

Writing Bessie Head in Botswana:
An Anthology of Remembrance and Criticism

Edited by

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Preface to this edition

This electronic version of *Writing Bessie Head in Botswana* 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: Mrs Ruth Forchhammer, Dr Obed Kealotswe, Mrs Seodi Khama, Mr Albert G. T. K. Malikongwa, 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 include the cover of the original edition because I have been unable to locate all the original artists. If I am eventually able to track them all down, I will insert the cover design.

Third, 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.)

Fourth, 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.

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October 2020

Preface

Bessie Head was Botswana's greatest female writer to date. She wrote profound, if sometimes difficult, books, refusing to be limited by the demands of immediate relevance as understood by the then dominant nationalist school

Her work has been increasingly appreciated, but paradoxically, its universal appeal has led to its being written about by Western scholars who often know little about the specific circumstances of her Botswana context. Now, at last, the Botswana voices can be heard through this collection.

African scholars welcome the contributions of the Western colleagues, but what is problematic is the situation where only Western voices are heard, only Western criticism is read, only Western publications are taken seriously. This situation does a disservice not only to Africa, but also to the Western scholars who need to hear the African side of the conversation in order to develop their own understanding to its fullest. Hence the importance of this collection of Botswana writing on Bessie Head.

As Dean of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Botswana, I am proud that our faculty has been the home of such an exciting and ground-breaking project.

Dr. Nobantu L. Rasebotsa
Dean, Faculty of Humanities
University of Botswana
Gaborone, December 2006

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Introduction

Mary S. Lederer and Seatholo M. Tumed

Writing Bessie Head from Botswana owes its inception to our smooth working relationship. During the time we shared an office and co-taught a number of courses in the English Department at the University of Botswana (UB), we developed a strong rapport. While co-teaching the English Department's course on Bessie Head's writing, we specifically developed the idea to put together this anthology.

We had, of course, separately or jointly handled Head's work in other courses, including "The Prose Literature of Southern Africa" and "Gender Issues in African Literature", but particularly the Bessie Head course and the amazing response of the students (especially as evidenced by their projects, which featured collages, visual representations of Head's themes and concepts, and the dramatisation of excerpts from her works¹) motivated and inspired us to work on this project. The tremendous and keen support we received from our colleagues at UB and the readers of Bessie Head's books from elsewhere in the country further fuelled our enthusiasm for this project. Consequently on 24 May 2004 we conducted a one-day seminar at which many contributors to this project presented their papers. The seminar triggered a considerable amount of brainstorming, and we emerged out of the seminar convinced that we would have enough material to produce this book.

Although she wrote almost all of her books from Botswana, Bessie Head is on record saying the readership that she considered "the most responsive and most sympathetic" (*Conversations with African Writers* 56) was to be found elsewhere, mainly in America. Head, of course, became more famous posthumously; therefore, she could not have had a complete picture concerning the responsiveness of her audience. Nevertheless, we seized this claim by Bessie Head and saw in it an opportunity to test the Botswana audience. Of course, a big part of the challenge concerning Head's audience can be attributed to Head's extraordinary personality and her extraordinary writings. Commenting on her most bizarre novel, *A Question of Power*, for instance, she has said, "most people tell me that they stopped reading the book at page fifty [because] they do not want to be in the helpless position of following into a nightmare" (*Conversations With African Writers* 54).

The perception that the society has held of Bessie Head concerning the nervous breakdown she suffered in the 1970s added to the uneasy reception of her works here in Botswana. Tumed, for instance, was at Swaneng Hill School during the time Head was engaged with the self-help projects there, and she has a memory of that "coloured" woman who often walked across the school grounds holding a small child by his hand, while the rumour doing the rounds among students was that she was a mad woman. Consequently, even after she published her books, this judgement of Bessie Head as mad stuck in the society's mind. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear Head's work described as "just trash", even in academic circles. Occasionally an elaboration may even be given thus: "How seriously can we really take Bessie Head's writings, in particular, *A Question of Power*?" Partly, we wanted to respond to this challenge.

A second, and no less important, factor in our desire to produce this anthology arises from the fact that Bessie Head, in her own words, "took this hallowed ground and made it my own" ("Preface to 'Witchcraft'" 28). In many ways, and although her outlook is very much shaped by her early life in South Africa, her writing comes from the place—both social and physical—of Botswana. We feel that it is time for Botswana to claim that part of her work and to register its academic and creative voices in response to her writing about Botswana.

¹See the website www.thuto.org or www.bessiehead.org for information about these projects.

Because this is Botswana's first book on Bessie Head, the contents are somewhat varied, but we have grouped the articles into two sections, both of which include creative writing in honour of Bessie Head. We are pleased to have poems from Barolong Seboni and Albert G. T. K. Malikongwa, two of Botswana's premier poets. We are also extremely pleased to have, for the cover of the book, an abstract painting by a group of students from UB's English Department course on Bessie Head; we have included their write-up of their painting, which represents Dikeledi Mokopi's gifts in Head's short story "The Collector of Treasures".

The first section of the anthology comprises memoirs and more personal writings and reflections about Bessie Head from those who knew her. We begin with a reprint of Leloba Molema's tribute to Bessie Head on Head's death in 1986. Skobienorhol Lekhutile writes both as director of the Museum where Head's papers are held and as a childhood friend of her son Howard. Lekhutile's article raises a number of points that are taken up in other essays. Seodi Khama, who worried that too many people in Serowe who knew Bessie Head would die before what they knew and could tell would be written down, conducted preliminary interviews with a few people who knew Head in Serowe. Unfortunately Seodi herself died before her selection was complete; we have included her work as it stood at the time of her death. Ruth Forchhammer writes about her friendship with Bessie Head and her experience with the Bessie Head Papers, housed at the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe. Patrick van Rensburg also contributes a piece containing some extracts from Head's letters to him, as well as a plea for Head's work to be translated into Setswana, and Tom Holzinger analyses his changing relationship to Bessie Head, even after her death.

The second section of the book offers critical analyses from Botswana academics and academics residing in Botswana. This section offers a number of new approaches to understanding Bessie Head's work, including in a Botswana context. The section begins with Maitseo Bolaane's discussion of early 1960s Serowe, which gives context for understanding Head's life and work. Neil Parsons reconsiders his reactions to Bessie Head's historical novel *A Bewitched Crossroad*. Rev. Obed Kealotswe gives important information about African Independent Churches in Botswana that is useful in understanding the background to some of the stories in *The Collector of Treasures*. Mompoloki Bagwasi's analysis of the use of identity markers in *Maru* is the first analysis of its kind, and we hope that her discussion will not be the last. Nono Kgafela, Fani-Kayode Omoregie, and Seatholo Tumedi look at women in Bessie Head's work from the perspective of a Tswana understanding of a woman's place and status. Mary Lederer compares the importance of the past in understanding Bessie Head and Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, and Tiro Sebina reconsiders the problem of madness in *A Question of Power*. David Kerr discusses his experience of working through *A Question of Power* and Bessie Head's life with theatre students. Felix Mnthali contributes his thoughts on the nature of belonging in Bessie Head's life and stories.

This anthology is intended to begin a critical discussion of Bessie Head in Botswana. We hope that the articles here will spur debate about Bessie Head's relationship to the country she eventually called home, and that this anthology will be only the first in an on-going tradition of Bessie Head scholarship in Botswana.

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PART I: MEMOIRS

A Woman Alone (For Bessie Head)

Barolong Seboni

When the rain clouds gather
Maru rumbles,
For the clouds themselves
Are not the rain
That we await throughout the drought
In this village of the rain wind
Where tales of tenderness
And power are told
By a woman, alone
At the bewitched crossroads
Gathering and garnering.

She is the collector of treasures
With thunder between her ears
And lightning in her eyes.

Her lashes envelope the darkness
And it is because of the sun
That we know she bore shadows,
That crept up stealthily to swallow her.

It's all a question of power
A powerful tenderness
That draws us all to the articulate madness
In the universe of her head.

“The end is where we start from”: A Tribute to Bessie Head

Leloba Molema (Young)

Bessie Head came to Botswana an exile, and as all exiles, she had no option but to grapple with her new country and come to terms with it—in her case to the point of breakdown. In that breakdown, we read not “crankiness” or “madness” but adaptation at great cost to herself, adaptation that also contains in it the seeds of our own discomfort. It is as catalyst that we value her contribution to our lives as Batswana.

With her novel *Maru*, she 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 even, to light without fail upon certain special, unspoken-of peculiarities of our seemingly placid society. Furthermore, she was a writer who took herself seriously, and, as is in the nature of this breed, she did not, could not, pass by burning questions for mere fear of censure. She wrote, and we disclaimed her contentions publicly to save face, but we cannot disclaim them privately to ourselves without being guilty of self-deceit and hypocrisy.

A second area in which Bessie has given us food for thought is in the matter of the goings-on of Botswana’s burgeoning elite, especially as represented by civil servants—logically so, since the civil service is the country’s largest employer. This group, as can be seen in some of her short stories, is not exactly corrupt, as may be the case in too many parts of Africa, but it too shows signs of a certain mindless materialism expressed in the compulsion to drink inordinately, to treat sexual partners as objects, to own cars principally as status symbols, all of which suggest *ennui* of some kind, especially in the towns, and personal disregard, of the countryside, by the people involved. The countryside becomes a dumping ground for children that women have no time to look after, or it is viewed as a captive audience that is expected to applaud uncritically when goodies, like rickety cars, are flaunted before it.

A third area that Bessie, through her books, provokes us to think about is the relationship between women and men and the underlying forces informing them. In general, it would seem that so far as her positive female characters are concerned, she gives them quiet emotional strength and immense integrity which they bring to bear in the day-to-day life with their husbands. This enables them to interact with their husbands on their own terms as women with their own mutual exchange, reciprocation, and willing co-operation; it enables them to quietly challenge their husbands and leave them if necessary, if the husbands are of the unthinking, violent, brutalising sort; it enables them to carry on with their lives and not to collapse after the divorce from sheer lack of masculine protection and direction. Secondly, these strong women of Bessie’s illustrate, deliberately so, the sort of integrity (in inner human terms) and the nature of their staying power that should be behind Botswana’s independence. She does the same for her Chiefs of course, except that they operate at the level of public affairs and not in the home surrounded by children and cooking pots.

In these ways, and in many others, Bessie has served us as catalyst and, though dead, she continues to live through us because of the process of fermentation that she has set off in us. She is part of our self-discovery at both the levels of our country and ourselves, and our context in the world.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

(T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding," V, 239–42)

Bessie Head and the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe

Skobienorhol Lekhutile

Introduction

This paper is a personalised account of the life of Bessie Head as she was known to most of her neighbours, friends, and fellow villagers in Serowe, the capital of the BaNgwato people and the headquarters of the Central District, where Head spent the greater part of her adult and writing life. The period under discussion stretches roughly from the early months of 1964, when Bessie Head first came to Botswana as a black South African exile, to April 17, 1986, when she met her rather untimely end. In addition, this discussion of Bessie Head's life and career shall extend to the extensive body of the largely unpublished literary material and manuscripts which at present forms the greater part of a collection that has come to be known as the Bessie Head Papers, held at the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe. The collection forms an indispensable part of the history of Serowe and a logical component of the Museum inventory. Hopefully, the specific benefit of keeping this particular collection of Bessie Head's practically unknown literary output in the safe custody of the Khama III Memorial Museum and the overall harvest—to the Museum as an institution, the local community in Serowe and the nation as a whole—shall become obvious as the discussion unfolds. That a few of her books already form part of the syllabus of courses in English literature in both local secondary schools and tertiary institutions is but a measure of her success and accomplishment as a writer of international repute.

Origins of the Bessie Head Papers at the Khama III Memorial Museum

Five months after the official opening of the Khama III Memorial Museum, Bessie Head made the following remarks in the Museum guest book: "1985 1st April, This Museum is going to be of great value". None of us ever thought that exactly twelve months later Bessie Head would be gone and her papers would be adding that great value to the Museum.

The Bessie Head Papers (BHP) became part of the Museum collection after her death in April 1986. To ensure a fair price was paid for this collection, Howard Head, the only heir to the Bessie Head Estate, placed an advertisement in the papers. With no one offering anything, which came as no surprise since in this country we are not very keen on keeping papers or records, the Museum's offer was accepted.

The funding for registering and cataloguing was provided by the Danish donor agent DANIDA through the Danish Volunteer Service. This funding also made it possible to engage Mrs Ruth Forchhammer, who is a trained librarian, to register and catalogue the papers.

It was indeed a blessing that when Bessie Head passed on, Serowe had a new Museum which was able to collect her papers for posterity.

Bessie Head's move to Botswana

Bessie Head came to Botswana, settling in the village of Serowe, in 1964. She had just fled her native South Africa, having found it immensely difficult to exist as a teacher and journalist of mixed parentage under the country's horrific apartheid laws.

In the years leading to her exile in Botswana, she had borne witness to one of the acts of mass slaughter perpetrated against black protesters by the increasingly paranoid and jittery elements of the apartheid state security machinery in the form of the Sharpeville Massacre.

As a result of the anti-pass protest, itself organised by the PAC in 1960, scores of peacefully demonstrating protesters were shot and killed in broad daylight. In these circumstances, Bessie Head decided to leave South Africa for Botswana, not so much to escape the direct and obvious brutalities of apartheid, but “in search of peace and a secure home” (Abrahams 4). She had previously travelled the length and breadth of South Africa, sojourning for a time amongst the Cape Coloured peoples in District Six without ever feeling “a part of this [or any other] community” (Abrahams 4). Finally, she had decided to leave the monster of apartheid behind her on her way into Botswana.

In Botswana, Bessie Head started out as a primary school teacher (for which she had qualified in Durban, South Africa) at the Tshekedi Memorial School and as a volunteer worker with links to the nascent brigade movement in Serowe before, following a series of some personal troubles, she settled for a writing life, completing and publishing throughout the entire time she spent in the country a total of four full-length novels and a collection of short stories. In addition, she wrote countless unpublished letters, manuscripts and official correspondences which have since been bought and remain in the custody of the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe, where they are collectively referred to as the Bessie Head Papers. These papers have been catalogued and are now available to researchers. It is also of paramount importance that researchers and scholars deposit their research findings with the Museum for posterity.

Bessie Head as I remember her

I will always remember Bessie Head as a mother—and a good one—because it was through her only son Howard that I got to know her. I first met Bessie Head in the 1960s when she was residing in a rondavel at the *kgotla*.¹ I was visiting some cousins who stayed at *kgosing* (the chief’s residence). We always found ourselves crowding around Howard’s place wanting to play with his toys, which he had a lot of, in my judgement.

I remember Howard as a shy boy who always played around his mom’s house, with very little or no courage to wander away from his zone. We always stopped by and picked him up as we engaged in our aimless walking about, but before leaving, Howard always sought his mother’s permission, and before giving it, his mother always asked how far the walking about would extend.

My next encounter with the Head family was when I was doing my secondary education at Swaneng Hill School in the 1970s. By that time Bessie Head was residing in her house “Rain Clouds”, and Howard was also at Swaneng Hill School. So I would frequently check on Howard and taste his mom’s cooking—where I tasted garlic for the first time in my life. All the toys were now gone, and in their place was a fine collection of children’s books with a wide range of titles.

One evening in 1977 when I was visiting Howard, Bessie had just received a letter which invited her to attend an International Writing Program in Iowa, USA. But before accepting this exciting invitation, there was one issue to address—who was going to look after Howard? To address this issue, we hastily engaged in a search mission for Howard’s temporary home. The first stop was at the van Rensburgs, where we met Mma Masego (Mrs van Rensburg), and Bessie was quick in explaining the reason for our call.

Over a cup of tea Mma Masego explained that she was not able to help, the reason being that they were relocating to England that year. During the discussion, I noted something that I had never seen before: Bessie lighting a fresh cigarette with the remaining bit of the used one. Where to now? Howard and I simultaneously mentioned Mr Keith

¹Traditional adult male assembly.

Woodworth—a metalwork teacher—the attraction was his fine collection of rock music which he allowed us to have a dose of occasionally at his house. Mr Woodworth was also unable to help as his house was not big enough to allow him to take Howard in, but he mentioned Mrs Wendy Willett, who was able to help and take Howard in.

At this point in time, Howard was in his last year of junior secondary school, and in the Setswana tradition, somebody of his age is expected to fend for himself. This was unacceptable to a good mother like Bessie Head.

Why it is important to have the Bessie Head Papers in Serowe

Bessie Head had a very strong bond with Serowe and the people. She built this bond over the years starting in 1969, when Bessie’s American publisher had paid her a lump sum of royalties, which made it possible for her to build the house she called “Rain Clouds”. For the first time in her life Bessie now had a home of her own and started to have a sense of belonging somewhere.

In the early part of 1974 Bessie Head had a rather difficult time in Botswana; to ease herself out of this difficulty she thought of emigrating to Norway. This she saw as her only way out of growing poverty and of ensuring a secure future for her growing son. Before leaving, she had a book to finish, and, hard worker that she was, she engaged in it full force and finished it. Then her love for Serowe grew strong and blocked her move to Norway. She explains how she came to the conclusion to stay: “I am going to say something very illogical now. It’s a question of love for a place. I’d posted off the Serowe type-script to you then I sat up the whole night and quietly thought out my situation and by the time morning came around I had cancelled all plans of going to Norway” (BHP file 44, 12.5.74).

In November 1975, she wrote an autobiographical sketch in *Ms. magazine* where she said, “I took an obscure and almost unknown village in the Southern African bush and made it my own hallowed ground” (“Preface to ‘Witchcraft’” 28). Bessie’s love for Serowe grew while working on her Serowe book (*Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*). That is when she discovered and developed a great love and respect for Khama III: “I only kept going on the Serowe book through my accidental discovery of Khama the great. No matter where I turn the stuff on him I’ve read during my research for the book had the effect of pulling my life together” (BHP file 44, 5.1974). She finds some linkage in the faces of people in the village to that of Khama III: “The ordinary people are very nice here. First I had used my intuition about them. I didn’t know Khama. I couldn’t link it to anything, but now I see that they had his beautiful face” (BHP file 44, 25.7.1973).

In a review of what she called the spillover from the Serowe book, she continues to give credit to the everyday people:

The richness of everyday detail came from the work I did on the Serowe book—just the physical daily contact with people and sitting around in their yards. I can hardly take credit for the feeling of the work. It is just what people are like here. They are classics. A bit of ancient Africa was retained intact in this community. (BHP file 44, 12.1.75)

Bessie paints in words the best portrait of Serowe, in her introduction for *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*:

A ring of low blue hills, partly surrounds the village; at least they look blue, misty from a distance. But if sunlight and shadow strike them at a certain angle, you can quite clearly see their flat and unmysterious surfaces. They look like the uncombed heads of old Batswana men, dotted here and there with the dark shapes of thorn trees. (x)

It is in view of this very strong bond which Bessie Head had with Serowe that one cannot think of any more suitable place for the Bessie Head papers than the Museum in Serowe, Serowe being the only place where Bessie developed a sense of ever belonging somewhere. We can all be assured that even Bessie herself would be happy to see her papers stored at the same place as those of Khama III—a man she had so much respected.

The full list of Bessie Head's published works completed while living in Botswana include *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1974), *The Collector of Treasures* (1977), *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981), and *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984).

Bessie Head died in Serowe at the age of 49 on April 17, 1986

The Bessie Head Papers

Quite a lot has been made in the literature of the personal loneliness, immeasurable anguish, and the inevitable optimism characterising the life and career of Bessie Head. In many of the accounts, the misery which would come to dominate her life starts in a mental hospital in the Kwazulu Natal town of Pietermaritzburg, where Bessie Head was born. Her tragic past then haunts her, providing her with the drive to write about much of that life in fictionalised form, up to the time of her death in Botswana in April 1986. However, out of these same accounts, relatively little is heard of Bessie Head's day-to-day experiences and similar preoccupations as she went about life in the village and country she had come to adopt.

Fortunately for us, the curious reading public, all is not lost. We can still attempt to piece together a picture of Bessie Head as an outstanding African woman writer and a South African exile, who spent most of her creative years living in one corner of our country, both from what she and others have written about her life and writing career here. The more enterprising among us can go further by examining the collection now in the possession of the Khama III Memorial Museum or to speak in person with some of the local people in Serowe who met and knew her. Even now, there are still many people both in Serowe and many other parts of the world who have had the privilege to share Bessie Head's creative and enriching days with her while she was alive and writing. From all such sources and, in particular, the whole collection of some of Bessie Head's own—and as yet largely unpublished—letters, an impression can begin to be drawn of this sensitive and very industrious African woman writer who from all accounts ran a rather busy and productive schedule involving local as well as international engagements.

Similarly, from some of her unpublished letters and manuscripts, and what other writers have commented on regarding her small and curious life in Botswana, it is clear Bessie Head maintained a lively and regular correspondence with the outside world (see, for instance Gillian Stead Eilersen, Patrick Cullinan, and Randolph Vigne²). Her contacts included personal friends, publishers, government officials, local and foreign universities, and various kinds of literary institutions and communities all over the world. In one of the best-known treasures which makes up a segment of the papers under discussion, an anecdote is told of how in the late 1960s Bessie Head, using a *poste restante* address and aerograms which she bought from the post office counter upon receiving mail from friends, would

²Patrick Cullinan, *Imaginative Trespasser: Letters between Bessie Head, Patrick and Wendy Cullinan 1963–1977* (Johannesburg: Wits UP; Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 2005); Gillian Stead Eilersen, *Bessie Head—Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing* (Cape Town: David Philip; London: James Currey; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995); Randolph Vigne, ed., *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991).

immediately set on replying all correspondence, much like someone who understood what she lived for and lived and wrote everything in something of a hurry.

Some of the early letters in the collection written by Bessie Head to friends and acquaintances in many parts of the world also serve to clearly show that she had much going on in her immediate locale. In one such piece of writing, Bessie Head goes into a fair amount of detail on her involvement with local community initiatives and village development programmes. These letters offer a rare glimpse into the work she did for the local brigades movement, some of whose students helped build the small house in Serowe in which she lived and did much of her work; the brigades students, she writes in one of her letters of the late 1960s, would have just enough time to finish work on her house before setting off in great haste to seek more lucrative opportunities in construction at the new diamond mining town in Orapa. Interested readers of the Bessie Head Papers will also come to know the author for some of the more obscure activities that she carried out on a regular basis in Serowe. These include such activities as the organisation and mobilisation of local unemployed women to form working groups which could engage in small-scale fruit and vegetable gardening in order to encourage local enterprise and consumption.

Bessie Head was very keen on agriculture, in particular crop production, as an immediate solution to the hunger experienced by many of the rural poor in Botswana. The kind of agricultural projects she envisaged would by all accounts appear to have been rather modern and sophisticated, for in her letters, she emphasises not only issues of agricultural production *per se*, but also those of marketing (and estimates maintenance). Did she here, we may ask, have something of a farmers' co-operative or an Israeli-type *kibbutz* in mind?

In connection with such projects, Bessie Head elsewhere remarks about how in general she preferred working and organising women to men, in part because she considered women in general to have more brains than their menfolk, but also because as a person she did not feel she had a "dominant personality" to cope with the attitudes of many men. Of course, these early letters also provide rare glimpses of some local men who time and again sought to find out who was her boyfriend. The demands must have been incessant and troubling enough to lead her to want to devise evasive strategies as a protection against all the intrusions into her personal and writer's space. At one point, she reveals how she found herself having to invent a boyfriend.

There must clearly have been times when Bessie Head felt very ill at ease with fellow villagers and some of the people with whom she worked. She commented on the attitudes of some of her fellow workers towards her, reflecting on prejudices of villagers against "half-breeds". Clearly, Bessie Head did not have it very easy in life; in the circumstances, the only solace for her came with the stories she patiently collected through the many interviews and conversations she conducted with various informants in Serowe and other parts of the country.

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Appendix I

List of some of the scholars and researchers who continue to pay homage to the Bessie Head Papers Held by the Khama III Memorial Museum

1. Dr Linda-Susan Beard, USA
2. Bettina Weiss
3. Vuyiso M. Magagi, SA
4. Betra Quaedvlieg
5. Ayana R. Abdalla, UWC, Univ. of Iowa
6. Maureen Fielding, USA
7. Annie Gagiano, RSA
8. Hitomi Yokohamaka, Japan
9. Natasha C. Vaubel, USA
10. Isabel Balseiro
11. Juani [?] B. Nielsen, RSA
12. Helen Richman, RSA
13. Fujio Fukushima, Japan
14. Corren Brown (Dr)
15. Shirley van de Veur, USA
16. Edwin Thumboo, Prof., Singapore
17. Estelle Jobson, RSA
18. Desiree Lewis, RSA
19. Kathryn Prince, RSA
20. Sue Atkinson
21. Ann Langwadt, Denmark
22. Patrick Cullinan, RSA
23. Margaret Daymond, Prof., RSA
24. Maria Olausson, Finland
25. Anthony O'Brien, asst. Prof., USA
26. Collen O'Brien, USA
27. David M. Newmarch, RSA
28. Dorothy Driver, RSA
29. Adeola James (Dr)
30. Gillian Stead Eilersen

Appendix II

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Acknowledgements

Preface

Abbreviations used in the Catalogue

Correspondence with Publishers	A1
Correspondence with Publishers	A2
Correspondence with Agents	B
Correspondence with Other Writers	C
Universities—Manuscript Collections	D
Correspondence with Authorities	E
Travels, Seminars, Meetings, Organisations, Workshops, Committees, Talks	F1
Travels, Seminars, Meetings, Organisations, Workshops, Committees, Talks	F2
General Correspondence	G1
General Correspondence	G2
General Correspondence	G3
General Correspondence	G4
General Correspondence	G5
Interviews, Radio, Film, TV etc.	H1
Interviews, Radio, Film, TV, taped interviews etc.	H2
Short Stories—Manuscripts	I1
Short Stories—Manuscripts	I2
Novels—Manuscripts, Proofs	J1
Novels—Manuscripts, Proofs	J2
Novels—Manuscripts, Proofs	J3
Articles, Stories, Talks, ‘Notes on...,’ etc. by Head printed or in manuscript + Biographical Material and Correspondence	K1
Correspondence related to contents of K1	K2
Dissertations	L1
Correspondence related to contents of L1	L2
Reviews	M
Articles etc. by and about B. Head + Criticism	N1
Correspondence related to contents of N1	N2
Articles etc. by and about Other Writers, Reviews	O
Christmas Cards, Birthday Cards, Post Cards	P
Miscellaneous	Q
Notes and Note Books	R
Statements Royalties	S
Books by Head: English/America Editions and Translations	T
Anthologies Containing Short Stories by Head	U
Books from Head’s Private Library	V
Free	W
Funeral Obituaries, Exhibition	X
Free	Y
Books, Short Stories and Articles by and about Head, Published after 1986	Z

Preface

When I (Lederer) first told Seodi Khama about this anthology, we were having dinner. “And you know,” she said, tilting her head towards me to indicate the importance of what she was about to say, “There are so many people up there [in Serowe] who remember Bessie and have stories of her. And they’re so old; soon they’ll all be dead.” I asked her if she would be willing to contribute something in the form of interviews with some of those people. (Seodi herself had just retired a few years earlier and seemed to be casting about for something interesting to do.) “What could I write?” she asked, and I replied that she could simply follow her own observation and get things down on paper before everyone died. She tilted her head towards me again: “Mary!” I took that as a yes. Seodi herself had lived in Serowe, still had a house there, and was related by marriage to nearly everyone there (she was the daughter-in-law of Tshekedi Khama, and possibly the most senior woman of the Khama BaNgwato). After her husband died, she lived with her sister Leloba Molema in Gaborone.

Over the course of several trips to Serowe, Seodi spoke first to Cassim Kikia, then also to Bontsi Kelebileng and Bosele Sianana. Her notes were careful renderings of what her subjects said (she did not want to use a tape recorder), so careful that when I was typing them up, I had to check with her frequently to make sure that I was not misunderstanding anything. She conducted the interviews (or conversations) in both Setswana and English, and then wrote everything down very carefully in English for me to type up.

Seodi died suddenly in April 2005, before we were able to finish editing the text and filling in the holes. Out of respect for her work and her personal relationships with Cassim, Bontsi, and Bosele, we have decided to leave this text as it was when she died.

Interview with Cassim Kikia

Born 14 October 1930, Cassim (Cas) Kikia came to Botswana in 1964. In Natal, he was a member of the Unity Movement (which included Makikum Pillay, Dr Limbada, Karim Essack, Xabashe, and others). Cas criss-crossed the apartheid security police, one step ahead for years before stepping into Botswana in Lobatse and later in Serowe and becoming a lone wolf of his political group and a simple trader of all odds and sorts. “They [the Security Branch of South Africa] wanted to kill me....” They ransacked his house several times. He had a room at the “Red House” [now the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe] and watched the ransacking from a room there.

Political matters and arguments were Cas’s life, and he took on Botswana political groups across the board, wholesale. What struck many of his debating partners and ordinary listeners was the land issue: land was a communal entity and uncodified inasmuch as land distribution followed tried and established positions over unfenced territory. Then with the implementation of certain government policies, i.e., removing land placement from tribal administrations and investing such placement on Land Boards tied to politically appointed District Councils, Cas foresaw the beginning of landlessness of Botswana.

Cas, a small general trader, met Bessie Head on a day-to-day basis as fellow asylum seekers in Botswana. Both of them came from the same province, Natal, in apartheid South Africa. Cas came to Botswana in 1964 and met Bessie soon after, along with fellow South Africans Patrick van Rensburg and Lawrence Notha at Swaneng Hill, a complex of secondary

education, technical brigades movement, and a variety of community projects. They all met very often up until Lawrence died and then until Bessie died in 1986.

Bessie had many financial difficulties. She approached Cas directly in his capacity as a trader and, according to his words, “Asked for help very humbly for monetary assistance of R10, R20—up to R100.” (Rands were accepted in Botswana before the fiscal change to Pula.) When he did not see her, he knew that she was working on what she called a “project”, which he also knew was mostly her writing and also community schemes that involved village women (e.g., Mme Bosele Sianana) in vegetable gardening and sales of her produce.

Whenever Bessie came to Cas for financial assistance she would say, “Don’t you worry; I’ll pay you back when my ship comes in.” This “ship” referred to payment for her writing and her minimal share of vegetable sales. Cas would see Bessie almost every morning on some occasions when she came from her small house in Swaneng to do the necessary errands for her household, which included caring for her dog. By this time Cas was married to Sharifa Essop (an Indian Motswana) who took part in helping alleviate Bessie’s financial struggles.

Faithfully and promptly, Bessie paid back her loans from Cas and later Sharifa along with a “special thank you”. Bessie categorically refused any gifts (in kind or monetary).

Bessie and Cas related amicably; however, Cas and especially Sharifa said that at times, “It used to be difficult to talk to Bessie or even understand what she was talking about. Yet her writings and books were very lucid.” Her books clearly expressed her subject matter and were somehow understood. When Bessie got hard copies of her books from her publisher/agent, she signed and gave Cas one of each of her books. He said that he was very happy to get these books and proudly kept them together on a special bookshelf. Unfortunately, Cas’s son Rashid, at between fourteen and sixteen years of age, out of sheer interest and curiosity, found his father’s collection of Bessie’s books. He devoured them from page to page. Rashid had seen Bessie coming to his father’s shop and thus knew her; also he wanted to hear for himself what she was all about from her books. From there, Rashid took over Bessie’s successive and dated “thank you” cards to his parents as his special collection, together with her books. “And now,” his parents said, “everything we had from Bessie is somewhere in the house (or elsewhere) that only Rashid knows.” But they were going to hunt for these books and cards so as to keep them more securely.

Sharifa was around when Bessie came by to ask for small loans from Cas. Sharifa said that she found Bessie to be reserved and sometimes aloof, but then on other times Bessie was warm and amusing. Regarding politics, Cas said that Bessie was overtly not interested in the subject, but she had strong feelings of her personal rights and those of others, and she spoke out strongly for these rights. Bessie was lumped together with the Swaneng group which had a strong anti-apartheid stance.

Regarding Bessie’s status in Serowe, Cas said that she had friends in the village whom she questioned and argued with on many social issues. She knew the rudiments of Setswana and understood the broken English that some of her friends spoke. Others spoke to her in grammatically correct English, e.g., Bontsi Kelebileng Lobelo, a nursing sister at Sekgoma Memorial Hospital in Serowe and now retired. [Seodi interviewed Bontsi Kelebileng separately, hoping to fill gaps in Cas’s recollections.]

Bessie’s relationship with South African exiles—there were quite a number of them in Serowe—was a thorny but supportive one. She had close, and then not so close, friends among those exiles, but she shut out others.

Cas had much to say about Howard being a problem child who caused Bessie a lot of trouble. At one stage Howard even left home for an extended period, presumably to look for his father. Bessie herself did not express any interest in finding her family.

Regarding Bessie's view of religion, Cas as a non-practising Muslim had little to say, and he did not remember having any discussions on this issue.

Interview with Mme Bontsi Kelebileng Lobelo, nursing sister and friend of Bessie

Bontsi originally met Bessie through her work as a nurse at Sekgoma Memorial Hospital in Serowe. She did not remember exactly when they met, but she was certain that it was in the last part of pre-independence for Botswana, around 1963–65. They became fast friends, and Bessie even invited Bontsi to her home where they enjoyed a cup of tea and pleasant conversation.

Bontsi and Bessie met with one another—frequently at first and then less so when each became involved with other matters—right up to the time Bessie died. After hearing that Bessie was an author, Bontsi asked for a book, which Bessie promptly gave her, along with others that were published. Bontsi enjoyed reading these books and found they reflected most clearly much of what Bessie had brought up in their discussions. So in a sense, Bontsi was a sounding board for Bessie and her work.

Bontsi bemoans the taking of her books by her children, who knew about and saw the friendship/camaraderie between their mother and Bessie. They wanted to know, from her books, what Bessie was all about. Bontsi suspected that her daughter in Francistown was the main culprit behind the missing books. She promised to phone the girl to find out if she had any of Bessie's books.

Bontsi surmised that Bessie had written something about Howard who at that time had left home and went perhaps to his father. His mother did not know where he had gone for some time; she packed up the boy's clothes and sold them at the mall in Serowe.

Bontsi knew Bessie to be very popular, jocular, and amiable with those she admitted into her personal circle. Education was a premium in those days for building a meaningful friendship. However, Bontsi said that if Bessie knew anybody she would always stop to greet them.

Bontsi did not think that Bessie's lack of fluency in Setswana was a problem. Bessie spoke with English-speaking Batswana who themselves were glad to have the opportunity to use their language-learning experiences. Besides, Bessie's Batswana friends did not want to be rude by speaking in their vernacular language to a person who did not know it.

Interview with Mme Bosele Sianana in Serowe (accompanied by Skobienorhol Lekhutile)

Bosele believed that, although she did not read or speak English, she was remembered and featured in Bessie's books. They first met in 1969 when they were setting up Serowe's Boiteko Project, which was composed of men and women with *no lands, no cattle, no schooling* [emphasis in original notes]. Boiteko was a brainchild of Patrick van Rensburg—following on from the technical brigades he had got underway for out-of-school youths, and their predecessor, Swaneng Hill Secondary School, a first of its kind in Serowe. Boiteko centred on skills training and development for older men and women in the areas of spinning, weaving, textiles, pottery, and gardening. (There were already youth brigades for textiles, spinning, weaving, farming, and forestry and later machinists, welding, and printing.)

Bosele chose gardening—in which she is still engaged to this day at her homestead—with fifteen other people, and Bessie was her supervisor. They began their operation at Moruleng, a site granted by local authorities in Serowe. They were an active group from the start, who sang and danced as they set about their preparations.

From amongst the group, Bessie chose an older woman, MmaSeole, as her granny.

The rest of the women in the group, including Bessie, called themselves *mogadikana* which translates into “co-wife”. The group members forged enduring friendships during the time they were working in their gardening plots. Together they attended weddings, which involved separate bridal and groom ceremonies and rites with much ululation, dancing, and good wishes. They also attended funerals, the solemnities of which were not lost on Bessie.

Bosele and others were aware of the political situation in South Africa and the doings of the apartheid regime, right up to the bombing of selected bases in Gaborone. They knew at that time in 1969 that Bessie was probably one of the casualties of South African apartheid, but none of them discussed politics to any great length and depth with other South African exiles during their day-long gardening sessions, with the exception of Patrick van Rensburg. Instead, Bosele says, “There were impassioned arguments about current Botswana society and the daily struggle towards raising and providing for their families”. Bosele described the relationship between the two (Head and van Rensburg) as “sometimes pleasant and sometimes rocky”. She was aware that the original Swaneng group dissolved, as did Boiteko much later. Only Bessie remained at her cottage with her writing and Howard.

According to Bosele, Bessie realised and talked with the group about the multiple job roles that Batswana went through in their lifetime. They went to the lands (*masimo*)—mostly those of others—to raise crops, the results of which were often meagre depending on pests, the weather, and many other factors. They also went to cattle posts (*meraka*), mostly those of other distant family members, to ensure that livestock were sufficiently cared for. In addition, Bessie also discussed with the group the multiple other traditional ways of making a living with earnings such as local beer brewing from sorghum, maize, and a bountiful variety of wild berries and trees. The drinks were commonly known as *bojalwa jwa Setswana* (commercialised as Chibuku), *khadi*, *mokuru* shamrocks, *banyana*, and *mokoko*. *Morula* and *magapu* (watermelon) have been commercialised as cream liqueurs. The Batswana group members were all knowingly aware of these potions being illegal and at one time would have faced their “houses being burnt down”. But the times had changed and “there was no more ducking the law” necessary for brewing beer.

When Bessie was out of sorts, Bosele said she recognised Bessie’s mood swings and heated rows with other people and did all she could to calm Bessie down. It would take some time to get Bessie to her fun-filled self.

Bosele knew that Bessie only ever had one child whom [Bessie] called Mothati, a Setswana name, among many others, that meant “beloved” or “the loved one”¹. Howard in turn “spoke fluent Setswana and Kalanga” and of course English. “Mothati” could only have been seen by his mother as a sort of parallel to Howard in some way or other.

Bosele was informed at the time when Howard began pulling at the family strings (his and his mother’s) and said that he wanted to contact his father, Harold, whom he knew to be in Canada where he lived with another woman who cared for Harold in all respects. With Howard’s coming the situation for additional care of Howard would be really burdensome. The lady was supposed to have told Harold to make plans and find other venues for being with his son. Bosele mentioned that Howard also searched for family members in Pretoria. Bessie seemed to Bosele to be very unhappy about Howard’s attempts to contact his family, especially because of the long period of time, and probably because Bessie herself possibly had not tried to trace her family.

Bessie and the Boiteko group parted company after a prolonged period during 1974–75. Bessie said she needed to concentrate on her writing as she really did not earn enough at Boiteko. Nevertheless, the group members accepted Bessie’s leaving, and they kept in touch with Bessie and readily accepted invitations to pick roots and seedlings and various

¹“Mothati” is normally understood to mean “the Almighty” (*Mothatiyotlhe*).

underground stems and bulbs. The Boiteko gardening group collected seedlings from Bessie's yard and replanted them at their site plots at Moruleng in Serowe.

Bosele had heard about "Bessie's being taken with illness and how the police lent a hand towards getting Bessie to the hospital". Then Bessie died....

In February 1977, I came to Serowe together with my husband, who was going to teach biology at Swaneng Hill School. Shortly after, I was asked to teach the typing classes as they were lacking a teacher at that time.

So many articles and books have been written about Bessie's literary work, so I have decided to write about the person, Bessie, as I remember her. She seems to be very present in my mind; I can almost see her and hear her talking.

A Danish teacher who was leaving Swaneng invited me to a farewell party where I met Bessie for the first time. I clearly remember the way Bessie looked at me. Her eyes were searching, apprehensive, and also curious. This was a look I saw many times during the years I knew her when she met people for the first time. That evening I learned that apart from being an author she also grew vegetables for sale. So naturally I bought my vegetables from her garden. This was the beginning of our friendship.

Bessie lived in her small house "Rain Clouds" on the outskirts of Serowe, not far from the Swaneng Hill Secondary School. And she kept her little house Rain Clouds equally tidy and clean and neat; it would have been unthinkable not to do so. We saw each other quite often, and I gave her lifts to and from the village. Later on when I moved to a house at the Farmers' Brigade, I passed by her house every day.

Bessie and her garden were something special because to Bessie a garden was not only a garden in which she could grow vegetables for sale; it was also very much a serious project in itself that was carefully planned. The soil was painstakingly prepared, the seeds carefully selected and planted according to instructions and Bessie's own knowledge of gardening. Nothing was left to chance. When you went to Bessie's garden to buy vegetables you felt like buying the whole lot, so beautiful were the plants, all big and green and very healthy looking, almost like in a fairy tale. When Bessie dug up carrots and beetroots and shook them free of soil with her swift movements, she was very concentrated, and there was no small talk to disturb the work.

In any case, there never was much small talk in the usual sense. Bessie liked proper conversations. She took them very seriously and was one hundred per cent attentive. She stuck to the topic as long as she felt she had something to contribute. It was a delight to listen to her beautifully articulated and clearly spoken English.

In a conversation with Bessie one could not help noticing the different expressions going over her face and her tone of voice as she talked and explained something. She could be matter-of-fact; she could be furious, frightened, offended, indignant, or just happy, but never sullen. And all the emotions showed in her whole body. It was almost like watching a play to witness one of Bessie's outbursts of feelings. The whole problem or story became vividly exposed. When talking about her own writings, Bessie would stage the story, giving voice and life to the different persons. In such situations she was also very focused.

It was not very often that Bessie and I talked about her writings, as there were almost always more practical problems to discuss, such as "How do I get some manure from the Farmers' Brigade for the garden?" or "I have no money for food. Could I borrow some from you?"

Shortly before Bessie passed away we talked about her autobiography, and I asked her if she thought it would be difficult and take a long time to write. In a very determined and strong voice, she said, "No, it will not be difficult because I am the main person, and I have everything ready in my head". There was no doubt she knew exactly how she would tell the story of her life to the world. It was all clearly arranged in her mind. I am sure she

remembered everything she thought worth sharing with her readers. She had a very good memory; as a matter of fact, I do not recall that Bessie ever said, “I don’t remember”. When she spoke about everyday happenings and emotions, she could combine them with the welter of other thoughts in her head and get it all down in writing.

When the going was good it was fun to be with Bessie, especially at parties, which she most often enjoyed tremendously. She did not mind being the centre of a merry company, and she herself contributed gladly to the entertainment, laughing loudly while talking.

That was Bessie when she had no problems. But far too often she did have problems, mainly money problems. If you met Bessie in one of the shops in the village, it was very obvious if she did not have money to pay for what she needed. She would look completely helpless and scared and walk around along the walls. So in order not to intimidate her by asking questions, one would walk over to her and discreetly transfer a bank note to her hand when greeting her with a hand shake. The transformation of her whole being was almost unbelievable. She looked self-confident when she walked over to the till to pay for her groceries. Afterwards she would approach one and say, “Thank you so much. I shall pay you back when my ship comes in”. She did not want to owe anybody, and she did not like these situations. She always paid back the money.

Visiting Bessie at her home, one sometimes found her very upset. She would tell you why, and through talking and gesticulating she gave her version of the problem in a very convincing way. She acted the whole event.

After a conversation with Bessie, one was always left with something to think about. She could talk about her life with its ups and downs in a matter-of-fact way, as if it were someone else’s life, almost with a kind of acceptance: this is the story of my life, just like this, no lamentations. One’s own problems—if any—disappeared quickly. One could learn something from her.

When Bessie was doing research for *A Bewitched Crossroad*, I was lucky to have the privilege of helping her look for literature. We went to the public library in the village and spent quite some time there together. When the public library ran out of relevant literature, Bessie borrowed material from the University Library in Gaborone. When we were talking about *Crossroad*, Khama the Great (Khama III) popped up again and again in our conversations, and Bessie could not stop talking about him. There was no doubt that Bessie’s admiration for the old Chief was endless: she adored him.

When Bessie died in 1986, the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe bought Bessie’s literary remains from her son, Howard. As I just happened to be around, I was very pleased to accept a request to catalogue these papers—and what a privilege it has been! About two thousand letters, so beautifully written and full of information, unveiled a very remarkable person. Unfortunately, Bessie once told me, she had had to dispose of some letters as there was no space in Rain Clouds to store them.

Right from the beginning it became clear that the huge material should be divided into sections in order to make it easier for researchers to find their way among the many letters and manuscripts. Bessie herself had filed some of the letters chronologically and left them in covers. Most of the manuscripts, some of them hand-written, but the greater part typewritten, were also in covers or plastic bags with a string around them. Bessie’s distinct sense of neatness also showed in the way she arranged her papers.

The interest for the Bessie Head Papers was immense. Researchers started coming to the archive to study the papers, even during the cataloguing process. As it turned out, some of the correspondences were incomplete, so letters were sent to all the correspondents, asking them to donate photocopies or original copies of letters which were missing in the correspondences. An overwhelming response resulted in both original letters as well as

photocopies which filled in many holes in the large collection of letters.

The Bessie Head Papers have found a home in the archives of the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe. On 1 April 1985, Bessie wrote in the Museum's guest book, "This Museum is going to be of great value", not knowing that about twelve months later her own manuscripts, letters, and books would be deposited in the archives of the very same museum as those of her idol, Khama III.

The Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe is the owner of a beautiful monument to an author who created it herself through her books and her letters.

How I Remember Bessie Head

Patrick van Rensburg

Bessie Head

Bessie Head was born in Pietermaritzburg where, coincidentally, I also spent the first four years of my working life and did my private studies with UNISA's Division of External Studies. Later, we were to work together at Swaneng, and subsequently, when she died in 1986, I was one of the speakers at her funeral. I spoke off the cuff; neither did I keep any record of my eulogy to Bessie Head. However, an American whose name I have lost recorded the speech and Gillian Stead Eilersen got hold of it. I quote a summary of this eulogy from Eilersen's book *Bessie Head—Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing* (Johannesburg: David Philip; London: James Currey; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995):

Patrick van Rensburg tried to penetrate further than most into the mystery of Bessie's creative genius. He pointed out how creative she was when she was writing. From the confusions of her daily living, she would withdraw to her desk and typewriter and there she would almost take on a new personality. While she sat there, she seemed to have her life under control. Her fears, anxieties and physical needs were pushed to one side, as she collected her ideas and concentrated her thoughts on what she was writing. It was here that the disparities in her complex personality were quietened for a while. It was here the realist and the diviner achieved a brief common purpose. (293–94)

This is how I remember her, and how I would like ordinary Batswana to know her, not only through memories of her schizophrenia, but through access to her creative genius.

Before Bessie Head wrote her books, and during my early days in Serowe, I remember receiving a letter from Dr Robin Farquharson, himself an erratic genius who would become "out of his mind" (as Marquez might have put it). In this letter Robin wrote that he had heard from Harold Head, Bessie Head's husband, that Bessie was teaching at a primary school in Serowe: "She is a very special person, she writes English like an angel", he wrote.

I myself have commented in connection with her book *Serowe: Village of the Rainwind* that "Bessie saw herself as a writer with a self-dialogue. Her books had welled up from inside of her." In her own words, in *Mmegi* ("Collecting Oral History," 23 March 1985: 6), she said,

You don't have to travel far from yourself to produce a book. You as a writer are aware that something has awoken in you—a dialogue whereby you are going to make a contribution to mankind's thoughts. It's always been a question of people surviving with people. Questions of love and human survival are very central to my work. I know exactly where I am travelling, and that I have started unfolding my message, but it's not complete yet.

Excerpts from her letters to me

As I wrote in my draft autobiography, Bessie sent me several neatly hand-written letters around the turn of the year (1965), all addressed to "Dear Mr van Rensburg". They give some idea of the troubling realities of her life and how she sought to transcend them. Three of these letters were dated 12, 17, and 22 December 1965, and the fourth was dated 14 February 1966.

In the first letter she thanked me for "your kind offer to me last night" (I had offered to pay her accounts). "I enclose the bills I owe in Serowe." (These were from the Tribal

Administration for advances of R24, from B. Wells Woodford for R25.72, and from Blackbeard and Co. for R35.27.)

“I had sort of been making various plans throughout the year—especially to raise money through some writing I did”, she continued. “Most of my work is with Mr Pat Cullinan a friend of mine in Eastern Transvaal. He was trying to get a subsidy for me.”

She “never quite expected the dislocation of the past month. It is more terrible to me because my mother died in a mental asylum in Pietermaritzburg. She had a nervous breakdown and was removed there by the family. They did not approve of her having a child from a black man. Only my mother’s grandmother loved me very much and when my mother died she brought me all her dolls”.

With the fifty Rands I was giving her, over and above paying her bills, she would buy two suitcases, “because the ones I have are broken. Then I would be ready to leave at any time”.

“Thank you for the application form. I had to fill in by hand. Sorry. No typewriter”. So began her second letter. (I had given her an application form for a UN bursary). “I’d really love to go to Israel—to one of those farms there. As you said I could also try other avenues and not depend on one thing once I have left here. Dr Robin Farquharson or Randolph Vigne could help me once I get to England. I am only in possession of an expired exit permit which does not cover my son because he was too small to identify. Would I have to have some travel vouchers or other papers?”

She continued: “My P. O. Box stays empty. Pat Cullinan was due to write to me and a number of other people. All of whom were arranging some kind assistance”. (They were writing to me!) “Since my back is so much against the wall I thought I should have to leave soon. I shall need some clothes for myself and my son. But this I would rather put off till I know I am leaving; and not get the clothes from Mr Woodford just now.” In conclusion she wrote, “I think that is all. I have an awful feeling about the application form”.

“I received a letter from Randolph today”, began her third letter. “He said I’d get into a tight spot if I attempted to get out of here as a political refugee. The way he has started to arrange things about the travel document and getting to Lusaka would take time. It seems that being a stateless person isn’t the same as being a political refugee”.

(She would try to get some work done in the hope that Randolph might get that advance he’d written to me about.) “Mary Gardiner agreed to type some things till I could get a typewriter”. (I arranged one for her, which somehow released her troubled creative genius.) More hopefully, she wrote, “I could get busy right away because the shattered pieces have come together again. You know Randolph actually said I should take some Stellazine tranquilliser!! I’d been writing him such frantic letters”.

(I knew and well understood the opening of the next paragraph in this letter.) “I am just afraid of the authorities here. Bechuanaland has meaning for me as a writer in rather an inward way; perhaps because I am rather an inward kind of person. For the first time I could absorb a lot of life from outside. I haven’t said anything about this yet.”

(Bessie had, she told us, been sexually harassed by someone in the Tribal education system and she had been dismissed because she refused his advances. She wanted to get away from Serowe for a while. Martin Kibblewhite, a friend on the Swaneng Hill School’s teaching staff, had arranged for her to work on the farm at Radisele with fellow Quaker, Vernon Gibberd. At the farm she would be typing and helping in the store. Her last brief letter was to tell me she would be soon leaving for Radisele.) “I thought to be employed was better than waiting in idleness in Serowe”, she wrote.

Conclusion

In concluding my memoir I would like to raise two issues in connection with Bessie Head's life and writings.

The first issue is this: what is it about her way of life that gave her her way with words? Did any of that literary creativity come from the background of her life in Botswana? A secondary aspect of this question is whether there was anything in her life here that may have added a dimension to her writing about people and life in Botswana.

The second issue concerns what ordinary Batswana know and think of her, especially in Serowe where she lived for so long, and eventually died. The point I wish to emphasise here is that they could not read her works. Can we make ordinary Batswana aware of her writings by translating some of her works into Setswana? Is it not possible to capture her way with words in Setswana?

A Warrior Alone

Tom Holzinger

The following is the text of my remembrance letter to Professor Daniel Gover, shortened to remove passages not related to Bessie Head. I have also broken it into additional paragraphs to make it more accessible.

Montréal, 1 March 1987

Dear Gove,

Got your letter two days ago. My mind is tired and my thoughts of Bessie are very many, so this will be an undisciplined stream-of-consciousness letter. I wish you'd come to Montréal for a weekend and I could just unburden myself of how I see her person and her writing as part of a tortured whole.

Remember how Auden says of Yeats that "mad Ireland hurt you into poetry"? The first thing about Bessie was that she was a driven person, a mad person, a person so much hurt and in so much pain that daily life was daily heroism. Writing was a way of getting back at the pain, of taking revenge on the fates that had given her such a tortured existence. Yes, rage is the force that drove her more than any other, overwhelming uncontrolled anger and the absolute knowledge that what had happened to her was wrong in both its possible senses of morally wrong as measured by what humans do to each other and of cosmologically wrong as going against the plan of the universe.

Bessie had to write, to give expression to the anger; I think she had a kind of foreknowledge or intuition that if she didn't write it out, write against it, by the most incredible act of discipline and will, that the anger would come for her in the secret hours of the night and destroy her, consume her, leaving her to rave like a madwoman in the street.

She said something like, "The gods have always tried to destroy me, even though I have done nothing to offend them, they wish to punish me for the sins of my forebears, and society likewise; but I shall defend that final little spark inside me that is myself and I shall fight back until they take my breath and my typewriter away, and yes, I shall wage war against them since they have declared war on me: I shall define a new cosmological order in which truth and love and beauty vanquish the horror that surrounds me now, the unfair and unjust pain that refuses me a normal and happy life".

She often quoted Conrad via Kurtz, "the horror, the horror". But at the heart of her darkness was not the moral decay of man and woman but the immoral order against which she was forced to struggle.

There are two kinds of characters in her fiction: those who succumb to the horror and those prometheans who rage and fight and offer a vision of love and harmony and justice. Bessie's own heroism was that she didn't complain, never whined about her own personal situation. She went out and waged war every day, but it was never for herself alone, even if she had few allies; it was to change the cosmos. This terrible terrible hurt, this consuming rage that threatened her daily and indeed from time to time mastered her, and yet never a whimper, never a complaint, never any self-pity. She was mad, and she was pure. She was utterly utterly un-self-regarding. Whereas her daily heroism was an act of incredible will, a testament to her amazing personal force, a conscious preoccupation; her total unawareness on the other hand of any persona, charisma, public image was a true innocence.

She would have loathed the kind of literary appreciation industry that the Cornell

meeting¹ represents. She hated to be considered a woman writer or a black writer or an African writer; she was fighting a cosmic war every day, good vs. evil, and anything that tried to trivialize this cosmic conflict tended to get lumped in with the evil and become a target of her limitless rage.

We used to laugh at the story because it was so typically Bessie, but I believe it is a true one: when the University of Botswana at last invited her to speak about her writing after ignoring her for many years,² it was to participate in a conference on the role of writers in African societies. With mounting frustration she listened to the other participants talk about cultural liberation, writing poetry in local languages, and so on. They weren't getting to the heart of the matter. When her turn came to speak she talked about Dostoyevski and his passion to make literature ask ultimate questions about freedom, knowledge and responsibility. Her remarks were poorly received. She added this to the store of hurts she carried; more than a year later she was still defiantly angry that people would have expectations of her different from the manichaeian good-evil sensibility which possessed her.

She raged against most literary analysis; she said it made literature look narrow and small. For her it was a total, and universal, weapon. The only literary criticism I ever heard her speak of with approval was that of Chinua Achebe, and it was precisely because she thought he was also concerned with the largest purposes, good vs. evil, fall and redemption, freedom and morality. Conrad was a favourite author.

Bessie fought on cosmic and universal battlefields, but she fought alone. Too much of the pain and the rage was particular to her and her alone. She carried not only the social stigma of her birth, but the genetic stigma of an uncontrollable physiological and/or psychological disorder. This wound, the knowledge that she could not be "normal" because of an accident of parentage, may have been the deepest pain of all, I don't know; she almost never spoke of it but when she did it was with an almost eerie Greek sense of preordained doom, there was not the same defiance in her rage but perhaps more of a bitterness.

As far as I know she never took and was never prescribed any medication for her condition such as the lithium maintenance that would have been tried in a more developed country.

I ought to tell you as much as I can divine about all the wounds and hurts, but my mind is tired and I'll just mention a few of the things which should be set against these. She had a few other ways of coping with the rage. She was a compulsively self-disciplined gardener, housekeeper, and shopper in the village. I think maintaining a rigid self-discipline about these things was a way of keeping her demons at bay. These activities were not sources of satisfaction in and of themselves I don't think; they were means to another end. As for pleasure, just relaxation for its own sake—Bessie was able to enjoy very little of this. Sometimes her mothering of Howard was a small balm in Gilead. There was her friendship with Bosele. Myself I am certain that Bessie loved Bosele and felt a physical attraction, but equally certain that she did not recognize much less acknowledge having the feelings. I think all questions of sexuality were additional torments for Bessie. Certainly her counterposed visions of a good and loving world under a just cosmology don't include any hint of a good or liberated sexuality. Her conversation and private life were both chaste and puritanical.

She understood her writing in the same terms that she understood herself. It was all one war. For her it was a desperate struggle to get disciplined sentences marching across the page. On those occasions when she would talk about her craft, it became clear that technique was just something to be dealt with matter-of-factly and quickly, questions subordinate to her

¹The annual meeting of the African Literature Association, 1987.

²My error. UB had just come into existence as a separate institution. I must have been thinking of its earlier incarnations.

other purposes. What vexed her was disciplining the ideas and metaphors. She said often, “I’ve got to get control over my words”, and she often made her creative activity sound like a bout in which she had to wrestle her phrases to the mat and pin them down and force them to lie still. Each of her books and stories can be seen as a triumph of her purpose and will over her hurts, rage, and handicap.

One thing I can scarcely comment on at all is her changing relationship and feelings about Howard. My hunch is that this must have coloured her outlook, but I can’t say how. I wouldn’t avoid the question of her 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. If she thought there was anyone trying to make her life look nicer for some reason of image and behind that of strengthening some cultural/ideological conception, she would attack in such fury that the [Dan] of *A Question of Power* would look like a good guy....

Well, Dan, I just can’t take this further now. To repeat the sequence for understanding that I would use, it would go from handicap to hurt to rage to redemption. And she was a hero. She transcended the small and mean and petty particulars every day in order to fight on the cosmic scale, a promethean role, one for which she had been given more natural impediments than gifts. She had to fight for every sentence, but more often than not she won.

Cecil Abrahams phoned last weekend. He mentioned your name as someone who “ought to be involved” in his Bishops’ U. conference in August as well as the one at Cornell.³ Whether that means he has the plans, means, either or both, to invite you, I don’t know. He will not be able to invite PvR⁴ unfortunately. Of the Montréal crowd that goes down to Ithaca, I’ll ask Nigel Thomas to look for you especially. He’s a long-time comrade in anti-apartheid work, an English teacher, an expert in Caribbean lit, and from St. Vincent himself.⁵ You’ll like each other.

I wish you could come to Montréal and I could explain the Bessie I knew. I feel very distrustful all of a sudden. Why wouldn’t Hugh Pearce⁶ want to say that Bessie’s death had been hastened by drinking? Was he the one buying her the drinks? Anyway, I do trust you, please make whatever use you can of my reckless impressions stated herein, and all best wishes. Hope to hear from you soon.

Fraternally,

tom holzinger

³Cecil Abrahams was Chair of the English Dept. at Bishop’s University near Québec City. He organized a conference about the lives of Bessie Head and Alex La Guma from which came the volume of critical appreciation, *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in Southern Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).

⁴Patrick van Rensburg was often known to close friends as PvR.

⁵And now the author of several novels about Caribbean-Canadian life.

⁶District Officer in Serowe in 1986, Bessie’s good friend and executor of her estate. In early 1987 I believe he was a graduate student at Cornell University.

Conversations and Consternations with B Head¹

Tom Holzinger

Write a memoir of Bessie Amelia Head? Rope a whirlwind into a museum? Foolhardy! The dust devil is likely to win. For me the tale begins in 1967. Ace was the first to breathe her name.

It is a warm dry December day in Serowe. I am twenty, a Swaneng brigade volunteer, restless, reckless, and about to hitchhike to Dar es Salaam. A South African exile sees me off: “When you’re in Francistown, look up this guy.” He hands me a scrap of paper with a few words: Mxolisi Ace Mgxashe. I fold it and put it in my pocket. How could I know? It will be my butterfly wings to deep and unexpected places.

In 1967 Francistown is the Wild West. Two saloons and an OK Corral. The summer is less brutal than now. *Mophane* scrubland stretches its fingers almost into the centre of town. The river is dry, yearning for the January rains. The population crosses freely between the different locations. I stay with the Kagisanyo family, South African exiles with a son at Swaneng. At night the drumming pulses out from a non-Tswana ward, astonishing my receptive ears. The moon is almost full. My romantic side devours every sight, sound, smell, taste.

Mxolisi Mgxashe is only a sheaf of years older than me but a thousand times more experienced. Everyone calls him Ace. He and a dozen PAC comrades spent eighteen months on Robben Island just before the ANC leadership was interned there. I stoop to enter his little Francistown hovel. I am met by a bookshelf full of real books! I stand, worshipful, as in a chapel to intellectual life everywhere.

Ace has an infectious smile, a reverence for Robert Sobukwe, and an unshakeable PAC politics. We hit it off at once and wag about everything. He tells me a story about two comrades in town who share a girl. All three in the same bed together. At a key moment the girl forgets which guy is on top. Ace’s face cracks in two with pleasure at the story. You were in that bed, I whisper to myself. This is the Francistown of the impulsive refugee.

Ace comes looking for me during my last evening in town. “Look,” he says. “There’s this woman writer you have to meet.” He points to his temple. “Her name is Bessie Head, ‘head’ like your head, and she’s with us in the PAC. She’s in the Tati Hotel bar. Come.”

We walk into the main bar with its long row of stools. No luck with any woman writer. The usual collection of desperate men. I hate it when they ask white strangers for drinking money. I want to leave.

“No,” says Ace. “The back room.” We push our way to a rear door that leads into a small drinking room with tables and chairs. Ace goes in first. He sweeps his arm. “Come, she’s here.”

Indeed she is. Madame Bessie Head holds court in her salon, a tough-talking duchess surrounded by male retainers and admirers. They love the flow of her words. I don’t see her face at first. She sits on a low stool facing away from us, cigarette in hand. She swings around to see who the newcomers are. She’s round and brown. “Ace!” she announces with pleasure, then looks me over from top to bottom. There is a long moment as she takes in my skin, age, clothing, glasses. Then a quick laugh before waving me into a chair. She resumes her tirade against the colonials. I gather that they are this evening’s enemy. Her rough language I find sometimes funny, sometimes embarrassing. If she is a writer, she is an unusual one.²

¹Bessie Head referred to herself as “B Head”.

²A few weeks after I wrote this, I rediscovered the following passage in Gillian Stead Eilersen’s biography of Bessie, *Bessie Head—Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; London:

The colonials themselves? They can't hear a word. They all drink, by informal understanding, in the other hotel. The details of Bessie's diatribe fade quickly from memory. What lingers are her controlled handshake and short fingers, her round warm face, her stubby frame, her raging mental energy.

I don't stay too long with her troop. We take our leave of Bessie's crowd, and shortly thereafter Ace and I shake on our own farewell. There are goodbyes to be said to new F-town friends, salt-of-the-earth folk whom I want to visit again. I am set to hitchhike north through Ian Smith's Rhodesia the next day, beginning at dawn. (My first ride will be from a donkey cart, I will overnight among village cattle, but that is a different tale.)

I won't see Bessie again for two years, when she becomes my comrade and favourite neighbour, adjoining the Swaneng fence. I won't see Ace again for four years, when he is among an exile group on the Zambian copperbelt. He and a comrade have been to PAC headquarters in Dar es Salaam; an opposing faction has knocked out several of the latter's teeth. We spend a nostalgic evening listening to Todd Matshikiza's music of Cape Town. It releases emotion in him, and the two of us feel again the power and pain of being strangers in a strange land.³

Bessie Head, I soon learn, suffers an alien's pain worse than we do, far worse. She also guards it and protects it and makes it part of her identity. Her outsidersness becomes a paradoxical source of strength and comfort, a bullet-proof vest sewn from a hairshirt. Although she wears bright print dresses on the paths of the village, they barely conceal her dark armour. In the years 1970–1973 she is rarely without it.

Safety and pain. This is where a serious memoir must begin.

Bessie, we hardly knew ye

A year after her death, an old friend from Serowe days, Daniel Gover, asked me to write a personal recollection of Bessie. He wanted it for his scholarship. I spent some time over it, writing as Bessie used to do, on a portable typewriter tight with carbon paper. Recently, when Mary Lederer requested a similar piece, I wanted to recapture the immediacy of 1987. But the earlier letter was no longer among my records, nor among Dan's. So I reluctantly let it go.

Fate, however, is persistent. Less than a month afterward Gasenone Kediseng of the Serowe museum asks me to proofread several catalogue pages from the Head archives. My breath tightens as I realise the listed materials relate to me. I stare wide-eyed at the titles of stuff I'd forgotten. And then from March 1987: *Holzinger to Gover, document 108*. A shiver of excitement, an overeager voice. "Gase, can we please look in Box G2?" First try, wrong box. Third try, right box. So many aerogrammes on top! Then three closely typed sheets of American-size paper, faded, probably the 3rd carbon down. "My mind is tired and my thoughts of Bessie are very many," I read, disconnecting from the younger man who had written them. A grand Bessie moment.

James Currey; Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1995): "she was a popular figure among the young men of District Six, who were keen on testing out their political ideas. She had taken up smoking and drinking by this stage and she would often sit on the edge of the pavement in the warm afternoon sun, the inevitable cigarette dangling elegantly from the tips of her fingers, discussing any number of political issues with her 'followers'" (52).

Not only is the similarity uncanny, there was also at least one man—Zoot Mohammed of Cape Town—who was in both audiences!

³Mxolisi Mgxashe's memoirs have been published: *Are You With Us? The Story of a PAC Activist* (Johannesburg: Mafube & Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2006).

But I am soon as unsettled and anxious as B Head herself. On key judgements the younger author contradicts the present me! Between 1987 and 2005 I gained much information, but I also smoothed out Bessie's roughness and pain. Which picture to paint for Mary? I listen to Gillian Eilersen's *Thunder*, and it corroborates 1987. I reread Bessie's non-fiction, and it supports 2005. In the end I trim both pieces and send them off equally. With great forbearance Mary allows me to disagree with myself in print. Bessie, I hope you're savouring this!

The physical alluvium of living

My chaotic account for Dan must have disappointed him. Reading it today reminds me of how little I knew of Bessie's dark side. My personal memories are mainly of our social time, from an hour before sunset until an hour after the paraffin lamp was lit. So the memories have a physical colour, the warmth of orange light on brown skin, yellow aprons, burgundy curtains, and the little wooden table where we arm-wrestled with cosmic ideas.

After meeting Bessie for the first time, the same Dan Gover pulled me aside. "That woman has a lot of energy coming out of the top of her head," he said admiringly. Everyone knew it. It seemed that Bessie could work all day and write all night. I never understood how she managed.

In her prime she had great physical energy. She dug the heavy black alluvium of the Boiteko garden with the strength of a man. And then she'd take a break to smoke! One day she asked me and my good friend Ketshabe Moduane to help set some poles into concrete. As she wanted to get to know him, she worked beside us until the job was done. Did she exaggerate her physical movements that day? Did she know how closely she planted her feet to ours? I found her presence overpowering, and Ketshabe later said the same⁴.

She usually worked in the garden with Bosele Sianana, and the two became fast friends. (Bosele, like Bessie, was an odd person out in her community.) A successful day closed with Bosele at Bessie's house, washing up and having tea. Howard would come in looking for a snack. Tom would hail from the gate, and Bessie would shout him in. While he washed and she cooked, she would pelt him with light-hearted questions about the day's events. On a good day this came off with gales of laughter. Such halcyon days were common in the first half of 1970; thereafter they became progressively rarer.

I was interested in Bessie's writing. I admired *When Rain Clouds Gather* and told her so, the more because I now worked at the brigade farm with its hero, Gilbert (Vernon Gibberd). She told me that writing was hard work. "I wrestle with the sentences. Sometimes they want to be in charge. Then I have to pin them to the mat." Her focus was on the word, the line. It seems curious now, but she never mentioned any other technical matter. And I, having become an editor and better writer myself, realise how her fiction suffered from her lack of experience. She was far stronger on tactics than on strategy. And the blasted woman was stubborn and didn't revise even obvious errors. One of her bulldozer techniques — making three or four carbon copies of even the initial draft — impaired the flow of her work. She was always heavily invested in the words as they stood. Who wants to hand-copy pencilled corrections to three additional copies?

Bessie was canny with her hands, and not only as a typist. She had a gift for manipulating a thing first in her head, then on the ground. "My mind is always leaping ahead...." She could make routine tasks seem artful. Pot to the tap, fill with water just so.

⁴A *Question of Power* seems to give an account of the same pole-setting day, though Bessie substitutes Bosele Sianana for Ketshabe Moduane. She dates it 27 December 1970.

Scoop up a cup of rice, maybe a little more or a little less. Rice into pot onto back of stove, gas flame set just so. Never once lift the lid. At the moment the other food becomes ready, Bessie snaps off all the fires. “Rice is ready!” she’d announce. “How do you know?” I’d think. But it was perfect, every time.

Chicken was a preferred food. She didn’t always buy it from the butcher. When I visited her in 1978 together with Ruth Cooper, she took a special delight in this big-hearted black woman from America who refused to make comparisons. She wanted us at her house every day. On our final visit she killed and cooked a chicken. She had a large white bird tied up outside her door. She picked it up by its feet, laid it on a rock near her door, put a heavy foot on it and abruptly twisted off its head. Ruth gasped. Bessie remained steady. Her foot did not come off until the gushing blood and thrashing wings had stopped. Then she lifted the carcass for me to take a photo—a round brown woman delighting in her prowess, red stains on white feathers, a pure cobalt sky above. Later I helped her pluck and gut the bird, and she turned it into a perfect dinner. She was never in better form.

All in all, then, she enjoyed a generous measure of power over her own demesne—just as surely as she suffered powerlessness on the larger scale.

Metaphysical armies of the mind

So many oppositions! She herself was contradiction, and she had an acute sense of tension in life and thought. Her chickens did not die without reflection from their butcher. But where others might perceive a subtle pull of opposites and temporary equilibria, Bessie felt, almost physically, cosmic clashes. (Yes, sometimes in the vegetable garden!) Left to themselves, her gigantic set-piece armies hurled themselves inexorably toward a one-sided annihilation. But come light and reason, the tin soldiers were picked up, cleaned off, and lovingly put back into their mental barracks. General B Head would march them out again soon enough.

She regularly and deliberately marched them into her fiction. “I guess I go for the extremes in my writing, Tom. I like good to be good and evil to be evil. I don’t get along with the wishy-washies in the middle.” This lack of nuance had its weaknesses and strengths. The weaknesses were obvious to almost everyone except B Head, who became famously defensive in both correspondence and conversation. The strengths were well agreed. Her stories quickly take on an heroic and epic dimension. Small conflicts magnify a thousand-fold. Minor characters march up to the stars. I think she once said it was D. H. Lawrence who made her write like that. By one of the little perversities of life, such an heroic, portentous voice is far removed from any Tswana tradition. I imagine that local readers find her overblown stance to be somewhat silly but harmless. In the short stories, so do I.

Back then, I needed time and fresh air to get used to B Head’s “cosmic mode” in conversation. At first I thought I had misunderstood the mock-heroic words when she whispered them; then I thought she must be deranged. Later I understood her cosmic consciousness as a personality trait or perhaps a state of being. I learned to recognise the signs: her conspiratorial manner, the whispered words, the eschewing of real names. “Tom! Do you feel the evil today?” she would say in whisper of either wonder or terror, round lips pursed outward, her hand sometimes gripping my arm. “Do you think the big power man at the *kgotla* wants to kill me?” Or, “Do you feel it, Tom, how good and evil are fighting a war in this very house?” Or, most commonly, “Do you know what the white man is doing? Oh, they are possessed by evil, Tom! They want to destroy everything that is beautiful and true in Africa.” Looking around that no one was listening, in an even lower whisper, “And they are being helped by greedy Africans, Tom, our so-called leaders.” That seemed to relieve some

inner pressure. She'd lift her head, put her hands on her hips, and come back into the public world.

She herself was a self-declared free agent in these various wars of the worlds. Again and again, in writing and in speech, she insisted that she belonged to no camp. She was later to set up her own camp, of course, the camp of the ordinary people. Robert Sobukwe may have been her model. She wished to be the people's prophet, offering literary muscle to that army of good and decent folk on their way up to becoming gods. That was our B Head ascendant, U-Shaka for the women who carried water and pounded corn. That was Saint Bessie, writing her way to a permanent place in our minds and hearts.

There were so many other B Heads. She was sometimes just a lonely woman, as poignant as any adult who has abandoned hope of finding real affection. Like so much else, Bessie experienced this loneliness physically. "No one cares about me; it makes my skin feel dry and cold," she'd say softly, reaching for a sweater. Or, "This house is different when Howard is not around. I hear the whispers of people who might have loved me." Imagine the confusion of a young man upon hearing these pleas for help! But they weren't. She was reporting her sensations. (I didn't learn for more than twenty years that she did make piteous cries, but they had destinations far from Serowe.) Occasionally there was a silent tear or two, but in my presence never sobbing or weeping. A woman alone who had built strong fortifications.

Bessie was frequently a vexed woman. Her controlled anger was marked by hands on hips, elbows wide, impatient feet, and sharply punctuated speech. The Queen's English delivered with a bark and a stamp of the foot. "Tom! That delivery man was a rude and rotten no-good!" "You black-eared goat-thing! Eat my cabbage again and I'll butcher you!" "Howard! Don't you dare play in your good trousers. Come here, you wretched nuisance!" The exasperated Bessie—loud, forthright, confrontational, exquisitely pronounced, with a twinkling humour not far below the surface—was her other daytime currency, the complement to the hale and hearty one. Both faces were well-known and liked in the village. I have spoken to friends and colleagues who knew her in the 1980s. The outward personalities that served her so well were loyal to her till the end.

But sometimes Bessie was the betrayed woman, when some insult, imagined or real, fired her up like old Vesuvius. Hell had few furies like B Head's gusting flames. I saw her uncontrolled anger only once, at a distance, and regretted seeing her so low. Wild gesticulations, shrieking, threatening fists, and a torrent of abusive language. Although she later regretted this particular tantrum, it was against her nature to apologise. To those with perceived power she could remain hostile and defiant for long periods.

She was often the disappointed-by-life idealist. How often her heroes let her down! They went straight into her "bad books". That's where politicians went too, though for different reasons. She sometimes refused to speak the names of those (men) whom she despised most, leaving me to guess their identities. I'd laugh but she would remain firm. In particular I was sure I knew who the "real" Dan and Sello were, but she stoutly refused to have that conversation.

Not every hero let her down. She always spoke with reverence of Robert Sobukwe. But she never let on that she had known him!⁵ And so many other things she chose not to tell: nothing of her childhood, nothing of past relationships, almost nothing about her husband. I did learn that the latter slept with a white whore in Toronto, but she didn't tell me either person's name!

At her best she was a reigning philosopher, Bessie the Good, wise and understanding

⁵We learn from *Thunder* that she last spoke with him on the morning of 21 March 1960, just before his arrest, perhaps an hour before the Sharpeville Massacre.

of the world. She had looked upon evil—lust for power and sexual promiscuity—and knew its hold on other men and women. She considered it tamed in herself. In the precious moments of serenity when there was no need to judge others, she was indeed wise. It was then one of life's warm pleasures to voyage into philosophical terrain with her. I suppose I rose to these occasions too, for they were the teatime sessions that both of us long remembered.

To where did she uplift our conversations? (She was generally in charge.) If there had been no vexations that day, then we jumped straightaway into existential questions: the possibility of knowledge, the possibility of good, the possibility of love, the inevitability of death, the necessity of unity. Bessie relished them all. Her lips smacked as she led off: "Tom! You know so many things. How do you know they are *true*?" Or, "Dostoyevski said that if there is no God, then everything is permissible. Why would Dostoyevski need a god to be good?"⁶ Or, "Do you believe in reincarnation? Don't you think it's beautiful?"

Let me be honest: for the first few months I enjoyed these naïve-sounding sallies as entertainment, not more. I had been bred to a harder thing, so I thought. But her method grew on me, her way of trumping rational analysis by gut feeling. Her gut feelings had their own hierarchy and inner order, amounting to a kind of parallel, undeclared philosophy. And I found myself very much in tune with them. (In 1995, when Gillian sent me her radical analysis of Bessie's beliefs, to become a section of *Thunder*, I stayed up the night reading and rereading her sympathetic account of Bessie's worldview. Only then did I become aware of it as an integral body of feeling and thought.)

A tragic life? Or a triumphant life?

The strophe for certain B Head literary criticism is "a tragic life", a victim of unending adversity and unhappiness from the moment of her anonymous conception to her premature death.

I am delighted to proclaim the opposite. It was an exuberant life, and now an exuberant afterlife.

She was indeed a victim as a child, a half-caste, an orphan, culturally and intellectually impoverished. But she found her bootstraps at an early age, and she scarcely looked back thereafter.

"But she was unhappy!" some will cry. "And she was just as often happy," I rejoin, "Maybe happier than you!" "But she would have been another Dickens, if only she had had the opportunity," they argue. "Ah, how profoundly you misunderstand, my friend. *Her adversity was her opportunity*, and she made brilliant use of it. Yes, we might suppose that her mother's affluent white family had sent her off to school in England, and nothing had opposed her progress. What then, dear friends? Brilliant self-ironies about literary women, accompanied by an acute social glance, the prime of Ms Amelia? Wherewith the struggle against the gods, the march to the stars? If you take away her adversity, you strip her of her *authentic opportunity*, the one she seized!"

I knew her as a generally cheery adult, when her physical circumstances were those of her own choosing. She was never without other options. She overcame much and accomplished more and knew that she had done so. By the end of her life she was acclaimed internationally. So the word "tragic" is wrong in all its shallow senses. If used as a sentimental ploy to evoke sympathy, it's even worse. (Bessie liked to pick up patronising

⁶Bessie offers her own take in *Rain Clouds* (21): "It is because of death that we tolerate evil. All meet death in the end, and because of death we make allowance for evil though we do not like it" (Oxford: Heinemann, 1986).

critics by their boney feet and wring their feathered necks.)

Tragedy is neither adversity nor unhappiness. It is rather a great loss foretold but not avoided, regardless of the degree of struggle. It is in this sense that “tragic” may have some meaning in speaking of B Head.

Bessie in daily life

Bessie and I became friends at the end of 1969. I knew her very well, was perhaps her closest on-site confidant, throughout the years 1970–1972. Those years encompassed both the writing of *Maru* and *QPower* as well as her breakdown and sojourn in Lobatse.

Her outward demeanour, except for truly awful days, was hard-working and cheerful. Only in serious conversation did one realise that this unusual woman was a thinker and a writer. She carried out the tasks of an almost-normal mother, housekeeper, and gardener, and she accomplished them with a distinctive flair. She had many friends among Serowe’s non-Tswana residents, especially the staff of the Swaneng schools and brigades. She was a busy and welcome daytime visitor, though not a night-time reveller. She gave endless time to the Boiteko garden. She hitched rides or cycled to the village centre (five kilometres) for groceries and mail, probably three times per week. She was lively, interesting, and *energetic*.

Then the sun sank below the flat western horizon, Howard was fed and put to bed, and her nocturnal spirits came out to surround her. The fabulous and the phantasmagoric breached the pregnant night. But beware! Its fierce labour also delivered deformed voices, stillborn ideas, pervasive evil, and especially individual despair. To hold the demons at bay Bessie had only a lamp, a typewriter, and unbelievable tenacity. In the morning she might exclaim, “We had a war in this house last night!” and then grow reticent. In the end I didn’t hear her full account, I read it. She thrust her first draft of *QPower* into my hands with a conspiratorial whisper: “You will learn what almost killed me.”

I knew she wrote her stories by night. Sometimes in the morning, when she was especially spirited, she’d say that she had created a beautiful world the night before. Not boastful; rather with an endearing mix of bravado and bashfulness. I was never shown the typescript pages. What I did *not* know was that she also wrote personal letters, hundreds upon hundreds of them, perhaps one per night. And still less did I guess that it was a different B Head who typed them.

A personal confession: when I first read *Thunder* and looked at the dates of the letters, I stared in consternated disbelief. The same sturdy woman who swung into varied projects by day was at the edge of despair and collapse by night, and not only during her truly awful periods. Her correspondents were made to suffer the desolation of B Head—on and on, endlessly—as surely as her daily colleagues enjoyed her cheer and her exasperations. Another B Head contradiction, and a revealing one.

My raw-impression letter of 1987 emphasised her pain. I was insistent that she wrote and kept herself busy as therapies against her various hurts. By implication she laboured in order to forget.

In 2005 I reverse that judgement: she wrote fiction in order to realise her visions, and she laboured by day in order to understand. The hours in the garden or kitchen didn’t make only cabbages or jam, they also made ideas, mountains of them, from which she winnowed the best for her nocturnal writing. (When her emotional hurts became too great, she didn’t work harder. Rather she went to bed.) Manual labour was neither solace nor a shelter from demon Sello; it was the sowing of inner seeds.

That letter of 1987 also stressed her selflessness, her lack of self-regard. I blush. The best explanation I can offer now is that I knew of neither her voluminous correspondence nor

her autobiographical *apologias*.

Rents in the inward fabric

Tragedy is a great loss foretold but not avoided. Bessie heard the foretelling and probably felt it physically. “It will kill me,” she used to say. What was “it”? What was going to kill her? And why did she knowingly leave it unclear?

If I put Bessie’s conversations alongside Gillian’s insights, I suggest she struggled with three primary fears. I must feel my way along here, for the closer to these fears, the fewer the words and the more whispered the tone, and the greater the likelihood of listener error. And I know only our dialogues, not her written letters.

I am quite certain that the enemy who would kill her lay within. Immigration problems, money problems, publishing problems, Howard problems: these were *problems*. The mortal enemy, on the other hand, was not a problem at all. The mortal foe of B Head was Bessie Amelia Head.

We are alone at her little table. “Tom, I’ve been an outsider my whole damn blasted life,” she says in a low tone. Her head is bent forward with intensity. “When is this going to end? It isn’t, Tom, it isn’t. It will be in the next life, that’s where I belong.” “But Bessie, why is it so bad to be an outsider? I mean, I’ve been like that too, my whole life. We get more chances, we see more than the ones who fit in.” “Well look at these African people here. They don’t know anything about the world. But they have their families, their work. They’re happy. But we are always going to wander, asking for this, for that...And then they despise us.” “No, no, Bessie, you should try to walk on the sunny side. You are something interesting to them, they are something interesting to you. You get along. And then common humanity clicks in, suddenly you’re friends.” “Oh Tom, you make it sound easy and beautiful. But it isn’t. You’re a white man from America. People have to respect you. You always respect yourself. But I’m this *coloured* person from South Africa. Do you know what that means, Tom? Do you know?” “Bessie, I can’t see how that’s different from being any other kind of person. I mean, how....” “Tom! You listen here. I’m from *South Africa*. I’m *coloured*. I have *no parents*. How does that feel? You, Tom, you will always belong *somewhere*. I will always belong *nowhere*. One day, one day...this will kill me.” She leans back, eyes closed, her face a mask.

Black Skin, White Masks. Fanon the psychologist sighs, “The only possibility is to become white.” B Head the humanist retorts: “The only possibility is to wipe away colour.” The revolutionary psychiatrist responds, “Your only cure is cleansing violence.” Bessie Amelia Emery—the little girl hidden by her foster mother during the 1949 Zulu riots—shudders and knows she cannot bear the cure.

Over tea we discuss Fanon. He is for her a deadly temptation, the most dangerous game. He exalts Africa as does no other, yet he tears at her self-image and that of other thoughtful people. Robert Sobukwe is *much* safer territory: he connects the cultural, spiritual, and political, and he locates the enemy on the outside. Bessie enfolds “African” to her breast, but she doesn’t know what to do with “Black” or “Black African”. We have not yet heard of Bantu Stephen Biko. Nor do we know of the women’s movement and its liberatory philosophy. But we do try to talk the identity talk of the 1960s. It leaves Bessie unsettled. If we get too personal, she shies away. She doesn’t tell me that in 1960 she and certain PAC militants were involved in a mutual betrayal. Nor do I know that she is again corresponding with Sobukwe.

To me the conversations about identity bring stabs of uncertainty and disappointment. She tosses off epithets that seem to stink of racism: “These Africans”, “the white man”,

“uneducated blacks”, “petty Indian traders”, “ignorant people in the village”. I wince. Then I realise my disappointment must be nothing compared to hers. She is on a self-guided path to the stars, to becoming Saint Bessie, only to be dragged back into the muck by an image and ideology devised and taught by others.⁷

The self-doubts are made worse by an unexplained clumsiness at other languages and cultures, by a certain boarding-school inflexibility, and above all by a curious blind spot for the ordinary feelings of ordinary people. She has a knack for the inopportune remark, often at moments when silence would be appropriate. I am often embarrassed by her mishandling of little interactions with Tswana friends. She hates herself for it but flares at others. Her first response is self-defence; the self-revulsion comes alone, later. A hairshirt worn so long, it must feel like Bessie’s outer skin.

And yet, and yet. *Rain Clouds* shows how closely she pays journalistic attention to Botswana, to what degree a sensuous love is planted there. Her outsidership, combined with swift shafts of human insight, come close to making a great novel. Compare the naïve *Rain Clouds* to the finely calibrated *L’Étranger/Outsider*. Camus knows how to weave the existential into a young Frenchman’s life and make a compelling story—but where are the Algerians? He paints them into a mute dumb background. *That’s* racism.

Bessie’s love-hate relation with Botswana is mirrored by B Head’s love-hate relation with Bessie Amelia. These conflicts, she understands, may kill her: “I lie awake at night until I am crushed by my own dreams...” Instinctively she knows she must transcend the confining social and personal contradictions, not struggle within their framework. She must do nothing less than annihilate today’s opposing concepts and replace them with other terms and qualities. A grand renovation of the universe. That restless energy coming out of the top of her head is her ceaseless rearranging of the cosmos, day and night, night and day.

Bessie’s promethean labour doesn’t help her to connect to others, of course. When the new University of Botswana invites her to a writers’ workshop, she is asked to speak on the author’s role in African societies. “Tom, I wrote a paper for that conference,” she tells me two years afterwards. “I worked hard on it. Then I went down to Gaborone and found they had invited all these other people to speak ahead of me.” I could feel an old indignity being rewarmed. “And they weren’t interested at all in serious subjects. They wanted to talk about cultural liberation, how we should all write poetry in local languages.” Her indignation flares. “Cultural ghetto nationalists, those Zambians!” she snorts. “So then my turn came to go up on stage. I told them about Dostoyevski and how he questioned the fundamentals of Russian society. And Tom, I heard them just laughing at me down there, making fun of me.” She’s in a fine dander now. “So I finished up quickly and walked away. When I saw the organisers afterwards, I looked them right into their eyes and told them to go to hell.” She throws her head back and laughs at the recollection, one of her full-bellied laughs. “You know, Tom,” she concludes triumphantly, “They will *never* invite me back. And B Head will *never* talk to such low people again.” She looks at me expectantly. It’s hard for me to agree with her, and anyway I find the whole tale hilarious. Such a self-inflicted predicament! I offer a bromide: “Well, Bessie, I hope you do go back sometime. People need to hear more about Dostoyevski.” And, I think, more than they need to read him! That gloomy neurotic, it took me weeks to finish [*The Brothers*] *Karamazov* and I still didn’t get the point. Mentally I cheer the Zambians, but how can I tell Bessie? So I store her account away and laugh at it over and over during subsequent years. Until 1996, when I read Gillian’s drastically different report of

⁷In *Rain Clouds* she speaks through Makhaya: “On the one hand, you felt yourself the persecuted man, and on the other, you so easily fell prey to all the hate-making political ideologies, which seemed to him to be the order of the day. Yet these hate-making ideologies in turn gave rise to a whole new set of retrogressive ideas and retrogressive pride[...].” (76).

the same affair, and wonder whose version is true.

Happily, Bessie's fear of outsiders gradually eases, though I am not in Serowe to witness it. But I love vicariously the emerging method to her stories. She gains confidence; she picks up Tswana materials and rearranges them. She weaves new themes, even heroic themes, into the familiar village music. No longer a simple journalist now but a player upon the Blue Guitar, telling us of things as they (almost) are. She has transcended; she has made it through.

The primordial hurt

Why have I been abruptly placed, abandoned, in a crazy wilderness with an almost unbearable load of powerful inner urges that are either the test of my self-control, or the root cause of degradation, downfall, and self-destruction?⁸

"Tom, do you think I'm a loony? Do other people think I'm a loony? Oh my god, how I make a mess out of life. Sometimes I hear those voices, and I wonder if I should give in. They want me, Tom, they want B Head. I haven't got anything to fight them with, and they just keep coming back. Do you believe me, Tom? No, you don't, I know it, you're a goddamned scientist like the other bloody fools. But I tell you, they come at night, most nights...." Her voice lowers further. "I think I was born like this, to be a loony...But I'm going to put up the worst fight they ever had. This situation can't go on. It's going to kill me, Tom, it's going to kill me."

Terrifying words, but she herself is a soft, controlled woman as she says them. What am I, an inexperienced twenty-three-year-old, to think? I later learn of her encounters with other people. She can indeed be uncontrolled, even violent in her speech. But I hardly ever see her like that. When her demons are on the prowl, it's my impression that she loses vital force, has a slowed demeanour, spends time in bed. I am more worried by her bizarre words than by her behaviour. But unknown to me, her demons are becoming bolder, making incursions into her daytime hours. She teeters on the brink.

In early 1971 I am not in Serowe. I learn by phone that she has been taken to the mental hospital in Lobatse. A kind of panic. Is she all right? Did she try to commit suicide? Is Howard all right? Fortunately everyone is fine. The story, as it comes out, is more improbable than any novel. Beating up on old Joan Blackmore? Denouncing the President in public? What is this all about? I thought her paranoia was the voices she hears at night, no?... Well, did the voices tell her to do it?

I am confounded and troubled by this shudder of the wheel. As I have to go to Gaborone on other business, I plan the short trip from Gabs to Lobatse. From the capital I call the hospital. "May I speak with Mrs Bessie Head, please?" "No, but you may leave a message. What do you want to tell her?" "I want to visit her next week. I want to ask her, what should I bring for you?" "Very good, I will go and ask her. What is your name? Thank you, Mister Tom. Will you please phone again in half an hour?" I hang up with a sense of foreboding.

Thirty minutes later I am more anxious. "Hello, this is Tom Holzinger. I phoned with a question for Mrs Bessie Head. Did you find her?" "Yes, Mister Tom, I asked her your question. She says she does not want to see you. She says you must not come to the hospital. She said it many times." I feel something go dead. "Please, may I speak to her directly? I

⁸"A Personal View of the Survival of the Unfittest", p. 149, written in the mid-1960s, first published with *The Cardinals* in 1993 (Cape Town: David Philip. 146-49).

think she will change her mind.” “I’m sorry, sir, it is not possible to speak to residents. You may leave another message.” So much to say! Which words will reach her? “Please tell her that her son is fine. Tell her that we love her. We are waiting for her to come home to Serowe.” And then it is over. Over for this day. Hopefully the future will give us more days.⁹

In fact the hospitalisation does not last long. Back in Serowe she quickly reconnects the threads of her daily life. She is surprisingly willing to talk about what happened. Always the hospital is the “loony bin”. Far more important, during this time the night-time voices grow faint. One day she tells me she thinks they are gone. Whereas earlier she described a “war”, now the battle metaphors disappear. She does not say she has won, far from it. She’s more like someone who knows she’s in remission from a disease. Which, of course, she is. *QPower*, a book-length description of her breakdown, is honest in most respects. The distortions, where they occur, lend dramatic effect. Some of them read like wishful thinking, others like carefully nurtured resentments.¹⁰

Just as with her outsidership, her fear of nocturnal demons declines after 1972. She returns to a baseline of erratic and emotional behaviour, without voices, without serious delusions.

But does she really pull through? After 1972 she is no longer a novelist. A mainspring has been torn out. Bessie, do come over here and argue it out with us. How do you weigh it up—your greater security against the loss of urgency in your writing? Do you miss the apparitions? Do you think you have more great writing in you?

In my view, her next book, the non-fictional *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, does have much greatness in it, from its sweeping plan to the unadorned but detailed method that assembles her gracious village one brick at a time. Her calm voice tells us that her demons are gone; her palpable love of Serowe tells us that her alienation from the village lies in the past.

In the centre of Serowe stands a simple monument to Ngwato, father of the Bangwato. On its top stands a little *phuti*, our totem. The inscription below, in English and Setswana, never fails to move me:

And so it came to pass that Ngwato, Tawana and Ngwaketse parted from their eldest brother Kwena. Ngwato and Tawana headed North, whilst Ngwaketse went South. Kwena and his warriors followed on Ngwato’s trail to kill him. When his pursuers closed in, Ngwato took cover inside a thicket of Letlhajwa bushes. As he lay there quietly, he saw a Duiker which remained unconcerned. Soon, the Bakwena warriors arrived and searched for Ngwato. “Ngwato must be hiding in those bushes there,” they said, as they surrounded the Letlhajwa bushes with their spears. Ngwato lay very still. Suddenly, the Duiker sprang out and escaped. “Look!” they cried, “there was a Duiker inside the bushes, Ngwato can’t be there. He must have escaped.” And off they went to look for him elsewhere....

Some of these words are taken directly from Bessie’s version of the story, as recorded in *Rain Wind* from traditional historian Mokgojwa Mathware. So, in the end, Bessie ascends from unwanted stranger to having a hallowed place in the heart of her adoptive village. A gesture of mutual belonging.¹¹

I have advanced that outsidership was her hairshirt and armour by day, and that fear

⁹In *QPower* she has me in fact visit the hospital, but only to receive the same dismal welcome.

¹⁰Perhaps the cruellest portrait she ever published is that of Marianne Marstrand, the Danish woman (“Camilla”) in the Brigade garden. I still wince when I read it.

¹¹In 2005 I am disappointed that Serowe has designated nothing to honour her. Pietermaritzburg has renamed its public library, but not yet the village that received her tempestuous love.

of mental illness—and episodically the real thing—was her haunt by night. Tragic? Neither trait caused her irreparable loss; on the contrary, they seem to have fuelled her creative energies. I am not sure, however, if the same was true of the third and most secret of her hidden wounds.

The woman who was never loved

Bessie never talked about her love life. It gradually became clear to me and other friends that she had no romantic interests. Nor, on the surface, did she seem to wish any. Again, understanding came little by little. By the time I said a rushed goodbye to her in 1973, I recognised a profound, repressed, affective life. But I had no idea that it troubled her as much as her written words seem to testify.

A wish to be loved is not to be confused with her hunger for intellectual companionship. “Tom, are you ever lonely? Do you look for people to share your ideas with?” Bessie launches a familiar game. “Doesn’t it drive you crazy in Serowe, all these people who lead their lives without thinking about them?” I’m less interested in this chase than she. “Yes, a little bit. But of course, I have B Head to talk to. Seriously though, they have their extended families. They aren’t in the same position as us.” Bessie is not about to be deterred. “Well, Tom, there are days when I think I will go stir-crazy in this damn blasted place. I’ll become a bomb, the B Head atomic bomb, and blow the whole sleepy dusty stupid thing to hell.” I laugh. “Go to it, Bessie, it might be a good idea. You can turn them all into pillars of salt. But wouldn’t you save a few, here and there?” Huge gales of laughter, then giggles. “You want me to play God, do you Tom? Well, I think that will be my next role, B Head as God. I will destroy all those big-time gods in all those blasted big-time churches.” And suddenly that conspiratorial voice: “Tom, did you ever have to fight against God?” I never get used to her abrupt about-faces. Sensing trouble ahead, trouble behind, I give her a flat-footed answer: “I’m not sure what you mean, fighting God.” It doesn’t rescue me from a stamp of her foot. “Tom! You are a draft-dodger and a question-dodger! Don’t be useless like the lot of them.” And she sits up straight, hands on hips, elbows out. I have to salvage the conversation with a hijacking: “Hey, Patrick wants to close the Boiteko brewery. It’s a chance for a god to become a shebeen queen.” Aware of the tactic, she relents briefly. But as I finish her tea and stand up to leave, I hear, “Tom, what makes people lonely? Do you sometimes get lonely?” “Yes, Bessie, I do, and that’s why I’ll probably drop by tomorrow.”

In the end it was an unsatisfying repartee for both of us. Bessie’s preoccupations led to many such conversations with friends. In overcoming loneliness, B Head was her own principal obstacle. I am certain she scolded herself, and just as certain that she could not restrain herself the next time round. She sought that which necessarily eluded her—an intellectual soulmate to share her obsessions.

People naturally ask, but didn’t she want a lover too? Wasn’t the absence of physical affection even worse for her than intellectual loneliness? And I have to say, I just don’t know. I do know that I rarely witnessed any physical interaction—play, affection, chastisement, or even a child’s bath—between Bessie and her son. Perhaps they occurred when the two of them were alone, or perhaps they rarely occurred at all.

Sometimes when it was just Bessie and me, and neither one of us in a hurry, we would feel some little tug towards greater intimacy. We both sensed it was there, in that kind of mutual recognition which proceeds by intuition. We would sit down with an extra cup, or an extra cake, and allow the conversation to be pulled toward the danger zone. But we never entered it. Again by mutual intuition, we knew the other wouldn’t really want greater intimacy, that a great destruction might well ensue. So we left it alone, with just a whiff of tea

and tangelis still hanging in the air when I closed her gate.

Her sexuality was one of her great vexations. She apparently never had a sexual experience or relationship that met her expectations.^{12,13} After the birth of her son I think it doubtful that she had any at all.¹⁴ She openly said that male genitalia disgusted her. Yet her inhibitions and fear were matched by a headlong hero worship of certain men whom she held up as impossibly pure and true. This conflict made for bizarre conversations and sharply erratic behaviour. She was certainly not the first creative person to exhibit such a paradox, but she carried it further than most.

She instilled her personal contradictions squarely into her fiction. Again and again we find a biting but hard-to-believe tension: male heroes far too good to be true, parachuted onto a broad terrain of gender conflict in which most men are thoughtless, brutal sex machines.¹⁵

At one point after reading *QPower*, I thought Bessie might be a lesbian, deep down in her repressed catholic heart. But since that time I have read more and thought more, and now I think that view was wrong. The person referenced in every romantic dream, every fantasy, every hypothetical situation, is always male. Her occasional use of “girlfriend”, as often when used by a woman, meant “woman friend” without romantic overtones. So, much as I personally might wish to count Bessie among the liberated sisterhood, she wasn’t.

Her heterosexuality does not explain her venomous feelings against homosexual men. Her characterisations of Sello and Dan may be symptoms of traumatic disturbance. One looks for strong and proximate causes. Were there men who threatened her family’s relationships in Pietermaritzburg or Cape Town?¹⁶ Did her loathing of homosexual men and her disgust for penises stem from the same injury early in life? Perhaps a piercing arrow exactly fitted a waiting-to-happen wound.

It’s almost dusk. Bessie’s voice beside the stove is soft, cool, controlled. “Tom, I want to ask you a question. Are you a homosexual?” I am paralysed. It’s my mother’s interrogation of five years ago, likewise beside a stove. Not one wrong step. “No, Bessie,” shaking my head and working on an answer. She’s ahead of me. “You sleep in the dormitories with the men, and you’re always alongside the trainees. I thought maybe...” Her lips are carefully pursed, the voice deliberately smooth. *How can she know?* “No, Bessie. My first friend at college wanted us to have a sexual relationship, he kissed me, but I couldn’t do it.” Bessie is transfixed. I plunge on. “In sexual relationships I’ve always wanted girls.” Cold sweat pours. Instinct moves me toward a chair. “Hey, Bessie, let’s take these teacups to the table.”

Bessie relaxes a bit. “Tom, it made me worry last night.” “I’m sorry to hear that. But you never need to worry about me.” “Tom, I want to know, what do you think of homosexuals? How can they do those dirty things?” Her whisper pierces the little room: “Are you sure you’ve never done them?” She searches my eyes. *How can she know of my as-yet-unrealised longings?* I hate my answer. “Oh, Bessie, you know I wouldn’t do that stuff.” She nods. I push ahead. “I don’t know why some men want to sleep with other men. But I think it’s their business, not ours. They’re not doing any harm to the rest of us.” Big mistake. “Tom!” She half-rises. Her nails find my arm. “Don’t ever say that Tom. They do disgusting things Tom, and they come and show me at night. Please don’t say that again.” She stands

¹²She offers various versions of her expectations. I like “Earth and Everything” from the mid-1960s, published with *The Cardinals* (139–40).

¹³I later learned that one of her earliest god-heroes in Cape Town subsequently sexually assaulted her.

¹⁴Ruth Forchhammer recently showed me an unpublished sheet in which Bessie states that she was never loved, except briefly by a German man. (Ruth had assumed that the “German man” was me.)

¹⁵It is fascinating that this formula has won her a steady following among cosmopolitan western readers.

¹⁶From *QPower* concerning Elizabeth, Bessie’s alter ego (19): “Women were always complaining of being molested by her husband. Then there was also a white man who was his boy-friend” (Oxford: Heinemann, 1974).

her full short height and wheels away.¹⁷

The moment passes. We change the topic to familiar themes. I drain my tea and rinse the cups. I pause to take my leave. She speaks first. “Good night, Tom, don’t forget to drop by for fresh jam tomorrow.” Although the modulated voice betrays nothing, the wave is a little slow, a little sad. “For sure, Bessie, I’ll be here.” It’s almost full dark. The duchess who breaks her dolls because they cannot be perfect is about to become a prisoner of her own nocturnal doll-keepers. She withdraws and shuts the door, a woman alone, until tomorrow’s chariot whirls her back into the clean Botswana sun.

When she was bad she was horrid

I am reluctant to state it: in her letters Bessie was a complainer. Small and large frustrations that were manageable by day loomed large during the solitude of night. A major frustration was to work alone as a writer, without writing company, without recognition of her skills, with no one to make a fuss over her. Without enough money to stop worrying about it, and sometimes, with aches and pains or a cold or flu.

I have often wondered why she was not as stoic at night as she was by day. Why did she cry out for attention and caring from those far away rather than from me or the folks next door? I think she “really believed it when she said it”. That is, her daytime self-reports were true, and her night-time ones also. I suspect she is not the only writer who has presented multiple faces to the world, not in any manipulative way, but because multiple truths dwelt in her breast and heart.

B Head knew all about herself: her strengths, weaknesses, and Achilles’ heel of mental instability. She was as self-aware as artists often are, quite far beyond the proverbial person in the street. And yes, she thought about herself and her situation a great deal. Had she not been a refugee and a writer, one might have told her to get over it and find a constructive project. But under the circumstances her preoccupation seemed perfectly normal and right, and indeed she gained terrific writing mileage out of her self-awareness.

Then there was the contradiction in her personal manners. For one who believed in “people religion” and “a world full of love, tenderness, happiness and laughter”, B Head was one tough cookie. Was she another of those didacts who love people in general and dislike them individually? I don’t think so. I think all of her various feelings were perfectly true and genuine. The chips just fell where they fell. She almost never spoke or wrote hypocritically. But she was more than aware that others did.

Once Sello and Dan had had their fling with her and were extinguished, she could again find exemplars among ordinary people and celebrate them for their simplicity and goodness. I believe her whole-heartedly when she writes,

All who know me know that in everyday waking reality I am an absolutely solitary person. Friends walk through my life, talk, smile and shake hands, but no one is near me. This is not true of my dream world at night. My dream world is crowded with thousands and thousands of people. It is not fancy or pretty-pretty but a practical, busy world where people are planning for the future and make known to me their preferences.¹⁸

Lay this weary soul to rest

¹⁷Bessie recounts this scene in *QPower* but omits her aggressive interrogation.

¹⁸“Why Do I Write?” *Mmegi wa Digang*, 30 March 1985: 7.

After I left Botswana in 1973, I missed Bessie literally. I moved around quite a bit. She kept up with me for a while, but somewhere I must have failed to send a new address. I lived in Pennsylvania while she sojourned in Iowa in 1977, but she didn't write or phone. She was only slightly apologetic when I visited her in 1978. She re-ignited an intense correspondence in mid-1983. I had just moved to Montréal with my wife and infant son. Howard was in Canada too, reunited at last with his father Harold—but deep in trouble and desperately unhappy in Toronto. He came and stayed with us for part of that humid summer, bringing with him a new trumpet, his comfort. He washed his horn every day in our bathtub and taught himself to play. For some time Bessie believed that the trouble lay with the father; it fell to me to advise her gently otherwise. In the end—how much elision here!—we put Howard safely on the plane back to Botswana.

Her late correspondence with me was less emotionally fragile, less daring, less beautiful, and more world-weary than before. Even in a hand-written aerogramme from Australia in early 1984 it seemed that her fresh eyes might be tiring, her delight in discovery less intense. I heard very little from her during 1985 and early 1986.

In April 1986 a long-distance phone call before dawn woke the Montréal household. Patrick van Rensburg in Serowe had phoned Randolph Vigne in London, and Randolph had phoned Harold Head in Canada. Now it was my turn to hear Harold's old-school voice, low and strained, "Do you know that Bessie is dead?"

Later that year Patrick visited Canada, kindly bringing for me a video of the funeral service. The electronics shop that transferred the format was far from my home. I was impatient. When I at last viewed the tape, it proved emotionally unsatisfying. Bessie, there are blasted *priests* preying over your body. How did they get there? Patrick's words, though, were a comfort. The final articles and tributes published in *Mmegi* were the most helpful. I read "Why Do I Write?" for the first time. What astonishment! O Bessie, that's unbelievable. Only you could play such a game, and you're totally on top of it. Bravo. Go well and stay well.

Channelling Bessie

If I spend a long time in Bessie's kingdom, reading and re-reading her words, I find myself coming under her spell and feeling the language somewhat as she feels it. What I like are her good English sentences and her truthfulness. I may wince at this and that, be embarrassed for her, be angry with her, but I think she meets the standard set by James Baldwin: "I want to be a good writer and an honest man." She would not bother to change the noun.

I can't channel her schizophrenic voices, fears, symbolisms. When she wants to engage me in conversation about them, I disappoint her. As she herself says, it's a treacherous quicksand in there.

If there is unworthy calculation, it is in a few of the letters and autobiographical pieces. I feel her cold sweat. When frustration becomes vindictiveness, there's self-righteousness. When I can't share her personal attacks, she doesn't mind or even notice. And quite often it is the reverse: Come, Tom, let's celebrate what a beautiful person so-and-so is; the greatness of this one; the heroic qualities of that one.

The noble part of Bessie is easy to channel. We share the same feelings about ordinary people and power people, about gods, about artistic imagination. I am more optimistic than she about humankind. She knows that evil is rooted deep down. We both salute the human capacity for heroism and greatness and self-sacrifice. She believes in

reincarnation; I believe in energising spirits. We click.

Her deep self-anxieties concern outsidership, emotional instability, and inability to love and be loved. Roam about in Bessie's world and these preoccupations become palpable. *Rain Clouds* and *QPower* offer rough resolutions to outsidership and instability. The possibility of love? *Maru* takes a bleak, even bizarre view: Love, yes, but held hostage to Power. In Bessie's case, never freed. A loss torrentially aftertold.

Coming to the end of these recollections, I am once more uneasy. B Head is a force of nature with myriad forms. I'm afraid I know her in only a few of them. She may well hate these pages and call me a damn blasted liar. But please, Bessie, be patient with me one last time; I have done what I can. This memoir is for you and your radical vision of humanity. Your mesmerising flame engulfs me. I am illuminated by your message—that we the plain and unremarked people of the earth shall one day walk as gods.

A re gateng, mmogo!

PART II: CRITICISM IN BOTSWANA

exclaiming it
explaining it
abstaining from it
debating it
compiling it
rewriting it
mystifying it
feminising it
colonising it

What is wrong with Bessie's Head?
I'm afraid the truth has to be said:
It's a little off-square but totally round
Sometimes it won't even touch the ground
It floats magically, up there it may be found
As fresh as air, as heavy as a feather
As natural but temperamental as the weather
Up there where those rain clouds have gathered

It's the tenderness of her power
It's the power of her tenderness
That's what's right in Bessie's Head.

Bessie Head and the Dynamics of Social Relations in Serowe: A Historical Perspective

Maitseo Bolaane

Background: Historical context

The aim of this paper is to understand the factors that might have influenced Bessie Head's perception of her social settings and the dynamics of the social relations in Serowe. This paper will also examine how Bessie interacted not only with BaNgwato but also the white (European settlers), Indian, and coloured communities living in Serowe. It is of particular interest in this paper to examine the kinds of social relations these communities entered into and the attitudes they displayed towards the non-whites, including the so-called coloureds, with a view to locating Bessie Head's experiences and the manner in which such experiences might have contributed to her writing to reflect the tensions and contradictions of negotiating personal and social identities, particularly as a stateless person.

At the time of Head's arrival, the country was moving towards self-government prior to complete independence. The administrative seat was moving from Mafikeng to Gaborone (now capital of Botswana). The country attained self-government in 1965 and became a republic in 1966 as one of the poorest countries in Africa with an overwhelmingly rural population which depended mainly on agriculture for their livelihood. Botswana also lacked meaningful social overhead capital on which to build a strong economy. Prospects looked bleak for a country which was in a quagmire in relation to hostile minority white regimes of the then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), South Africa, and South West Africa (now Namibia) respectively.¹ It also had to deal with liberation movements, freedom fighters, and political refugees. Most South Africans reached Botswana after the Sharpeville Massacre on 21 March 1960, when sixty-nine black protesters were shot and killed by South African police in the township of Sharpeville. On 30 March, the South African government declared a state of emergency, which led to the arrest of a large number of people of different races who opposed the government. Refugees from South Africa used the route through the Bechuanaland Protectorate to safety in Europe or friendly African countries such as Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia. In his "Memoirs of the Refugee 'Pipeline'—The Serowe Route, 1960–1961", R. Watts describes his involvement (together with that of his wife Theresa Piper) in the movement of South African refugees after their arrival in Serowe in March 1960.² The BaNgwato leader Tshekedi Khama had invited Watts to Serowe and appointed him a manager for the Bamangwato Tribal Cattle Development Centre (later called Tribal Agricultural Office). Later Watts was appointed by Robinson, the District Commissioner in Serowe, to co-ordinate the movement of the refugees through Serowe and on to Francistown, where a Ghana Airways DC3 would collect them. According to Watts, between March 1960 and January 1963, 1,200 South Africans are estimated to have passed through the Bechuanaland territory going northwards.³ He describes the refugees that he met as a fascinating mixture of people from all over South Africa.⁴ These included Adelaide Tambo

¹See P. T. Mgadla, "Deportations, Kidnappings, Espionage, Threats and Intimidations during the Liberation Struggle in Botswana 1965–1985", paper read in the Southern African and the World: the Local, the Regional and the Global in Historical Perspective Conference, organised by South African Historical Society, University of Cape Town, 26–29 June 2005.

²R. Watts, "Memoirs of the Refugee 'Pipeline'—The Serowe Route, 1960–1961", *Botswana Notes and Records* vol. 29 (1997): pp. 105–120.

³Watts, "Memoirs of the Refugee 'Pipeline'", p. 107.

⁴Watts provides a profile of refugees he met in Serowe: "Memoirs of the Refugee 'Pipeline'", pp. 114–117.

and her children, who were on their way to join Oliver Tambo, one of the key leaders of the ANC. This was also the first time that Patrick van Rensburg, known to many people for his brigade movement, came to Serowe. Van Rensburg, who like other white South Africans had become disillusioned with apartheid, resigned from the South African diplomatic service at the time of the Sharpeville Massacre and became an active opponent of the government. The Watts family left Serowe in October 1961 before the arrival of Head and her son Howard. However, Watts gives a picture of the refugee situation in Serowe at about the time Bessie Head arrived.

Serowe: *MmaBesi-a-Kgama*

Serowe, coincidentally famed *MmaBesi-a-Kgama*,⁵ is the home of the largest social and political group of the Tswana, known as BaNgwato. Serowe became capital in 1902, succeeding Shoshong (1850–1889) and Palapye (1889–1902), which were abandoned mainly because of water depletion.⁶ One of the main contrasts between Botswana and Bessie Head's country of birth is that in Botswana, the power of the chiefs (*dikgosi*) was well established among groups such as the BaNgwato. Like other principal Setswana-speaking ethnic groups such as BaKwena and BaNgwaketse, historically BaNgwato respected the authority of a single *kgosi* (chief). Traditionally the chief held much power and was highly respected. The chief's authority was not, however, absolute. He had advisors, councils, and an entire hierarchy of leaders to assist him. Frequently, matters were brought before the *kgotla* (traditional court, plural *dikgotla*), where freedom of speech was encouraged, and men (but to a lesser extent subject groups like the San/BaSarwa, who felt excluded from the process) were allowed to express their views. According to historian L. D. Ngcongco, Tswana societies, just like other African societies, did not consider public affairs a domain for women.⁷ Therefore, Bessie Head's views could hardly be expressed through the *kgotla* as traditionally she did not fit within that structure. The *kgotla* served as the locus for participatory decision-making and/or the public legitimisation of decisions, and the *kgosi* presided over the *kgotla* gatherings.

Kgotla operated at all levels of BaNgwato society, from the family lineage and ward groupings to the central leadership of *morafe* (tribal group).⁸ The homesteads (*dijarata*) in Serowe were placed in some kind of order, with the chief's home located in a central position and wards (also called *dikgotla*) around the chief's according to seniority. The households of related families formed a ward.⁹ When Bessie Head arrived in the *Ga-mmangwato* ("at the place of the Ngwato") 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. In her description of village life Bessie observed a life where a household unit consisted of a man, his wife, children, and dependants, with compounds headed by a senior male member of the family. She also observed how compounds of a group of related family members were linked by a network of stony paths.

⁵This name for Serowe actually refers to Khama III's wife, Bessie, so that the place is described as the home of the mother (of the BaNgwato), Bessie.

⁶Q. N. Parsons, "Khama III, the Bangwato, and the British, with special reference to 1895–1923", (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1973).

⁷L. D. Ngcongco, "Tswana political tradition: how democratic?", in John Holm and Patrick Molutsi (eds), *Democracy in Botswana*, (Gaborone: Botswana Society & Macmillan, 1989), p. 46.

⁸On chieftainship and the *kgotla*, see Ngcongco, "Tswana political tradition: how democratic?", pp. 43–46.

⁹On the ward organisation, see Ngcongco, "Tswana political tradition: how democratic?", p. 43.

The compound constituted a ward, and most villages in Botswana are constituted into the ward system, although the tradition is now gradually fading away as villages expand and become more urbanised. Bessie and her son Howard constituted their own family unit in Serowe. Finally, in the traditional Botswana society, each totemic group identified itself with a particular animal, and the Ngwato totem (*sereto*) was—and still is—a duiker (*phuti*). Thus an individual will fondly be referred to as “*phuti*”, a reflection of their Ngwato identity. It is not surprising then that there is a reference to the “totems” in her novel *Maru*.

Throughout the colonial period, the BaNgwato political domination continued to be extended to other groups such as BaKalanga, BaBirwa, BaTswapong, BaKgalagadi, and BaSarwa,¹⁰ who are still today referred in the literature as minority groups, in terms of their subject status. At the time Bessie Head settled in Serowe, Kgale Mang Tumedisho Motsete (1899–1975) was one of the first non-royal Batswana to acquire a higher education. He was a Motalaote (i.e., of Kalanga origin) born in Serowe. According to Tlou and Campbell, he was the most educated Motswana in Bechuanaland at the time. Motsete’s major contribution was to the writing of the national anthem, “*Fatshe Leno La Rona*” (“Our Land”).¹¹

At the same time, BaNgwato power was felt beyond the boundaries of Serowe, and the whole area is today designated as the Central District, which is the largest district in the country. The non-Ngwato groups residing in Serowe, e.g., BaKalanga, had their own wards, such as Botalaote and Sebina, and did not identify with the totem *phuti*. Bessie Head was not white, and therefore not considered of “superior race”, but she was also not a MoNgwato and did not have a totem to identify with; this made her a minority in Serowe, the village that she and Howard adopted as home. Leloba Molema argues that, although Bessie writes so passionately about the village that she adopted, it is also clear from her writing that she was grappling with the new country and coming to terms with it, even “in her case to the point of breakdown”. Molema further observes that in that breakdown “we read not ‘crankiness’ or ‘madness’ but adaptation at great cost to herself, adaptation that also contains in it the seeds of our [Batswana readers’] own discomfort.”¹²

According to the Botswana census definition, today Serowe is an urban village because of its population, which is over 5000, because 75 % of the labour force is engaged in non-traditional agricultural activities, and because it also has other key amenities like police stations, post offices, and a primary hospital. But as a village it still retains the traditional set-up of having a tribal authority,¹³ and the atmosphere retains its village-like qualities (unlike other regional capitals such as Mochudi, which have a more urban feel). Today the village has important historical landmarks, such as the memorial to Khama III, chief of the BaNgwato people in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the London Missionary Society (LMS) Church built of brown sandstone, and the Ngwato royal burial ground at the Serowe Hill, the steep outcrop of rock. In the vicinity of Serowe is the Khama Rhino Sanctuary. Although the village is located away from the main road and railway, it is now linked to the main Gaborone-Francistown road with a tar road. There is yet another important road that links Serowe with the diamond mining town of Orapa. Serowe is the birthplace of Seretse Khama, the heir to the BaNgwato chieftainship and Botswana’s first president. It is also home village of the current president of Botswana Festus Gontebanye Mogae and the vice-president Seretse Khama Ian Khama, as well as some of the members of the Botswana

¹⁰J. Ramsay, B. Morton and T. Mgadla, *Building a Nation: A history of Botswana from 1800 to 1910*, (Gaborone: Longman, 1996) p. 231.

¹¹T. Tlou and A. Campbell, *History of Botswana* (2nd ed., Gaborone: Macmillan, 1997), p. 292.

¹²Leloba Molema, “‘The end is where we start from’: Tribute to Bessie Head”, *Mmegi wa Digang* Gaborone, 26 April 1986 (vol. 3, no. 15), reprinted in this anthology.

¹³Botswana Government (Central Statistics Office), *Population of Town, Villages and Associated Localities*, Government Printer, 1991 & 2001.

Cabinet. Because it is the home of Mogae and Khama, Serowe therefore remains politically important.

Serowe: simple but complex village life

BaNgwato kept small livestock like goats and poultry in the village, and Bessie noted the busy life of flocks of chickens with scraggy chicks, each bossed by an ostentatious rooster as they were searching for food, goats that were almost everywhere in the village also busy scavenging for food. Each homestead (*jarata*) was surrounded by the rubber hedge that Bessie Head noted: this adaptable green plant is commonly known in the Central District as *tlhare se tala* (green tree) or *motsetse* (breast-feeding mother) because of the milk-like, bitter sap that comes out when a branch is broken from the hedge. The description of the layout of Serowe in the 1960s matches the post cards on sale of “old” Serowe (see for example the cover of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, 1981) and in many ways captures a reflection of simple village life in Botswana before the arrival of globalization.

Bessie showed a great interest in the life of BaNgwato, Serowe village itself, and the country in general. She was soon to find out that traditionally Batswana have a three-tier system of residence: the village, cultivation settlement area (lands or *masimo*), and a livestock keeping area (cattle-post or *moraka*, plural *meraka*).¹⁴ The largest sector of the economy was agriculture, with sub-sectors of arable farming and cattle keeping. Both made a major contribution to the BaNgwato rural households’ food consumption. Traditionally people had to produce and provide for their households.

Bessie arrived and settled in Serowe at a time when the economic development of the country depended principally on the cattle industry. Agriculture, more so cattle ranching, was the dominant economic activity, and beef production formed the mainstay of the economy in terms of output and export earnings.¹⁵ Seretse Khama and many of the Ngwato nobility were among the major cattle ranchers in the country who supplied the newly established Lobatse meat freezing plant.¹⁶ Although livestock accounted for the largest share of agricultural production, more people were directly engaged in arable agriculture, an activity taking place at a subsistence level on a piece of land outside the village.¹⁷ BaNgwato (and Batswana more generally) commonly grew sorghum, maize, cowpeas, melons, and groundnuts.¹⁸ In her writing, Bessie noted that the BaNgwato’s world was filled with observation of nature, its trees, wild fruits and flowers, and the everyday life of man as he ploughs his field and of woman taking care of the weeds and the insects that are likely to affect the crops. She also was aware that cattle were usually tended far from the village by herdboys. In the case of BaNgwato, the herdboys would be the BaSarwa, whose status was very low. A system of clientship also operated amongst Batswana, in which the cattle-owning BaNgwato maintained a top social status and held as clients non-cattle owning people such as BaSarwa. Traditionally the cattle industry played—and still plays—an important part in Batswana society. Cattle were seen as security against misfortune because they could be sold for cash or

¹⁴This observation noted in Gillian Stead Eilersen, *Bessie Head. Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), p. 67.

¹⁵Mishingo Mpaphadzi (ed.), *Botswana '85: an official handbook* (Gaborone: Government Printer, 1985), p. 74.

¹⁶The *Manchester Guardian* reported Seretse and his uncle Tshekedi Khama amassing considerable wealth through selling their cattle to the Lobatse abattoir, 3 March 1958 & 4 Feb. 1959.

¹⁷*Botswana '85: An official handbook*, p. 77.

¹⁸See M. Bolaane, G. Lesetedi and M. Mulinge, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Food Security in Botswana: A case of *morogo*, *dinawa* and *lerotse*”, a paper presented at the SADC Workshop on African Indigenous Knowledge best Practices for Food Security in the Southern African Region, Kimberley, 17 Feb 2006.

exchanged for other goods when needed. Cattle were paid as *lobola* (bride price) for marriage. The number of cattle paid to the bride's parents determined one's social status. The importance of cattle therefore had an impact on social relations in Botswana (particularly Serowe) society. This had implications for Bessie herself as a coloured without any of those cattle posts or cultivation residences. Bessie could be relegated to a low social status, as she did not own a herd of cattle and was simply an unmarried woman within the Ngwato traditional context.

As Bessie talked with the people of Serowe about the multiple job roles that Batswana went through in their lifetime, she realised that Africa was never a "Dark Continent" to African people. Her interest in the history of BaNgwato introduced her to leaders such as Khama III and Tshekedi Khama. During his reign (1926–1948), Tshekedi Khama had advocated productive development for his territory, which he argued the colonial authorities had hitherto neglected. He perceived meaningful development as that which enabled the people to take part in their own improvement. Apart from the building of Moeng College (1947), collective development was also initiated in the late 1950s through the Bamangwato Development Association with the main objective to foster economic activity among his people.¹⁹ Tshekedi consolidated his idea of community-based development after visiting similar projects in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), which were run on a community basis under the guidance of Clutton-Brock, whom Tshekedi later invited to a meeting at his *kgotla* in Pilikwe, thus leading to the establishment of a similar project in the Ngwato territory. Clutton-Brock supervised the implementation of the Bamangwato Development Association.²⁰ Up until independence, there were discussions on agricultural issues on a large scale and issues related to livestock improvement. Batswana advocated the introduction of better cattle breeds. Issues on control of livestock diseases (such as foot-and-mouth), grazing conditions, and the water situation were discussed. Included in the discussions were drought, since the semi-arid country was prone to such conditions. Bessie noted these drought conditions when living in Serowe, and she alludes to them in her writing.

Bessie Head is still considered Botswana's most important writer. Her work, on Botswana and in particular Serowe, emphasised the value of ordinary life and humble people, something that McCall Smith has attempted to capture in his series of Precious Ramotswe's No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, but he could not depict Botswana and Batswana in the same artistic style that the "insider" Bessie did.²¹ Bessie's reviewers have noted her importance as a social critic,²² but she could still write as a historian. This is confirmed by the historical sources listed in the bibliography of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. In this book, Bessie gives readers an insight into Serowe community life and situates it within a historical context, events following chronologically (1960s–1980s). She tried to unravel the Khama III period and his relationship with the London Missionary Society. She also remarks about Tshekedi Khama's regency and the events shaping Seretse Khama's childhood and later his marriage to Ruth Williams, which produced more opposition in South Africa than within his place of birth.

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 discrimination and domination of those who are weak by those who are powerful, women by men, and those who are poor by

¹⁹P. T. Gabasiane, "The origins and activities of the Ba[ma]ngwato Development Association: economic and social influence of Tshekedi Khama 1958–1968", (unpublished research essay, University of Botswana, 1988).

²⁰Guy & Molly Clutton-Brock, *Cold Comfort Confronted*, (Oxford: Mowbray, 1972) p. 99.

²¹I am indebted to my daughter Tshepho Bolaane who brought the idea of Bessie's analysis of society to my attention.

²²See e.g. G. S. Eilersen.

those who have wealth and material possessions. As Mompoloki Bagwasi notes, Margaret Cadmore, who is identified in the text as a “Masarwa”, is at the centre of the theme on identity and race “that is complicatedly portrayed in the novel”.²³ But Leloba Molema brings yet another interesting observation: that Bessie’s South African experience prepared her to address this subject of unequal relationship between Batswana and the San (BaSarwa),²⁴ the group that still faces extreme marginalization and poverty in the country.²⁵ The persisting socio-political, cultural, and economic factors have resulted in serious disparities in terms of access, participation, and performance of disadvantaged groups, particularly the San.²⁶ Bessie, who was light skinned like BaSarwa, felt empathy for these people, who could be viewed to some extent as permanent outsiders within the BaNgwato society—like she herself was. What is important about Head’s writing is that she is trying to force Botswana society to be more self-critical, especially for the majority (BaNgwato) to see the need to reassess this relationship. According to Molema, Bessie discusses the question of discrimination and prejudice against BaSarwa without flinching, an issue that could not (and still cannot) be openly discussed in Tswana society. One can therefore argue 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. She also describes thin “Masarwa” stick legs of malnutrition and the hard callused feet that had never worn shoes, and a dress which smelt strongly of urine and the smoke of outdoor fires.²⁷

Locating Bessie Head within the segments and stratification of the populace of Serowe

At the time Bessie Head settled in Serowe, there was a whole section of non-Ngwato groups in the village. There was a very, very small number of Europeans in Serowe, who divided into colonial officials (magistrates, district commissioners) and a crew of technical cadres, in services like public works, veterinary services, health services, and maybe one or two doctors for Serowe and its satellite villages. According to Parsons and Watts (in their separate works), the white community in Serowe were mainly traders and merchants who owned shops, ox-wagon repair workshops, and/or dairy plants.²⁸ In terms of settlement patterns, there was no designated place for whites; instead, they were interspersed within the village, but strategically placed in most cases next to their stores, except for the likes of Palmer, whose residence was some distance in Botlaote (President Mogae’s ward), according to William Sentsheheng, an academic and MoNgwato of Serowe. Most of the white traders’ stores were located in the centre of the village and tended to concentrate relatively near the main *kgotla*. Traditionally the *kgotla* served as a trading centre, and the chief had control over trade.²⁹ Other known white store owners were the G.B. Watson family, the Jimmy Blackbeard family, the MacIntosh family, the Woodford family, the Smith family, the Steinberg family, etc.³⁰ Parsons argues that this category of whites might have been viewed as superiors but they deferred to the *kgosi*, who was the most superior in the Ngwato

²³Mompoloki Bagwasi, “Identity and Race in Bessie Head’s *Maru*” in this anthology.

²⁴Referred to as San, Bushmen, or BaSarwa (which is the official term in Botswana).

²⁵Nthomang, Keitseope, “Relentless Colonialism: The Case of the Remote Area Development Programme (RADP) and the Basarwa in Botswana”, *Journal of Modern Africa Studies*, vol. 43 no. 3 (2004).

²⁶Maitseo Bolaane and Lily Mafela, “Ethnic Identity, Language and Mother Tongue Education”, a paper read at the ‘Regional mother Tongue Conference’, Gaborone, 1-2 June 2005.

²⁷Bessie Head, *Maru*, (London: Heinemann, 1981) p. 12.

²⁸Watts. “Memoirs of the Refugee ‘Pipeline’” and Parsons, “Khama III”.

²⁹Parsons. “Khama III”.

³⁰William Sentsheheng, University of Botswana, e-mail communication, 16 March 2006.

tradition. The oldest traders had arrived when Khama III was an independent ruler, and they still remembered the pre-colonial relationship, which was different from the rest of Africa. In addition to the white community were individuals such as Patrick van Rensburg, dubbed the father of the Botswana brigades, who only came late to Serowe in 1962 as a refugee. Although white, he could not be classified within those fitting in the old model; he belonged to the post-colonial model and easily fitted in the category of a group of cosmopolitans, e.g., those who were foreigners and did not associate with white traders. They were well educated and culturally superior. This group, popularly referred to as *mavolontiri* (“volunteers”), included the black South Africans and the non-Tswana. Serowe did not have a large coloured community. Bessie Head belonged to this group of people but never fitted completely because of her paradoxical identity and also simply because she was Bessie Head. Among the coloured residents of Serowe were families such as the Stonehams and the Kuhlmanns, who were considered “junior whites” in terms of their economic position in society, skin and complexion, but not white in the sense of white traders. They were half castes in a bigger society, but unlike Bessie Head, not considered different because they were Tswanalized; they spoke Sengwato but at the same time experienced some ambivalent acceptance, for example because of their commercial activities and artisan occupations, which gave them economic status. Conversely, the fact that they were of mixed blood relegated them to a low position in society, looked upon as not being pure Ngwato.

Bessie Head herself did not belong to the long-standing community of mixed blood distinguished by their command of Setswana with a Sengwato accent. Firstly, she was not conversant in Setswana and was not identified by an association to an artisan occupation. Secondly, she was a writer in a largely illiterate society (including some in the royal quarter), and she was also a foreigner, an immigrant with nothing to her name, and finally she was of mixed blood and therefore was relegated to a low status. Her residence was on what was at that time the edge of Serowe village, in a place where other foreigners, including Patrick van Rensburg, lived.

In the circumstances, both the established coloureds and white settler families commanded the commercial sector. They provided transport for mail service and for passengers. They provided European goods and the basic necessities in their retail businesses. Clearly, therefore, one could argue that owing to their economic position, they were looked up to by the villagers with reverence. Watts has noted that most of the white traders in Serowe sympathised with the South African regime.³¹ As to whether there were classic negative racial relations in the Serowe of Bessie’s time, it is not easy to tell through her novels. However, Bessie situates what she considered racism in Ngwatoland. She gives it a historical context by looking at Khama the Great’s time (1875–1923) and his relations with the London Missionary Society (LMS). She observes that although on Sundays all the Serowe pathways led to LMS church door, a long and tortuous relationship existed between the LMS and the BaNgwato leadership, who did not want to appear as “dirty heathen” to the missionaries. Nevertheless, up until the reign of Tshekedi Khama, the relations between BaNgwato and BaBirwa (for example) continued to be that of subordination. Ngwato chieftainship used to dispatch appointed Ngwato representatives such as Modisaotsile to oversee the BaBirwa capital, Bobonong. The LMS churches (*kereke ya Lontone*) were located in subject villages such as Bobonong and Mmadinare as a way of demonstrating power, control, etc., and during the course of the school year were used as schools for BaBirwa children.³² On Sundays they were expected to go to church, and alcohol brewing

³¹Watts, “Memoirs of the Refugee ‘Pipeline’”, p. 107.

³²G.B. Molelu, “The History of the Babirwa from pre-colonial times to early Ngwato rule 1820–1926”, (unpublished research essay, University of Botswana, 1985).

and drinking were forbidden on that day.

William Sentshebeng observes on the other hand that the traders endeared themselves to the Batswana in paternalistic ways of giving emergency help to some people in moments of economic crises.³³ The traders also arranged terms of payment for goods on credit with those they trusted. Sentshebeng's grandfather, who was a Second World War veteran, was a very close friend of the Watson family, whose residence is in Maatso, the same ward of Sentshebeng's maternal grandfather.³⁴

In Durban, Bessie Head interacted with Indians, but it was not that easy in Botswana, except with those she trusted like the Kikia family. Although she was a loner, sometimes aloof and more attached to her son, alcohol, and her typewriter, she related to a small group of Serowe residents like Cassim Kikia, a small (Indian) general trader who met Bessie on a day-to-day basis as fellow asylum seeker in Botswana.

It appears she had a few village women friends with whom she could argue on many social issues and who possibly contributed to her understanding of the rudiments of Setswana. To some women in Serowe she was a friend and a sister despite the fact that she was not fluent in Setswana. This in many ways is normal behaviour with introverts, as they tend to be very selective and choosy when it comes to friendship. But the gardening sessions at Boiteko seem to have forged a sense of sisterhood and friendship between Bessie and the BaNgwato women. The Boiteko group is described by the women that Seodi Khama interviewed as an active group that sang and danced as they set about their preparations for their daily activities.³⁵ The environment at Boiteko would sensitise the women to the political situation in South Africa and the doings of the apartheid regime and how this was likely to affect Botswana.

Conclusion

Bessie Head was South African-born and became Botswana's first world-famous writer. She is a renowned literary figure, and her texts offer an insight into the history of Botswana in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She remarks about the Batswana's remarkable transition from "ancient tribal culture" to Christian culture. As someone who was intrigued by the daily life of Serowe ordinary people, in her writing she recognises her debt to the culture and history of Botswana. She has analysed extensively the village of Serowe and the history of Khama III. As for Bessie Head's analysis of the non-blacks of Serowe, we might infer that she did not have sufficient material resources, and perhaps she lacked esteem in the eyes of some of them. She was a loner and might have struck those who did not have an opportunity to talk to her or to read her work as an unfriendly or anti-social person. The details of her interpersonal and social relations come through her writings. She remained in many ways an outsider in her adopted country and had something of a love-hate relationship with it. She suffered from mental health problems. Her early death came, tragically, just at the point where she was starting to achieve recognition and was no longer so desperately poor. But she did live as an acute participant observer of her social settings and the dynamics of social relations in Serowe.

³³Sentshebeng, e-mail communication, 16 March 2006.

³⁴Sentshebeng, e-mail communication, 16 March 2006.

³⁵See Seodi Khama, "Interviews", in this anthology.

A Historian's View of Bessie Head's *A Bewitched Crossroad*

Neil Parsons

Bessie Head's last published book *A Bewitched Crossroad* appeared in 1984 and was greeted with deafening silence. I, for one, bought a copy with enthusiasm but soon set it down and never finished reading it. I was embarrassed enough by my lack of response not to make time to see the author on a quick trip to Serowe in 1985. In the next year Bessie died, because she declined to follow the simple but radical dietary rules (no fat and no booze for one year or more) necessary for recovery from common hepatitis. I knew about this as I was diagnosed with hepatitis myself on the very morning of her funeral.

Since then, I have wondered whether Bessie Head did not deliberately commit a slow and cumulative form of suicide over a number of months. What did she have to live for? Her latest book, an innovative venture into a possible new career in historical-biographical novels, was an apparent failure. Her country of adoption, Botswana, was under active attack from South Africa, her country of origin—and in South Africa there was no end in sight in the struggle for freedom. The forces of *Apartheid* had never been more triumphant in aggression.

If only Bessie had been able to hang on for a couple of years, she would have found that the darkest hour did indeed come before the dawn. And if only us historians had reacted more positively to *A Bewitched Crossroad*....

Bessie Head and me

I first met Bessie in September 1974, when I was stopping over at Serowe on my way from Livingstone to Gaborone. I know now that she did not take to me, maybe with good reason. You can read about this in a Patrick Cullinan's published edition of her letters, *Imaginative Trespasser: Letters from Bessie Head to Patrick & Wendy Cullinan 1963–1977* (Johannesburg: Wits UP; Asmara and Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005). She thought me “a glib, fast-talking hippie with long hair, so anxious to be on the side of the Africans that he slips up as a historian”—because “He doesn't really know black people and history wasn't written with their reactions and thoughts in mind” (161). (The implication was that “history” was something so fixed that it could not be interrogated or re-written.)

No doubt I was an annoyingly cocky young man. But I should also explain that I had written a booklet, entitled *The Word of Khama* (Lusaka, 1972), which was then a best-seller in the tiny Botswana book market. It celebrated the life of Khama III (c. 1835–1923) as a resister against the loss of Botswana to white settlers. Bessie had also read the copy of my recent doctoral thesis on Khama and the British that I had given to the Bamangwato Tribal Administration in Serowe, in which the concluding chapter ridiculed an earlier statement by Bessie Head that Serowe had no history. On that occasion in 1974, the main subject of conversation between us was how she might write her book on local history that became *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*.

In *The Word of Khama* I had expressed the intention to write a full biography of Khama. In fact I was diverted into other projects, and Jack Chirenje stepped in with his *Chief Kgama and His Times* (1978). Meanwhile I learned that Bessie wanted to write one herself. I asked her about it, and disclaimed my own interest in doing so. She was somewhat cagey, but confirmed that she was going ahead with the research, and subsequently indicated that it was somewhat of a struggle. The last time I saw Bessie Head, after a talk she gave in the Gaborone town hall, she was more interested in talking about nineteenth-century Russian literature, but she did indicate that the task was finished or almost finished in some form.

A Bewitched Crossroad as factual-fictional biography

I believe it is a truism among literary historical biographers that, just like one looks at its side to see a star in the night sky, so a famous historical personage is best written about in factual fiction through the eyes of some close associate. It is thus that Bessie Head solved the problem of writing a historical-biographical novel about Khama, by choosing Sebina, founder of the Sebina ward among the Bangwato, as her central character. Though she does not acknowledge him in the book, I believe it must have been old T. P. Sebina, recommended by Professor Isaac Schapera to me and then by me to Bessie at the time we met in 1974, who inspired her interest in Sebina family history. What she does acknowledge is the essay entitled “History of Makalaka” by T. P.’s elder brother P(eter) M(azebe) Sebina, which was published in *African Studies* (Johannesburg) in 1947.

A Bewitched Crossroad is presented in fifteen chapters. It begins “about 1800” when Sebina’s Kaa-Rolong people became Bakalanga; it runs through their conquest by Matebele and their fleeing to Bangwato in 1882, and it ends with the death of Sebina in 1896. Khama is introduced in the fourth chapter and dominates the story to the end, though the concluding paragraphs and the title itself suggest that the book is the biography of a country, Botswana, as much as of Sebina or of Khama.

The ambiguity of that title, *A Bewitched Crossroad*, as a historical descriptor of Botswana has always worried me. It is only fleetingly explained on the last page of the book. *Crossroad* refers to Botswana having been the Road(s) to the North used by invaders since 1800. The meaning of *Bewitched* appears to be in a benign rather than a malign sense of the word. It refers to Botswana’s good luck in having been saved from destruction and white rule, with the implication that the main wizard behind this was the great Khama. (There appears to be absolutely no reference at all to European traditions of crossroads being places where pagans used to make human sacrifices, places where since Christian times malcreants denied the sacrament have been buried, and therefore places where witchcraft and necromancy can still be practised.)

On re-reading the book, I can see what put me off the first time. The opening chapters on “tribal” origins and the *Mfecane* wars are—despite the odd lyrical passage drawn from Bessie Head’s imagination—ill-digested in historical terms, and no doubt confuse most readers too with so many unfamiliar proper names. (One aggravating point for me is the constant repetition of Damboshaba, the Red Pan, when it should be Domboshaba, the Red Rock.) The narrative only begins to flow after three or four chapters, when Head has hit hard ground in historical sources and discovers a real historical character whom she admires—Moshoeshoe. She sees Moshoeshoe in Lesotho as originating successful statesmanship in southern Africa, combining traditionalism with modernisation and balancing collaboration with resistance to colonialism. From Moshoeshoe’s hilltop capital “spun out the new shapes and changes that were vitally to affect the destiny of black people in southern Africa” (28). Moshoeshoe’s template is passed on through Sechele in southern Botswana to Khama in northern Botswana.

It is not difficult to spot Bessie Head’s continuing heavy reliance on good historical sources, notably *Ten Years North of the Orange River* by John Mackenzie and the British Parliamentary Papers as cited in the works of the colonial historian Anthony Sillery. Nearly every substantial quotation in *A Bewitched Crossroad* of speeches and sentiments expressed at the time comes from such sources. This gives the novel a documentary character, and in this Bessie Head is not alone. Stanlake Samkange’s *On Trial for My Country* is closely based on the same British Parliamentary Papers but referring to Lobengula and Rhodes.

Bessie Head tells the story well, inserting her own vivid phrases to keep the

documentary exposition and commentary going. Her snatches of original dialogue are sufficiently “African” without going in for the parody of archaic simple-but-wise speech that passes for translated African languages in the likes of Rider Haggard. Inevitably the author has papered over gaps between data in the sources available to her, writing as she was in Serowe, hundreds of kilometres away from good libraries. There are a few glaring “inaccuracies” where the historian can say that things really happened otherwise—but fewer than in any non-documentary historical film you care to name. Some errors, such as placing Lovedale in the Transvaal Republic (133), could surely have been picked up if Bessie Head or the publisher had trusted an appropriate person to read her manuscript.

The narrative thread of the life of Sebina gets rather lost in the master historical narrative of *A Bewitched Crossroad*; his life usually takes up no more than two or three paragraphs in a chapter. Still it is good to read, after reading all the verbatim quotes from *kgotla* speeches given when the British announced their “protectorate” in 1885, how “Sebina was dazzled and blinded by the proceedings” (120).

Ironically the character that comes out strongest, besides Khama, is Sebina’s friend Maruapula, father of Tumedisio. One should note that Head acknowledges having read Dingaane Mulale’s 1977 University of Botswana B.A. research essay on the life of Maruapula’s grandson, K. T. Motsete, and she may have met old K. T., who died in Mahalapye in 1974. As for the character of Khama, Bessie Head was a great admirer but seems to have been somewhat overwhelmed by the task of analysing such a multi-faceted and historically important person. (She was not alone; I did not write another word about him for twenty years until *King Khama, Emperor Joe, and the Great White Queen*, which was published in 1998.) More than once in *A Bewitched Crossroad* she is rather ambiguous about Khama’s real worth. At one moment he is “a serene, steady personality” (50). At another time he is intolerant “Mr Abolishment” (98).

Conclusion

It is always difficult to write a historical cliff-hanger, when the end result is already known to the reader. But a historical novel really has no such excuse. The last chapter, when Sebina can die in peace now that he knows his grandson Mazeba can make his way successfully into the future as a qualified teacher, does present a kind of happy resolution. But there has been no previous tension building towards this point in the novel. What had kept Mazeba being educated so for long (ten years) in the Cape Colony, such that Sebina feared his grandson was dead or would never return? The answer given in a new chapter would have taken us away from the documentary history of Khama’s country during those tumultuous ten years, but would have been meat for our minds in humanising a period of rapid political and economic change.

It is almost as if Bessie Head no longer dared to write about the Cape in South Africa, from which she had sprung twenty years before. The only luxury she allowed herself was exposing, from Botswana documentary sources previously ignored in Cape and Rhodesian histories, that Cecil Rhodes demonstrated “rabid greed[...]and contempt for black men” (189)—certainly not the philanthropic multiracialist portrayed by white liberal writers in her youth.

As a historical novel, *A Bewitched Crossroad* is an anomaly within the corpus of Bessie Head’s works. It stands as a lonely signpost into what could have been the writer’s second literary career—getting beyond the immediate practicalities of life which she had experienced, deeper into the vicarious experience of re-imagining the past. Comparing this book with her other later works, one sees common concerns with “compassion for human life

and suffering” (55, 58–59) emerging through contact with Christian belief, and with its effects on the “beginnings of an independent and emancipated woman in the society” by the 1890s (173). These concerns were combined in Bessie Head’s personal search for the roots of Love—also seen in one of her last short stories, itself a mini-historical novel or play on the two young lovers lost in time who cause Lentswe-la-Baratani (Lover’s Rock) near Otse to be given its name. But I cannot help feeling that in *A Bewitched Crossroad* such concerns are as yet insufficiently projected into unravelling the motivations of other people in other times.

A Bewitched Crossroad was Bessie Head’s first attempt at a historical novel, and she obviously lacked confidence in the new genre. She had dug into Botswana’s wonderfully rich (though essentially British missionary and imperial) seam of Historical sources on the later nineteenth century, but scarcely went beyond them. This is where us historians might have saved her by reviewing the book after it was obscurely published in South Africa (Bessie having quarrelled with the big multinational publishers who would have distributed review copies with more largesse). Indeed I feel historians might have saved her very self from self-immolation, by encouraging her to do more of what she did best in a historical novel—to be more novel than historical.

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Life and Prophecy in the African Independent Churches: Some Background to Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures*

Rev. Dr. Obed Kealotswe

The African Independent Churches (AICs) are a major form of Christianity in Africa. Much study and research has been done covering the AICs in the whole of Africa, but the largest phenomenon of the rise of the AICs was experienced in sub-Saharan Africa. Those studies with most relevance to Botswana are by Sundkler (1961) in South Africa and other studies by Daneel (1971 and 1987) and by Oosthuizen (1968). Studies in Botswana have been done by Amanze (1994 and 1998) and Kealotswe (1994). The common conclusion is that the AICs arose as a protest against the Western forms and expressions of Christianity. Their major concern was to develop an indigenous expression of Christianity. As Hastings pointed out, Protestant missionaries of the type common in Southern Africa presented the Bible as the authority, and encouraged its reading, yet “had somehow overlooked, as essentially irrelevant, a great deal of what is actually in the Bible” (71)—dreams and visions, healing, prophets inspired by the Spirit. Also, the AICs inherited from the Free Churches (such as the Congregationalists who were the principal early missionaries in Botswana) the model of the founding of a new church as a normal part of ecclesiastical development (Hastings 70). The understanding of the AICs in Botswana should be viewed from this general perspective.

As a resident and observer of Botswana society, Bessie Head would probably have been aware of the influence of AICs in Serowe and Botswana. This paper is an attempt to highlight two areas of the practices of the AICs from the time of their coming to Botswana to the present and to point to new areas for understanding some of Bessie Head's short stories from *The Collector of Treasures*. These areas are first prophecy and witch-hunting and second the care of the poor and people neglected by the economies of Botswana.

Background

The rise of the AICs precipitated religious transformation in Botswana. Previously, the chiefs had great control over the religious lives of the Batswana. The chiefs used their influence through new laws to assist the different missionary bodies operating in Botswana to suppress the religious beliefs and traditional customs of the Batswana. The AICs challenged this situation by various means. The AICs used different strategies from those of the chiefs and the mission churches. Their beliefs and practices show a large degree of the integration of Christian values with major aspects of Botswana beliefs and practices, such as the belief in ancestors, healing, and family values. This integration is how they managed to penetrate the tribal structures of Bechuanaland (spreading from South Africa and Zimbabwe).

The existence of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) in Southern Africa encouraged the growth of the AICs in the late 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, reaching a climax in the early 1960s. The basic elements of the movements of the 1930s were more religious and theological and less political. It was a response to the unanswered questions of circumcision or initiation, ancestors, polygamy, witchcraft, and beer drinking. These questions had remained in the missionary churches without being addressed theologically. The availability of the Bible in Setswana and also in Zulu or Ndebele put the biblical message into proper biblical verses and concepts which challenged every belief and provided a reasonably acceptable solution. It was no longer a period of prohibitions by word of mouth and coercion, as formerly carried out by the missionaries with the help of the chiefs, but a direct appeal to the biblical message to speak for itself and convince those who were prepared to listen and change their lives by accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

A more serious form of religious independence, referred to as the Zionist movement, also appeared in Kanye during this crucial period (late 1930s to early 1960s). In 1907, a travelling prophet, Sencho Legong, appeared in Kanye. He proclaimed himself to be an angel of God, a prophet, the Lord Jesus himself. His message was a promise of rain which would cover the hilltops, three harvests a year, absolute freedom from the white man's control, and a return to all the old heathen customs of the past. In response, many people burned their Bibles and hymn books, and others offered gifts to Sencho Legong. The reaction of the chief was that all the followers of Sencho Legong were to be whipped at the *kgotla*.¹ The white traders, who were concerned at a possible boycotting of their businesses, appealed to the magistrate to prosecute Sencho. As a result, he was tried in court, declared insane, and ordered to live in the custody of his parents. The sentence of the court did not stop Sencho's movements because he still travelled to other tribes. Thus Zionism had set in. It remained under close scrutiny and suspicion until the late 1940s when a more forceful form of Zionist movement emerged. This movement grew rapidly in the early 1960s, culminating in its tolerance and ultimate recognition after Botswana came to independence in 1966.

The chiefs and the London Missionary Society (present and influential in Serowe at that time) felt threatened by the new religious movements, particularly in view of the fact that it was difficult to separate religious issues from political ones. It suffices to say that, in spite of the political concerns of many tribes, the Zionist movement was a religious one, and mistakenly judging it to be a political movement led to a failure to understand religious change.

Another major church, the Spiritual Healing Church, was started by Prophet Motswasele Mokaleng in South Africa. The church was then established at Matsiloje in the North East District in 1953. According to evangelist Buka Monyamane of the Head Mountain of God (HMG, interviewed on 23 February 1988), the members of the HMG helped in the founding of the church. Bishop Motswasele Mokaleng had two sons Jacob and Joseph Mokaleng; one was a prophet and the other was the administrator of the church. These two had a great influence in the growth and spreading of the church. The headquarters are at Matsiloje Village. The church is now well established all over Botswana and it is a member of the Botswana Council of Churches.

The government of the colonial period was very worried about the growing number of the AICs and started accusing them of many crimes to create an excuse to ban them.

The AICs in modern Botswana

It has been pointed out that prophecy was one of the major causes for the rise of the AICs. The role of the prophet has in many cases replaced that of the traditional healer. The village of a prophet becomes a busy place, with people coming from all over to seek assistance. Displaced people and especially women, who are often among the disadvantaged of the economy, are the most popular followers of prophets, and many of the women end up being married to the prophet or becoming concubines of the prophet. This practice made the chiefs and the colonial government to see the AICs as causing lawlessness and disobedience of husbands by wives. AICs were also accused of sexual orgies which corrupted the youth. From the healing practices of the prophets, settlements commonly called *diagelo* (singular *seagelo*) came into being. In a *seagelo*, the sick are kept in the home of the prophet. Many buildings are constructed to accommodate the patients, the visitors, and the needy. The home of the prophet becomes a social centre where people with various needs come to get assistance.

¹*Kgotla* is the administrative centre of a village; chiefs hold discussions, hear cases, etc., at the *kgotla*.

Many prophets do not charge anything for such services because they believe that they get power freely from God. Those who charge are always unpopular with the mass of the people. They are accused of trading with the name of God. The prophet Lebojang (in “Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest”) who was rich and then lost everything is a clear example of such prophets who trade with the word of God.

One of the most important engagements of a prophet is to address and attend to matters of witchcraft. It has been stated above that the spread of the AICs was largely due to their concerns about the lives of the people. The prophet replaced the traditional healer, for the reason that traditional healing was despised by Christianity, which was assisted by the chiefs. Secondly, since independence, traditional healers and church prophets were all registered as healers. This situation led to some competition between the prophets and the traditional healers. The competition was caused by the fact that the money economy became very attractive, and many traditional healers were making a lot of money by healing people, especially to give them good luck to get jobs in the new and changing economy of Botswana.

The importance of healing prophets in contemporary Botswana can be illustrated by a recent example. In 2000, I came across a case where the Lambs Followers Church in Maun had a patient who had run away from her home because her husband made a *thokolosi*² for her. The husband had two wives and he was a very popular traditional healer. He did not like his first wife anymore, but he did not want her to go away and be taken by another man. His jealousy caused him to make a *thokolosi* to take care of the sexual needs of the woman. She could not manage to satisfy the sexual needs of the *thokolosi*, and she became very lean because she could not sleep since the *thokolosi* demanded sex from her daily. She then went to Maun to ask for assistance from the church. In my discussions with the patient, she told me that she had to run away because she was living in a lot of pain. The prayers of the church and the holy waters which she was given made her well, and the *thokolosi* was expelled. The expulsion of the *thokolosi* was followed by a big occasion where the new house of the patient was blessed so that the *thokolosi* should never go there again. The blessing was followed by the death of the husband of this woman. In my latest visit to Maun (13 July 2004), the bishop of the church told me that the people are saying that he is the one who killed the husband of the woman. This example could explain why the prophets have become more popular than the traditional healers.

AICs in The Collector of Treasures

In the book *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*, there are many stories which have historical background behind them, in which many of the features identified above are present. The two most interesting ones to refer to are “Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest” and “Witchcraft”.

There is a lot of historical evidence to the story “Jacob”. The village of Makaleng is probably mistaken for the name Mokaleng, the prophet of the Spiritual Healing Church in Matsiloje, as pointed out above.³ The two brothers in the story could refer to Jacob and Joseph Motswasele, who succeeded their father as the leaders of the church. However, the point is not to correct historical events but to examine how the author used the historical material to present her ideas about contemporary society.

The competition for wealth led to the rise of many people claiming to be traditional healers but failing to heal, as in the case of Lekena in Bessie Head’s story “Witchcraft”.

²A *thokolosi* is a small supernatural being that does the bidding of a witch, usually requested or paid for by someone with a grudge against another person.

³Makaleng is also a village approximately fifty kilometres from Francistown.

Alongside the traditional healers were the prophets, most of whom healed freely for no charges but using healing as a way of evangelism, such as Jacob in “The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest”. Even prophets who charged money were not as expensive as the traditional healers. The other factor was that going to a traditional healer in modern Botswana was looked down upon as uncivilised and barbaric. Traditional healers are generally associated with evil and witchcraft. In the case of Lekena and Mma Mabele, there is a great possibility that Lekena could have made a *thokolosi* for Mma Mabele to have sex with her. Her description of a man-like creature that troubled her is very common today amongst women, such as the woman in Maun described above. The belief is that a witch can get a *thokolosi* from a traditional healer and use it to have sex with someone as an act of bewitching. Such a person becomes sick and weak like Mma Mabele, as described by Bessie Head. Nowadays, many women go to church prophets to be healed of the *thokolosi*.

The story of Jacob shows how prophecy in AICs blends tradition with faith in Jacob’s marriage to Johanna. Jacob hears the voice of God, but once Johanna comes to him (and marries him according to common behaviour), she begins to show him how tradition can be an important factor in, for example, raising children.

The problem of traditional healers and of using the name of God to dupe people is also depicted in “Jacob” as well as in “Witchcraft”. Lebojang in “Jacob” claims to be a prophet, but he is revealed at the end of the story to be relying on the worst form of witchcraft (ritual murder) in order to gain material wealth. Lekena in “Witchcraft” is also a kind of charlatan who wishes to take advantage of Mma Mabele to earn more money.

The penetration of all the tribes and different ethnic groups of Botswana by the Zionist movement shows that they had and still have a great relevance to Botswana communities. The role of the prophet has done a lot to revive and transform many traditional values and customs and practices. Their form of Christianity addresses problems faced by many people. The stories of Bessie Head are based on the actual lives of AIC prophets and show how they relate to their communities.

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Bessie Head's novel *Maru* is no doubt a novel about inequalities in race, gender, and social class. It is about discrimination and 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. At the centre of these themes is a character called Margaret Cadmore, who identifies herself as "a Masarwa", an identity and race that is complicatedly portrayed in the novel. From a sociolinguistic background this paper attempts to answer the following question: who is Margaret Cadmore, and to which ethnic group or race does she belong?

There are several ways in which individuals may mark their membership to a community or ethnic group, but Chambers argues that language variation follows a biological instinct concerned with establishing and maintaining social identity; we must mark ourselves as belonging to a territory, and one of the most convincing markers is by speaking like the people who live there (250). Further, Le Page and Tabouret also see speakers' language use as "a series of acts of identity in which speakers seek to align themselves with or distance themselves from certain social groups" (181). They contend that "the individual creates for himself the patterns of his linguistic behaviour so as to resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he wishes to be identified or so as to be unlike those from which he wishes to be distinguished" (181).

Essentially the theory propounded within the view of sociolinguistics is that language reflects society as witnessed by the close correlation between aspects of language and social hierarchies. Though Margaret Cadmore, the character in *Maru*, was taken away from her community at birth and raised by a European missionary, throughout the novel she strongly and repeatedly affirms in an affected accent that she is "a Masarwa" instead of "a Mosarwa." In Setswana, nouns have classes. For example, nouns referring to people have the prefix *Mo-* and are found in class one. Their plural forms have the prefix *Ba-* and are in class two. Before the 1990s, nouns that refer to people who are discriminated against by Batswana such as foreigners and the so-called minority groups were found in classes five and six. These classes have the prefixes *le-* for singular in class five and *ma-* for plural in class six, as in *lekgoa/makgoa* (a white person/white people), *lesarwa/masarwa*, and *lerotsi/marotsi*. However, in the late 1990s users of the language became conscious that such language use was discriminatory, and that awareness led to class one and class two prefixes (*Mo-* and *Ba-*) being used in all nouns referring to people of all ethnic groups so as to get such forms as *Mosarwa/Basarwa*, *Morotsi/Barotsi*, or *Mokalaka/Bakalaka*.

In the novel *Maru*, it is interesting 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. The expression "a Masarwa" is ungrammatical because it comprises an English article "a" which denotes singularity and a Setswana prefix "*ma-*" which denotes plurality; it is a grammatical error that can only be made by somebody who is not proficient in the language. This kind of error casts suspicion and doubt on Margaret Cadmore's authenticity and originality in the matter of her ethnicity, for as Mesthrie et al. argue, certain features of speech, including accent and other variations, indicate an individual's social group or background: the use of such features is not exactly arbitrary since it signals that the individual has access to the lifestyles that are associated with the type of speech (6). Thus, for Margaret to refer to herself as "a Masarwa" indicates her lack of knowledge of her language or her not belonging to such a social group.

The expression "a Masarwa" is not only used by Margaret, who supposedly does not know the language because she was raised by an English-speaking family, but by others in

the village who speak the language: for example, the school head exclaims that he has “a Masarwa” on his staff (*Maru* 41); Ranko also reports that there is a little trouble about “a Masarwa” who was appointed teacher at Leseding School (51), and Maru tells his sister to ask her friend if she would like to marry “a Masarwa” (109). There are two ways in which this can be interpreted. Either it is a joke and mimicry by the people of Dilepe of the way Margaret describes herself, or it is a typo and lack of knowledge of the language by Bessie Head. If it is a typo and lack of knowledge by Bessie Head, it is indeed a grave one that threatens to weaken the portrayal of her characters. One can only assume that Bessie Head failed to carry out thorough research on the language and culture of the people she is writing about.

There are basically two senses that the word Mosarwa implies in Setswana. The most salient meaning, that Bessie Head probably knows, refers to a person who belongs to the Basarwa ethnic community. The second meaning of this word is derived from the demeaning and derogatory belief that the Basarwa people are of a low social status and primitive culture. Thus, in some Setswana sociolinguistic contexts, members of any ethnic group may call each other or other ethnic groups Basarwa if they consider them to be of a low social standing or to have undesirable behaviour. For example a white person, Mongwato, or Mokalaka could be described as a Mosarwa if they are seen to behave in an unbecoming or disagreeable way. It remains doubtful that Bessie Head’s competence in the Setswana language enabled her to see this second meaning.

Language is not the only thing that links one to a certain ethnicity: history, biology, place of origin, and physical appearance all play a part, as illustrated in Gilman’s definition, in which he says ethnicity is “a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative or common ancestry, memories of a past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the group’s identity or physical appearance” (19). In *Maru*, Margaret Cadmore’s only link to her ethnicity comes in the form of a poor and shabby-looking dead woman whose language or place of origin are unknown. Of the dead woman’s physical features, Bessie Head simply writes that she “had the *same* thin, Masarwa stick legs” of malnutrition and the hard callused feet that had never worn shoes, and “wore the *same* Masarwa ankle-length, loose shift dress which smelt strongly of urine and the smoke of outdoor fires” (12, emphasis added). Margaret’s mother’s ethnicity is based on the stereotype that Basarwa are shabby, dirty, and poor-looking people.

We are told by Ranko that the villagers comment “the eye is a deceitful thing,[...]. If a Masarwa combs his hair and wears a modern dress, he looks like a Coloured. There is no difference” (52–53). It is interesting that it was very easy and quick for the villagers to label Margaret Cadmore’s mother a Mosarwa, even in her death, because of her poor condition, yet her offspring’s ethnicity is a great source of confusion when she arrives at Dilepe because of her educated and sophisticated look. This clearly shows that attitudes and stereotypes play a major role in labelling people and placing them in one group instead of another.

Margaret’s mother is at first sight unequivocally labelled a Mosarwa while her daughter is many times mistaken for a coloured. Bessie Head’s statement that Bushman “was also a name they gave to children of marriage between white and African. Such children bore the complexion of members of the Bushman tribe” (20) suggests that for her the terms coloured and Bushman or Mosarwa are synonymous or have a close meaning. However, in the Botswana context these words are never used interchangeably, and their meanings are very different. Both in the Botswana context and in South Africa, for that matter, coloured means of mixed white and non-white descent. If in South Africa coloureds are also called Basarwa, then Bessie Head is imposing a South African label onto a Botswana setting.

There is no doubt in the eyes of the people of Dilepe about Margaret Cadmore’s race;

she is coloured. Ranko says that people *examined* her and *concluded* that she was a coloured (51), and later on Pete says, “It *surely* had all the appearance of a Coloured” (40, emphasis added). The people’s conclusions that Margaret is a coloured therefore suggest that for Margaret to be labelled coloured but not a Mosarwa by the people of Dilepe, a place which is a stronghold of the wealthy chiefs who owned innumerable Basarwa as slaves, and to be called “mixed breed”, “half breed”, and “bastard” by children at her school (18) would point to one thing only: though Margaret Cadmore does not have any knowledge of her father he must have been white. And if Margaret’s father was white she is coloured; she is also a Mosarwa because her mother was a Mosarwa. Whether we see her as a Mosarwa rather than as a coloured is really a question of whether we see the contents in a bottle as half filled or half empty.

The logical question is why her Mosarwa rather than her coloured identity is emphasised and made controversial throughout the novel. There are basically three reasons. First, Botswana is a patrilineal society, children usually take the identity and lineage of their father, but children born to mothers who are not married take the lineage and identity of their mothers. Since Margaret’s paternity is not disclosed, most probably because her mother was not married, Margaret had to assume the lineage and ethnic identity of her mother. Secondly, Margaret’s paternity is underplayed by her white surrogate mother who affirms to her that she will have to live with her appearance for the rest of her life and there is nothing she can do to change it (18). Theoretically, coloureds are half white and half black, but they are usually classified under black because white blood that is tainted with black blood cannot be considered white any more; it has lost its purity. Therefore Margaret does not fit into the white and European community that contributed half to her biological make-up and raised her; she has to be left behind for the sake of her people (21). But who are her people? She is made to assume the identity of her mother who is African, black, and a Mosarwa. Thirdly, if Margaret had emphasised and assumed the identity of the European who raised her and the white father who fathered her, she would have become too powerful and inaccessible even to Maru.

Indeed, Mwikisa argues that it is not only her education that accounts for the attraction that the Tswana aristocracy had for Margaret: the fact that the Tswana were themselves oppressed by the white people who did not make a difference between a Mosarwa and a Motswana (*Maru* 11) made her important and attractive to them (Mwikisa 79). Mwikisa argues that by marrying someone with European education and culture and Europeanised mannerisms, Moleka and Maru felt they would get acceptance and recognition from their own white colonial oppressors. This paper further suggests that they also saw in her the white blood which made her coloured, which they considered superior to them. Bessie Head’s statements that “There was, maybe, a little more respect granted to a half caste, [...]” (20) and “Those types were well known for thinking too much about their white parent, not their African side” (39) acknowledges the attitude held by the people that the coloured race was considered superior to the African, Bangwato, or Basarwa races. Thus, Margaret Cadmore becomes a powerful destabilising force in the Dilepe community because culturally as well as biologically (though partially) she belongs to the white race, and thus as Mwikisa puts it “she is a cut above even her Batswana overlords” (72).

Mwikisa argues that initially the one thing that prevents Moleka and Ranko from instantly possessing Margaret is the fear that she may not in fact be a Mosarwa but a coloured (69). On the contrary, this paper suggests that this belief that she is a coloured actually makes her approachable and desirable to them. Dikeledi, Ranko, Moleka, and the school head all at first sight mistake Margaret for a coloured, and they approach her with smiles, but they all get shocked when they learn that she is a Mosarwa. So it is the first impression of a coloured

that draws them to her and the affirmation that she is a Mosarwa that makes them pause and start assessing their relationship with her.

This multi-identity that we see in Margaret relates to a situation in language use that Simon Herman calls overlapping situation (qtd. in Fasold). In an overlapping situation, a speaker usually finds herself pulled in different directions in her personal desire to speak the language that she knows best and the language expected of her by the social group. An African American in a group of white Americans, for example, will obviously be racially black, but can linguistically reveal his ethnic orientation at the moment by shifting toward Vernacular Black English or toward standard American English. In one case he is emphasising his membership in the absent group; in the other, he is minimising it (Fasold 187).

In the novel *Maru*, the character Margaret Cadmore, even though she could easily pass as a coloured, chooses to be identified as a Mosarwa. However, she is different from other Basarwa and the people of Dilepe. For example, she speaks with a near perfect English accent, eats sandwiches of marmite instead of fat cakes, gives the goats that keep her company names like Queen of Sheba and Windscreen-wiper instead of Setswana names as would be the custom in Dilepe, wears nice dresses and eye makeup. In short, she is a sophisticated and Europeanised woman. So Margaret finds herself pulled in two directions: one, her personal desire to identify with the ethnic group that she believes she belongs to; and two, upholding the culture and lifestyle she was raised in.

Though *Maru* is just a piece of fiction, the situation in Dilepe forms a diglossic pattern, a diglossia without bilingualism type. In a diglossia without bilingualism set-up, there exist two separate communities in the same community: one ruling elite and the other governed. In such a community, the governed group will acquiesce to the rule of the elite but would not consider themselves part of the same speech community. The ruling elite, who in the case of Dilepe are the Totems, would be called the High because they belong to the dominant group, are educated, drive cars, work in offices, and live in nice houses. The ruled would be called the Low, and they comprise of the Basarwa who belong to a minority group and mostly work as slaves and cowherds.

In the middle of this stands Margaret Cadmore who is “not part of it and belonged nowhere” (93); she falls somewhere in between these two groups but yet is broader than the two groups because she “was hardly African or anything, but something new and universal, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as a tribe or race or nation” (16). Her multi-identity makes her valuable; Maru describes her as gold: “I’ve always touched straw. This time I’m stealing the gold because I’ve grown tired of the straw” (84). As a coloured, Margaret becomes a very important symbol of a merger between two opposite camps: the oppressor and the oppressed. One half of her represents the most dominant and oppressive race that has colonised and oppressed other races for many years, and the other half represents the most downtrodden and oppressed race. Thus, she is something new and universal, not easily definable but bringing out the best and worst of the two races.

Uledi-Kamanga has observed that while Bessie Head in her novels variously foregrounds strong condemnation of racial prejudice and discrimination, she also seems to affirm racial difference, privilege, and patriarchy (39). In *Maru*, Margaret finally marries Maru, the heir to the Dilepe chieftaincy, an act that is seen as a symbol of emancipation of Basarwa and a renunciation of male racial power. Mwikisa does not see this as a symbol of emancipation of Basarwa and renunciation of male racial power but on the contrary as a reiteration of the original conquest and domination of the Basarwa and an affirmation that a relationship with a member of the dominant class is a symbol of acceptance in the value

system of the dominant culture (74). Margaret considering herself to be a member of the lower ethnic group marries Maru, of the Dilepe aristocracy, to gain acceptance and recognition in the community. Maru too marries the educated, Europeanised, and coloured Margaret as a way of gaining acceptance and recognition in the white race and culture that has oppressed and looked down upon his people for many years. Such a conclusion seems to affirm racial privilege and patriarchy because Maru comes from the dominant ethnic group; he is of the royal class, and he is not the one that Margaret had her eyes on.

In the Setswana culture it is acceptable for Maru, the chief of Dilepe, to marry Margaret a Mosarwa because of the patriarchal set-up of the community that does not recognise the identity of the woman, a belief reflected in the Setswana proverb *mosarwa ke yo motonanyana yo monamagadi ke mosadi* (a Mosarwa is a male one; a female one is a woman). Lederer and Molema interpret this proverb to mean that “a male Mosarwa is equivalent to a male animal and a female Mosarwa is equivalent to a female animal[...]and she can be had sexually by a male human being and thereby elevated to the ranks of humanity” (129). However, the most common interpretation of this proverb is that a woman from a so-called lower ethnic group can be married to any man of a so-called higher ethnic group because according to Setswana practice, in a marriage, a woman’s identity is often considered insignificant since children always take the lineage and identity of their fathers. This proverb is based on a male chauvinist idea that allows men to widen their horizon and choices into other ethnic groups, while deterring women in their ethnic groups from venturing out of the ethnic group. In the novel *Maru*, Margaret a “Masarwa” marries Maru a member and chief of the Bangwato and by so doing leaves her community and assumes a new identity, that of the man who marries her.

This paper has argued that the people of Dilepe are right about Margaret Cadmore’s identity: she is coloured; she is a hybrid. She is coloured not only in terms of her looks but also culturally. She represents a merger of opposing cultures, races, identities, and struggles; that is why she is so desirable and yet hard to define or confine to any one race. The paper has presented identity not as a static notion but as fluid and always under construction. For instance, various characters in the novel perceive Margaret Cadmore in different ways: a coloured, a Mosarwa, or a Motswana. The notion of pure identity is exploded. It is hard to decide on a particular factor as the key determinant of her identity. Her mother was a Mosarwa, but she is raised by a European family and imbibes European culture, education, language, and name. Hers is an identity that defies easy and simplistic definition and categorisation. It is a borderline and hybrid identity that tends to depend on who is defining her.

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The Representation of Women in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*

Nono Kgafela

Yet her writing is unique because she focuses not as much on racial oppression as on the oppression her society invokes against women. Head's works depict the struggle of both African men and women against ghost-ridden pasts; yet she shows the way that struggle cleaves along gender lines.¹

This essay examines Bessie Head's portrayal of women in *When Rain Clouds Gather* by trying to address the following questions: How does Bessie Head write about women? Does she reinforce or subvert the cultural stereotypes of what a woman is or should be in Botswana? As a female writer (a woman writing about other women), what is feminine about her writing? Does she write like men, projecting patriarchal literary tendencies in writing about women, or is there a female voice in her novel?

To address these questions, the essay employs patriarchy and gender definitions to read her novel. Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust (Botswana) defines patriarchy as "a system of domination and control that promotes the rule of men. It expresses the values, beliefs, stereotyped myths, practices, and tendencies that support the power and interests of men" (14). This system is perpetrated by institutions such as the family, the education system, religious institutions, and so on, which "condition men and women to accept and behave in accordance with the relations of 'ruling' in their society" (14). Under the patriarchal system women do not have independent existence. They exist with and for men, and this in turn leads to men thinking and believing that they have a right to control the lives of women. Patriarchal societal values affect the representation of women in fiction, which shows them as subject to the whims of male dominance and control.

Bessie Head is not exempt from the dilemma that confronts all women writing about women within patriarchal literary conventions. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar highlight stereotypes about the divine gift of literary execution. They argue that Gerard Manley Hopkins, in a letter that he wrote to his friend, R. W. Dixon in 1886 when talking of writing as a male gift, seems to have thought, "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?", and Gilbert and Gubar further cite R. W. Dixon as having declared that "the artist's most essential quality is mastery execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women" (91). Almost one hundred years later, Bessie Head portrays women dominated by men, with limited or no power to free themselves from dominant male control.

However, patriarchal control or power in society is not enforced by men only: "Many women and girls internalize and consciously support patriarchal values saying that they are part of their culture" (*No Safe Place* 15). This view is shared by L. M. Handrahan, who states that "Women have been instrumental in promoting ethnic identity particularly in the private sphere of communities and home, to which they were relegated" (10). One may slightly differ with Handrahan and argue that women do not opt to internalise patriarchal values; these values are instilled in their thoughts or rather their overall existence by the society. As a result, they find themselves in a cage they seem not to have power to escape from, lest they lose their sense of identity, for according to Manu, "in childhood a woman must be subjected to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead to her sons" (qtd. in Mukhopadhyay 7)

Gender is

The socially learned behaviour and expectations that distinguish between

¹Karen Bernardo, "Commentary," 27 January 2006, <<http://www.storybites.com/head1.htm>>.

masculinity and femininity[...]. [G]ender is acquired identity. The major aspect of gender identity is that males are superior to females, and consequently females are subordinate to males[...]. Generally, however, through socialization of children, each is put in his (masculine) or her (feminine) place at an early age. (Spike and Sission, qtd. in *No Safe Place* 9)

The two related paradigms chosen for reading Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* are relevant because they advance information on the structure of power relations between men and women, and explain why women find themselves at the bottom of the social ladder, and hence shed light on why some women choose to remain at that level, and why others struggle to get out of the social cage.

The concept of gender continues to be the principal tool for analysing the organisation of social relations, enabling us to uncover the mechanisms that support inequality between men and women and justify their hierarchy. According to Joan Scotts, "Gender is an element that shapes social relations based on the perceived differences between the sexes, and second...gender is a form in which power relations are voiced, power being understood as access to material and symbolic resources" (WLSA Mozambique Pilot Study 4). These discussions also help us determine the type of voice we hear as we read Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Literature portrays roles of women and men in fictional society, images of women as either seen through the eye of a male or female writer and, therefore, their place in the society.

The representation of women in Bessie Head's novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* operates on two distinct planes: women as villains and women as paragons of virtue. Within these two extremes is the portrayal of women as torn between villainy and virtue. This essay suggests that such representation of women is based on or has been influenced by patriarchal stereotypes and gender relations, which inform the voice of the writer. Bessie Head to a great extent writes about women with a voice of the male writer (consciously or unconsciously).

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the manner in which Head portrays women depicts her support for patriarchal stereotypes. In instances where she subverts the stereotypes, she ends up questioning the ability of her women characters to perform "male" roles. Thus, the narrative voice that one predominantly hears in the novel is more male than female.

Bessie Head represents some women as adulterers and prostitutes:

[Makhaya] lay quite still as the door of his hut was carefully and quietly pushed open by the child and equally quietly and carefully closed behind her. She dropped lightly down on her knees and moved her hands over the covers until they reached his face.

"What do you want?" He asked.

She kept quiet as though puzzling this out. At last she said, "my grandmother won't mind it as long as you pay me."

"Go away," he said, abashed, humiliated. "You're just a child." (9)

Here, the girl-child is represented as a prostitute, even though coerced into it by the granny. Makhaya's refusal to defile the child places him morally above women. He declines to have sexual contact with the girl, and like a good Samaritan, offers the girl a ten-shilling note and sends her away. This could also be seen as a progressive representation of a man by Bessie Head.

Two interesting observations can be drawn from the representation of the girl-child: first that the grandmother is an evil, heartless woman, who trades the granddaughter for money, a perpetrator of sexual immorality; second, that the man is morally decent. This kind of representation of women as sexually immoral has no doubt featured in texts written by men, including the Bible, where a woman, Eve, has been portrayed as sinful and fallible and

the source of man's moral corruption. The grandmother wonders, "'You mean he gave you the money for nothing?' she said, beside herself with excitement. 'This is a miracle! I have not yet known a man who did not regard a woman as a gift from God! He must be mad!'" (9).

Bessie Head presents the girl looking at Makhaya "with a full bold stare. There was something very unchildlike about it and it displeased him" (8). One may suggest the girl's loss of innocence, and in a way, Head here prepares the reader for the eventual sexual advances the girl makes on Makhaya. Evidently, Head here echoes the male perspective about women as fallen, and the narrative voice that the reader hears in the text is patriarchal. Pondering the girl's advances and the grandmother's evil schemes, Makhaya thinks,

What a loathsome woman, he thought, and yet how naïve she was in her evil. He had known many such evils in his lifetime. He thought they were created by poverty and oppression[...]. It was the mentality of the old hag that ruined a whole continent—some sort of clinging, ancestral, tribal belief that a man was nothing more than a groveling sex organ, that there was nothing such as privacy of soul and body, and that no ordinary man would hesitate to jump on a mere child. (9)

Similarly, when women prepare food for Maria's wedding, they start chatting about Makhaya and tease Paulina about her possible interest in him. Bessie Head describes Grace Sebina as "a rough, wild, promiscuous woman" (88). Grace is described as a loose, unchaste woman, who indulges in casual and indiscriminate sexual relationships. Paulina ultimately calls her a slut: "'if your eyes chase all men, Grace Sebina,' she said crisply, 'please don't put them on me'" (88).

Such representations reflect the insidious inclinations that are typical of male perspectives about the chastity or sexual immodesty of women. Here Bessie Head does not only "allude to the problems regarding patriarchal objectification and marginalisation of women" (Wisker 166), but supports such objectification. I agree with Lloyd Brown when he asserts that in handling sexual themes, Head portrays traditional sexual relationships which "at their traditional worst[...]reflect established attitudes and institutions that have warped the individuality of both men and women" (165). In repeating such notions about women as prostitutes, Head reinforces patriarchal attitudes towards women.

Women in *When Rain Clouds Gather* are represented as immodest. These women's behaviour violates to a certain extent the expected feminine character. Maria is described as haughty and hostile. When Dinorego asks Mma-Millipede if Makhaya would make a good husband for Maria, "Mma-Millipede looked at her friend for some time. She had a lot of reservations about Maria. Even her shrewd eye had not succeeded in penetrating the barrier of aloofness and hostility that were a natural part of the young girl's personality" (68). We are presented here with the personality of Maria from the perspective of Mma-Millipede, a true custodian of patriarchal order, schooled to subordinate her interests and aspirations to the values and stereotypes of the patriarchal system. Maria's personality traits break the angelic image which makes the old woman, indoctrinated into patriarchal norms, uncomfortable in thinking of her as a possible partner for any man in marriage. Gillian Stead Eilersen observes that "Though many women of Mma-Millipede's generation have had some schooling, it has not been sufficient to develop their independence, for they remain 'their same old tribal selves, docile, and inferior' [*When Rain Clouds Gather* 68]" (98).

Paulina Sebeso is another woman whose personality subverts patriarchal expectations of what a woman must be. Head represents her as passionate and impetuous, with no sexual morality, a woman who makes advances on men (Makhaya). She is not coy. Such behaviour does not conform to the patriarchal perception of a virtuous woman, who should be approached by a man, and not the other way round. In Botswana, men's role is to initiate love

relationships, in as much as they have reproductive rights regarding decisions on when to marry a woman and how many children a woman can have. If a woman initiates a love relationship, she would not be conforming to her gender role. This would be a reversal of gender roles, which would render a man passive in the relationship. A woman who initiates a love relationship ventures into the masculine domain and hence is referred to as *Mma-Poo*, a Setswana name meaning a woman with testicles.

Bessie Head writes,

Paulina, meanwhile, had watched these comings and goings at sundown with avid curiosity and at last,...had sent the little girl to Makhaya with a message. [...]

“Sir,” the child said. “My mother says she sends you her greeting.” [...]

“Go and tell your mother I don’t know her,” he said. (74)

The refusal to accept the greeting by Makhaya can be read as a patriarchal stereotypical corrective measure to remind Paulina that she is not expected to make advances on men. This voice of condemnation is heard towards the end of the novel when Paulina doubts her femininity within the patriarchal construct: “‘Makhaya,’ she said softly. ‘You mustn’t think I’m a cheap woman, but I love you’” (154). This ultimate confirmation of patriarchal power is well captured in Rosalind Coward’s argument that

In novels[...]the power of men is adored. The qualities desired are age, power, detachment, the control of other people’s welfare[...]. Occasionally the heroines “protest” their right to gainful employment, or rebel against the tyranny of the loved men. But in the end they succumb to that form of power. And what attracted them in the first place were precisely all the attributes of the unreconstructed patriarch. (189–92)

Even though Maria and Paulina, in their relationships with men, have been represented as different from other women, (outspoken, defiant, unpredictable, changeable, loudmouthed, etc.), they still subordinate their feminist self to a self soft, meditative, and obedient. They still find themselves trapped within the patriarchal system. When Gilbert tells Maria that he will take her along with him to England one day, “Maria placed her free hand straight out on her knee, indicating that she had made a rule she wasn’t going to budge. ‘You will have to go back to England by yourself[...]I will not live in England with you’ she said.” But the stubborn self immediately gives way to the obedient self: “‘It’s not that, Gilbert,’ she said crisply. ‘I won’t feel free in England’” (98).

I agree with Lloyd Brown when he argues that Paulina, like Maria is not new in a complete sense. Her personality, like Maria’s, still bears the marks of female subordination. Her vigorous independence gives way to submissiveness in the company of strong male personalities, such as Makhaya (166). Makhaya, like Gilbert, has power and privilege over Maria. Male dominance is also clearly depicted when Bessie Head says about Gilbert,

Still from some unknown quarter, Gilbert had acquired a number of conservative ideas about married life—like it was a man who was the boss and who laid down rules.

“You’re not Dinorego’s daughter any more,” he said to Maria, in a quiet threatening voice. “You’re my wife now and you have to do as I say. If I go back to England, you go there too.”

The woman of common sense retreated rapidly before the threat, and the other woman softly contradicted her, “I did not say I won’t obey you, Gilbert. I only wanted to find out what was on your mind.” (99)

Women in *When Rain Clouds Gather* are also represented as virtuous and good. Here, Head evokes in the mind of the reader an awareness of the maternal nurturing qualities of the village women. These women do not at this point violate or subvert patriarchal stereotypes.

Head portrays women as mothers, caretakers and counsellors, who attend to men's needs. Mma-Millipe is represented as a religious counsellor who advises men and women of different ages on different issues. She advises Maria about her marriage to Gilbert and Makhaya on his relationship with other people, especially on how to let go of hatred. She is kind and generous. When Makhaya first goes to Mma-Millipe with Dinorego, she is concerned about his general welfare; Mma-Millipe wanted to know all sorts of little things about Makhaya: "Do you often get ill, please inform me so that I may accompany you to hospital as you are now faraway from your home and relatives" (67).

When Makhaya visits Mma-Millipe and discusses his hatred for himself and the world and life, she opens his eyes to the positive side of life, and her words are like a soothing balm to his emotional scars. Bessie Head writes, "He hadn't expected anyone to tell him that generosity of mind and soul was real[...]he could give up almost anything, and hatred might fall away from him like scabs[...]" (128). Mma-Millipe, with her maternal, nurturing personality, facilitates Makhaya's transformation from a hateful, wild-hearted man to a generous man.

Women in *When Rain Clouds Gather* perform their traditional gender roles of cooking, ploughing, and providing for their families as married women or single mothers. They make tea and cook porridge for men. The essay suggests that in representing women performing traditional gender roles within the society, Head does not only shed light on gender socialisation process, but justifies the socialisation process. Head writes:

Men and women were unlike mentally. Look at how this man built a fire! He treated each stick as a separate entity, and because of his respect for each stick, he moved his hands slowly with many pauses, placing the firewood down at carefully calculated angles[...]. A fire was only a rag bag to a woman, and because of this she threw the firewood on the flames in haphazard confusion. (135-36)

This kind of writing depicts a woman as a disorganised, haphazard being as opposed to the well organised, skilful and "clean" man. The woman's fire is smoky, while the man's fire is smoke-free. Here Bessie Head has not done much to elevate the image of women. Her narrative is a patriarchal one, playing down the mental capacity of fellow women. One may argue therefore that Bessie Head's representation of women's traditional roles is simultaneously an expression of the construction of gender identities of women's capacities to perform such roles and their limitations when placed side by side with men. In maintaining traditional gender roles of men and women (which underlines the construction of female subordinates) women are represented as complimentary to men.

Bessie Head portrays the plight of women in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. They are portrayed as victims of patriarchal stereotypes. Women are represented as sexual objects. They are prey for men's libidinal appetite. This is evidenced by the conversation between George and Chief Sekoto concerning Makhaya's stay in Golema Mmidi. Chief Sekoto laughed heartily "I made a promise to Gilbert[...]. You must spy on the refugee and tell me if he is eating up all the women" (53). The representation of women as sexual objects is also found in the description of sexual relationships within married life, and how women are treated by their husbands as "dead things":

Not so the dead thing most men married. Someone told that dead thing that a man was only his sex organs and functioned as such. Someone told her that she was inferior in every way to a man, and she had been inferior for so long that even if a door opened somewhere, she could not wear this freedom gracefully. (121-22).

What Bessie Head depicts is that in the society, women and girls exist for men. This encourages some men and women to think and believe that they have the right to dominate and control the lives of women as objects for satisfying their sexual desires.

Men evidently need women to gratify their sexual desires and to bear children. In the process of raising children, married women are abandoned (e.g., Mma-Millipede) in pursuit of other women, and this in turn leaves them lonely. Eilersen argues that “Men have become so used to being superior in the eyes of the law that they have become morally degenerate. They feel no responsibility for a family and the women are left caught up in a ‘trap’ of loneliness” (97).

In conclusion one may assert that Head’s representation of women in *When Rain Clouds Gather* shows her more conventional than might be expected. Consciously or unconsciously, in writing about women, she rather subjects them to whims of patriarchal stereotypes than elevates their image or status. It is predominantly the male voice that one hears in the novel. Most of her comments on the plight of women are unequivocally critical about male attitudes, but she also subjects them to the same system she attempts to expose and subvert.

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Living Under the Power of the Fathers: Bessie Head's and Lília Momplé's Women

Seatholo Masego Tumedi

All forms of exploitation resemble one another. They all seek the source of their necessity in some edict of a Biblical nature. All forms of exploitation are identical because all of them are applied against the same object: [the human being].
(Fanon 88)

It is my conviction that the female character in African literature in general, and in the literature of Southern Africa in particular, remains under-investigated and under-interrogated, yet more enthusiastic investment of energy into this area of research is bound to reveal useful insights on the gender relations in the literature. This paper, therefore, focuses on some of the characteristics of Bessie 'Head's and Lília Momplé's female characters depicted in *The Collector of Treasures* and *Neighbours: The Story of a Murder* respectively. The paper further seeks to examine the female characters' experiences as they coexist in the societies represented in the two texts.

The two societies of Botswana and Mozambique are former colonies of the British Empire and Portugal respectively,¹ and they both have a patriarchal social set-up. It is against such general background that I analyse the chosen texts with a view to determine the factors that might have contributed to these female characters' tendency not only to yield to their under-dog status, but to go even further and play a complicit role in their own disempowerment and often even direct oppression. At the risk of homogenising the two societies fictionally represented in the two texts, the paper analyses the female characters' shared or common experiences.

The experiences

Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* is an anthology of short stories dedicated to the women of Serowe, one of the major villages in Botswana. The text actually portrays the lives of the women of Serowe. Lília Momplé's *Neighbours: The Story of a Murder* is a novel that depicts the challenges faced by the Mozambican society due to the South African destabilisation mission in the late 1970s to the 1980s. The novel, while focusing on the South African conspiracy to destabilise Mozambique, does pay considerable attention to the plight of the female characters living in this acutely stressful period.

Indeed Bessie Head seems to speak for both the Botswana and the Mozambican societies when in her title story "The Collector of Treasures" she writes,

The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of life. To this day, women still suffered from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life. (92)

Such "errors" are not unique to Botswana and Mozambique. In *Issues In Feminism: A Course in Women's Studies* (quoted in Jane Mills's etymological dictionary, *Womanwords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Patriarchal Society*), these errors have set in motion patriarchal beliefs and practices that "culminate in attitudes that demean our bodies, our abilities, our

¹It has to be noted here that the difference that these two societies have is that Botswana, not having been a settler colony, gained its independence in 1966 without engaging in an armed struggle, while Mozambique obtained its independence in 1975 after a protracted liberation war.

characters, and our efforts” (162).

In the case of the texts studied for this paper some of the practices that can be related to patriarchal power on one hand, and the powerlessness of women on the other, generally manifest in atrocious acts committed against women. The male characters in these two texts do, in addition to engaging in adulterous affairs, go the extent of physically assaulting their wives.

Mena in *Neighbours* is constantly being assaulted by her husband Dupont, and Kebonye in “The Collector of Treasures” complains about the atrocious handling she gets from her husband. Every time her husband desires sex, he kicks Kebonye between the legs: “I once aborted with a child due to this treatment”, she says (88). In the case of Life (from the short story “Life”), an ex-prostitute who defiantly commits adultery, the husband murders her cold-bloodedly and then proceeds to self-righteously justify his crime before a “sympathetic” male judge: “I thought that if she was doing a bad thing with Radithobolo as Mathata said, I’d better kill her *because I cannot understand a wife who could be so corrupt* [...]” (46, emphasis added). The underlying belief implied in the above illustrations is that women “must be controlled, dominated, subdued, abused, and used [...] for male benefit” (Mills 162).

Life’s defiance and rebelliousness against her husband, an act that clearly translates into self-immolation, is worth examining in more detail, for it reveals the subtle machinations of the power interplays that characterise the gender relations in the two texts analysed in this essay.

In an opposites-attract fashion, Life is attracted to her husband Lesego mainly because of his dominating personality: “she saw in him the power and maleness of the [Johannesburg] gangsters” (42). Lesego’s kind of dominance soon manifests itself negatively as he literally, consciously, and deliberately assumes control of Life’s life. He becomes the sole financial administrator and controller in the family. If Life should need money, she is “to ask him for it and state what it was to be used for” (45). Then he bans the music played from Life’s transistor radio. Thirdly, in a dictatorial manner, he announces to Life, ““If you go with those men again, I’ll kill you”” (43). These authoritative pronouncements from Lesego strike at a cord of resistance within Life. Head describes her reaction: “She hadn’t the mental equipment to analyse what had hit her, but something seemed to strike her a terrible blow behind her head. She instantly succumbed to the blow and rapidly began to fall apart” (43). Very soon after this incident Life announces to her friends: “I think I have made a mistake. Married life doesn’t suit me” (44), and she stubbornly reverts to her former life of prostitution while still trapped within the institution of marriage, and consequently she pays a dear price with her own life.

Life’s reaction to male authoritarianism is, however, far from being the normal response that is observable from a majority of the female characters in the texts under interrogation. Almost all of the remaining female characters in the two texts overtly manifest docility, submissiveness, and subservience in their relationships with their male counterparts, be they spouses or blood relatives. A few examples given below, for instance, illustrate these female characters’ unquestioning acceptance of whatever decision is made for them on their behalf. The notion of arranged marriages is a case in point. In “The Collector of Treasures” Dikeledi’s marriage to Garesego is a matter agreed between Dikeledi’s uncle and Garesego himself. Interestingly, Garesego’s only reason for marrying Dikeledi is her lack of formal education. Though having had a considerable amount of schooling himself, he cannot afford to marry “the educated kind because those women were stubborn and wanted to lay down the rules for men” (95).

Neighbours’s Mena, wife to one of the conspirators whose mission is to sabotage and

destabilise Mozambique, is another example of a young woman who initially does not participate in making decisions that affect her own life. She accepts Dupont, “a man much older than herself”, as a husband simply because “she felt it was her parents’ wish”: “Like the majority of girls in Angoche, she had been brought up to believe she should accept any man her parents deemed worthy as a husband” (48). Such characters often proceed in life to play a passive role that poses no threat, nor interference, to their men’s freedom to use, abuse, and exploit them in any manner they wish. Dikeledi, for instance, never protests when her husband Garesego starts running around with other women. Mena, who figuratively and literally becomes a punching bag for her husband Dupont, remains loyal and obedient to her husband until she discovers his involvement in a plot that aims at destabilising his own country.

Some such types of female characters even go to the extent of collaborating with the male characters in generating or protecting situations that are unfavourable to themselves and others. The home of Narguiss (another one of the female characters who resignedly accepts arranged marriages) in *Neighbours* provides some understanding of the position of women in the Mozambican society and, in particular, exposes some aspects of the women’s thinking concerning their own standing in their respective communities. Narguiss’s is a Muslim family. At the point at which this family is introduced to us, Narguiss is obsessively worried that her family is celebrating the Day of Eid (an annual Muslim festival) “without father, without husband” (6). The father and husband is of course her husband Abdul, who is an incurable womaniser who has decided to abandon his family in pursuit of extra-marital pleasures, but it is not simply the incompleteness of her family that Narguiss bemoans here. It is rather the conspicuous absence of the one who wields power in the family the absence of the patriarch that Narguiss laments. In fact, besides the urgency created by her husband’s abandonment of the family during the Eid festival, Narguiss is also constantly perturbed by, and disapproves of, what she perceives as her youngest daughter’s failure and refusal to catch a husband, an issue that has worried the whole family as well. The daughter, Muntaz, is described by another female character, Fauzia, as “almost abnormal in her mania for studying; and is so different from her sisters, who are normal girls, who like beautiful dresses and enjoying themselves *as is suitable for women their age*” (29, emphasis added).

The normal kind of dream and aspiration for a young woman Muntaz’s age should be, according to her community’s prescription, to find a rich husband, but Muntaz relentlessly and resolutely pursues her studies, which the whole family considers “unfeminine”. This attitude of the family (which of course represents the community, itself is a component of the society) to the education of females is, conversely, based on the fact that education is a masculine pursuit which females should not meddle with. An inclination that manifests itself in both texts studied here,² this attitude points out a parallel between the notion of sexism and that of racism as depicted in Momplé’s novel. Sounding much like Jeremiah’s reproach in Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, ““Can you cook books and feed them to your husband?”” (15), Narguiss’s family rebukes Muntaz, ““Study so much for what? Woman is not made to fill their heads with books”” (7). Furthermore, this rebuke simultaneously and curiously echoing Dona Florinda’s husband’s reproach to Januario, who, whilst working for the white family as a servant, decides to pursue his studies. Dona Florinda’s husband lashes out at Januario’s “unnatural inclination” thus: ““So you want a degree. Don’t you know that blacks can’t have degrees? They have heads like monkeys [...] I’ve never liked servants that study”” (38).

The point I wish to emphasise here is the fact that in Narguiss’s family there is no

²A majority of the female characters in both *The Collector of Treasures* and *Neighbours* do not possess much, if any, formal education.

male presence in the present of the novel, but it is Narguiss herself and other women (mainly Muntaz's sisters and their cousin Fauzia) who are in the forefront, working against Muntaz and threatening to kill her ambition of obtaining the high educational qualifications she desires.

A similar pattern is discernible in Head's short stories. In a number of these stories some female characters are portrayed as consciously and unconsciously working against other women, sometimes even against their very own interests. The story "The Special One" features a female character Mrs Maleboge, a widow who is deprived of her late husband's inheritance by the husband's male siblings, and it gives us an example of one female character working against another. Gaenametse, Mrs Maleboge's friend, is married to a womaniser who is "off from woman to woman" (83), a habit that eventually leads to the couple's divorce. While the society with its ancient and gender-biased beliefs degrades and dehumanises Gaenametse, the victim of this divorce, a character only identified as "a woman neighbour" is ascribed the role of exposing the society's "dirty linen" as she relates Gaenametse's unfortunate story, and through it she castigates the *female race*:

"No one will talk to *her*. She's a wash-out! Everyone knows about her private life. She had a terrible divorce case. She was driving the husband mad. She pestered him day and night for the blankets, and even wanted him to do it during the time she was having her monthly bleeding. Many women have killed men by sleeping with them during that time. It is a dangerous thing and against our custom. The woman will remain alive and the man will die. She was trying to kill the husband, so the court ruled that he'd better be parted from such a terrible woman (84–85).

An intriguing phenomenon in this attitudinal trend is not only the female characters' resignation to the abusive treatment from their societies, but also the self-inflicted suffering that some of the characters invite or wish for themselves.

In Momplé's text, Narguiss and Mena are characters who become resigned to the abusive environment in which they live, and they do so to the point of seeking and crafting excuses to justify their life circumstances and exonerate their male partners of any blame. As Mena's husband finds every excuse to assault her, for instance, she learns "to resign herself to these beatings because she knew that a husband's abuse formed part of the destiny of many women" (52).

Narguiss too is a female character who was brought up as a "true woman", a description from which we can deduce that she was, typically, docile and submissive. As a result, when she discovers her husband's infidelities she convinces herself "that it was her destiny to share her man with other women" (93), and she decides that she would all the same continue to love her husband, and she does so "with [...] astonished gratitude" (93). The amorous adventures of her husband drive her to seek solace in sweet delicacies, and consequently she develops obesity and balloons out of shape: "Today it is no longer possible to recognise, in this large woman, the slender girl that Abdul once knew. Because of this Narguiss forgives him his infidelities and accepts him when he seeks her out" (94).

In "The Collector of Treasures" we are confronted with some situations which spell out the ironies and paradoxes of a patriarchal society. In this text we read of women who, in spite of the men's general disposition to engage in promiscuity and adultery, consciously initiate their men's extra-marital relationships. Kebonye, Dikeledi's prison friend, for instance, says of her husband, "I once said to him that he could keep some other woman as well because I couldn't satisfy all his [sexual] needs" (89–90). Kenalepe, who is married to Paul Thebolo, a new kind of man who loves his wife passionately and cares for her, explains the joys of love-making to her friend Dikeledi and concludes by suggesting that her friend should experience Paul's love-making because Paul knows all kinds of love-making tricks:

“I can loan Paul to you if you like [...],’ she said. ‘I would do it because I have never had a friend like you in my life before whom I trust so much [...] I wouldn’t mind loaning him because I’m expecting another child and I don’t feel so well these days [...]’” (96). Kenalepe’s is a goodwill offer but also one that describes the naïveté of its originator. Fortunately for the couple, Dikeledi declines this benevolent proposal.

Women are “just dogs” in these societies!

At this point in this discussion it may prove worthwhile to ponder on the usage and significance of two of the most striking expressions from the texts under scrutiny. The expressions are “true woman” from *Neighbours* (90) and “women are just dogs in this society” from Head’s short story “The Special One” (81). The expression “a true woman” is used to describe Narguiss, a pathetically docile and submissive character. “[W]omen are just dogs in this society” (81) is an expression that is frequently uttered by Mrs Maleboge who is robbed of her late husband’s inheritance (in the form of cattle) by her brothers-in-law in “The Special One”. An appeal to her community’s administrators of justice yields negative results as the judgement favours the male defendants. Consequently, she habitually goes about the village announcing that she lost her case because “women are just dogs in this society”.

The character Narguiss in *Neighbours* has been socially constructed under the Mozambican society’s patriarchical system as “a true woman”. The text elaborates on this reference as meaning that she is confined to “the house and the vegetable garden” (90). Narguiss is, therefore, a housewife as are all the other female characters in the two texts under analysis. This character, therefore, represents the female characters in these texts fairly well.

A close look into the implications of the housewife status with which Narguiss is associated yields extremely interesting results. A simple definition of a housewife, taken from *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* reads; “a woman who works at home for her family, cleaning, cooking, etc” (548). On the basis of this definition a housewife is essentially a housemaid. An observation on the consequences of housewifery recorded in *The Media Machine* could shed more light on this issue: “[housework] crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades (the woman), chains her to the kitchen and the nursery” (qtd. in Tumedi 10). Tumedi also comments on the psychological impact of the structure of the home on women’s development: “the physical construction of houses conspires to box the development of women and their contribution to society. The whole exercise, therefore, becomes very mind-numbing and isolating as well” (Tumedi 10). Etymological accounts also describe housework as “not socially counted as work, the implication of this image being that of the housewife herself as an uninteresting, worthless person, a cabbage” (Mills 120, emphasis added). Mills also refers to some “folks etymology” that suggests that “housewife” could be defined as “a woman who is married to a house rather than to the man she once thought it was all about” (122).³

A metaphorical illustration of the housewife figure analyseable above is availed by Mrs Maleboge’s statement: “women are just dogs in this society”. The complete Setswana idiom normally used to compare a human being to a dog is *ntša ya go latlwa* (a dog to be thrown away; i.e., when dead, it cannot even be eaten); thus when applied to a human being, it would be an implicit reference to that particular person’s worthlessness. So the word “dog” in Mrs Maleboge’s idiomatic expression could be used to connote the underdog position of

³ This is definitely one of the most relevant definitions considering the promiscuous, adulterous, and irresponsible conduct of a majority of the male characters in *The Collector of Treasures* and *Neighbours*. The men are, symbolically and practically, “never there” for their wives and families.

women in her society.

Finally, the word “dog” also suggests “bitch”, which makes Mrs Maleboge’s metaphorical statement even more potent in meaning, for the word “bitch” is described as “the most offensive appellation that can be given to [a] woman, even more provoking than that of a whore” (qtd. in Mills, 27). Casey Miller and Kate Swift record the word “bitch” as “[manifesting] prejudice and a discriminatory attitude towards women as a group and [...] conversely, betrays prejudice toward the woman of whom it is said because of her sex” (qtd. in Mills 28).

Thus, the comparison of women to dogs can be decoded as a reference to their worthlessness, their moral depravity, their unattractiveness, and their inferiority as viewed by their patriarchal societies. Mrs Maleboge’s statement, therefore, is a heavily loaded comment on the position of women in the Botswana society and, by extension, the Mozambican society too.

Cathartic blows

With the female characters in these texts being so docile, submissive, and subservient, one of the consequences of their nature is that they permit the unfavourable environment they find themselves in to deteriorate to a point where very few human beings could continue to endure the situation, a point at which, apparently, some cathartic action is needed. For five characters in “The Collector of Treasures” (including Dikeledi, the protagonist), when the need for letting off some steam arises, that is, after the women have been abused beyond tolerance, and beyond endurance, they strike out at their male partners, each separately killing her husband by cutting off his genitals. In the case of Mena, the worst abused female character in *Neighbours*, when a situation favourable to the denouncement of her husband comes, she seizes it. She calls the police and reveals the information she has gathered concerning her husband’s involvement in a plot to kill innocent Mozambicans. This way Mena makes a decision that has left her husband either dead or safely put under police custody, as the police respond to her call and shoot dead two of the saboteurs and arrest the remaining three.

Having purged herself of all pent-up frustration, Momplé’s Mena feels no remorse after denouncing her tormentor-husband: “her heart is empty of any feeling, even hatred. She does not even feel remorse at having denounced him. She just feels, for the first time, that she holds her life in her hands [...]” (129–30). Similarly, Head’s husband-killers demonstrate no sense of regret, as evidenced by their prison conversation:

“And what may your crime be?”

“I have killed my husband.”

“We are all here for the same crime,” [...] “Do you feel any sorrow about the crime?”

“Not really” [...].

“How did you kill him?”

“I cut off all his special parts with a knife,” [...].

“I did it with a razor,” [...]. (89)

Conclusion

Considering the fact that gender is “unstable, mobile, and heterogeneous” and that it is “a fluid process of negotiation rather than a rigid imposition of meaning” (Donaldson 116), this essay cannot claim to be comprehensive in its analysis of the position of women

coexisting with men within the patriarchal societies of Botswana and Mozambique, but it pokes at some indicators that reveal the disadvantaged status of these women and the absurdity of the women's collaboration in their own debasement. The inferior position of the women in these texts, which is strikingly similar to the inferior position of the black person,⁴ comes as a consequence of the patriarchal socialisation in the societies fictionally represented in the two works, a process that Bessie Head blames on "the ancestors". Head's analysis is echoed in, and elaborated on by, Adrienne Rich, a US poet and writer who asserts,

Under patriarchy I may live in purdah or drive a truck [...] I may serve my husband his early morning coffee within the clay walls of a Berber village or march in an academic procession, *whatever my status or situation, my derived economic class, or my sexual preference, I live under the power of the fathers, and I have access only to so much privilege, or influence as the patriarchy is willing to accede to me, and only for so long as I will pay the price of male approval.* (quoted in Miles 173–74, emphasis added)

Patriarchy has been inherited from the ancestors, and women have been conditioned over the centuries to remain docile, submissive, and subservient to men. Hence the majority of the women in Head's and Momplé's texts are the "true" or "normal" type of women, rooted to the culture that has decreed that they should forever gravitate towards the kitchen and the garden, the type of women who leave education and the high-paying jobs that come with it to the men, the type of women who leave politics to the men, the type of women who leave to the men anything that smells of power, the type of women who could never challenge patriarchal decisions, the type of women who pose no threat whatsoever to the inherited social set-up, thereby gaining the male approval Rich refers to.

The quest for obtaining male approval might just help unravel some of the complexities that involve women's collaboration in their own oppression. What could please the one who wields power better than a victim who victimizes her fellow victim, better still, one who wills and endures some self-inflicted pain?

Parallel to the notion that Fanon calls "the racial distribution of guilt" (103), the situation here could represent some gender distribution of guilt, or the notion of collective guilt, both of which would only serve to absolve the actual culprits of any oppression and instead attribute the vice to some faceless ancestors or society. For indeed I suspect that gender-based or patriarchal oppression, like any other kind of oppression, would be a heavy burden to bear without an accomplice.

Interestingly, the reasoning employed in the justification and maintenance of both sexism and racism is often identical, based and operating on the same principles!

Who ever heard of a woman who hungers for education? Who ever heard of a black person who yearns for education?

Where is the difference?

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⁴The chapter entitled "The Fact of Blackness" in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* would be even more interesting if we were to substitute "femaleness" for "blackness" and "woman" for "Negro".

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Reinterpreting the Past and Rearranging the Present: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*

Mary S. Lederer

I have recorded whatever hopeful trend was presented to me in an attempt to shape the future, which I hope will be one of dignity and compassion. ("Some Notes on Novel Writing" 64)

Bessie Head's attempt to shape a future of dignity and compassion came at a very high personal price. She was adamant that such a future could only come if people abandoned the social categorisation that led to any group having any form of power whatsoever over another. She did not accept sexual, political, racial, religious, or any other form of authority, and this attitude meant that she took on important social conventions in her life and in her writing. Personally she suffered a great deal from the labels that had been assigned to her. In her work, she ripped those conventions apart to show how damaging they are. Once those conventions are demolished, she believed, people would be free to accept and love one another. However, without those conventions, we have to redefine ourselves, and Head's most famous and most difficult novel, *A Question of Power*, describes how one woman redefined herself in the face of very powerful resistance. Almost ten years later and on another continent, Paule Marshall considered the situation of African descendants in the United States and wrote *Praisesong for the Widow*, describing how another woman went through a process of redefinition in order to heal herself and her children—her future.

Although set in different social and cultural contexts, both *A Question of Power* and *Praisesong for the Widow* explore one similar problem. Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* must be successfully reborn—or reincarnated—a process which leads to new status for herself as a representative of a new spiritual sensibility. This status can only be achieved if Elizabeth understands certain things about the nature of power—things she can learn best from her past. *Praisesong for the Widow* chronicles the journey of Avey Johnson as she connects to a past she thought she had buried, and celebrates an African-American woman's rebirth. That rebirth out of a painful and alienating present—Avey's legacy of the historical suffering of African Americans—is necessary if she is to become a master *griot* with the power to contribute meaningfully to the future. Both Avey and Elizabeth are forced to acknowledge the importance and influence of the past, no matter how horrible; both Avey and Elizabeth must revisit their pasts if they want to understand the present and reshape the future.

Already in the mid-1960s, Bessie Head was concerned with what seemed to her to be the capricious and even cruel nature of God: "God is wild and mad and illogical and it is better to have nothing to do with him" (Cullinan 20). In the same letter to Patrick Cullinan, dated 28 July 1964, Head wrote of her admiration and sympathy for Israel, whose suffering she pitied, because God "is being just as terrible as he was in those dim, dim ages" (20). These ideas already pre-figure her criticism of Christianity at the end of *A Question of Power*: "the basic error seemed to be a relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky" (205). For Head, the problem of power rested in the way all power, all control, was coveted by people for their own ends.

The answer to the problem that Head finally comes to explain in *A Question of Power* is present already in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, when Dinorego's "Good God" becomes part of the narrative voice:

Therefore the Good God cast one last look at Makhaya, whom he intended revenging almightily for his silent threat to knock him down. He would so much

entangle this stupid young man with marriage and babies and children that he would always have to think, not twice but several hundred times, before he came to knocking anyone down.

He wandered along the footpath, in the direction of the sunset, and stopped for a while in the yard of Paulina Sebeso. She was busy at her smoke haze fire, preparing supper, but she paused and looked up expectantly as she heard familiar footsteps. It was Makhaya coming home. (187–88)

When Rain Clouds Gather outlines the problem of integrating God into humanity; it opens up the possibility of other ways of understanding God. In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth learns to understand God as herself, and, like Avey, she does so through her experiences of the past.

In *A Question of Power*, finding the “answer” rests with understanding the way the notion of God is appropriated by those in control. For Head, the answer to the question of power must be sought in the evil society: bad things happen to Elizabeth because she was born into a bad—oppressive, cruel—society in South Africa. That society cannot help her to understand herself, because it does not give her a positive sense of her self. The character Elizabeth must move to Botswana, where she is forced to confront her past. Head articulates the cruelty Elizabeth experiences so that the reader cannot doubt the effects of passbooks, schoolyard taunts, the perpetual threat of arrest, and unmasked hostility; this is part of her past. The torment does not leave her even as she works in the co-op garden in Motabeng, Botswana: “The record churned on monotonously the whole day, and the day passed in a blur of pain[...]It wasn’t that it was unfamiliar to her. It was the nightmare of the slums she had grown up in in South Africa, [...]” (116–17). But if the experience of alienation is largely social, then the experience of rebirth is equally spiritual, and the possibility that is first hinted at in *When Rain Clouds Gather* finds more complete expression in *A Question of Power*, which traces most explicitly the relationship between social and spiritual concerns and makes clear the fact that the two realms are inextricably connected. The past may be horrible, but an understanding of it is necessary if Elizabeth is going to reshape her future: to live meaningfully into the future, one cannot forget the past.

John Mbiti’s work *African Religions and Philosophy*, a book Head read and admired very much, offers a theory of time and its place in African philosophy that explains the process quite usefully. According to Mbiti, God can be explained and understood in terms of time. Present time refers to the lifetime of an individual. The past refers to the lifetime of the community. God explains human contact with time (5) because God exists in both the past and the present. In African societies, according to Mbiti, the past is not a finite concept, closed off as each moment passes. Every person expects that eventually s/he will become part of it and assumes that his/her present contributes to the collective past. This way of understanding human society as collective appealed strongly to Head, who rejected allying herself with any ideology or political camp: “It’s myself, and myself alone that I have to present. A protest is an excuse, a cover up. I no longer have that and besides it’s the lowest form of writing” (Cullinan 23).

In *A Question of Power*, Head explores this concept of time (as Mbiti constructs it) in ways that question conventional notions of the inviolability of the past. Elizabeth learns to understand her place in the present by examining her past, but she later uses that knowledge to imagine a different future. The total segregation of apartheid informs the decisions that South Africans make about their lives, and so Elizabeth lives her life according to the patterns she learned in South Africa: she organises her present according to the only social patterns she knows. Her first incarceration in the hospital occurs when she buys a radio. The torture in her mind becomes unbearable, and she knows only one way to alleviate it—by abusing others in the way she learned in South Africa:

she began heaving mentally in a crescendo of torture. The insistent hiss, hiss of horror swamped her mind: “You see,” it said. “You don’t really like Africans. You see his face? It’s vacant and stupid. He’s slow-moving. It takes him ages to figure out the brand name of the radio. You never really liked Africans. You only pretended to. You have no place here. Why don’t you go away....”

She was choking for air. The clerk had told her to sit down opposite him. A loud wail of counter-protest was arising in her. The insistent hissing was mean, stifling, vicious. *Whom could she accuse*, to end it? She sprang to her feet...and shouted: “Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana!!” (50–51, emphasis added)

Later, during her second stay in the hospital, one of the nurses tells her, ““You are mad, aren’t you? You hate black people. You hate white people. You hate everyone”” (182). Elizabeth shuns society because she has been shunned.

Sello understands and tries to alleviate her isolation and her hatred. He seeks to place Elizabeth’s life in the context of a larger community, and he first does so by bringing the poor of Africa onto her bed: “At this gesture, a group of people walked quietly into the room. They were the poor of Africa. Each placed one bare foot on her bed, turned sideways so that she could see that their feet were cut and bleeding” (31). Elizabeth needs to understand the universal nature of pain and suffering, not to wrap herself in her own cloak of suffering, if she is to understand herself and her life in the context of any community at all, whether in South Africa or Botswana.

Elizabeth’s torment and salvation have a religious aspect, but Head (much more than Marshall) rejects Christian models for Elizabeth’s new life as a prophet. Instead, Head turns to other traditions (such as Hinduism) and draws on Mbiti’s formulation of the relationship between God and time to fashion Elizabeth’s reincarnation. Rukmini Vanamali and Paul Lorenz have both considered the religious character of Elizabeth’s hallucinations. Lorenz explores the elements of Buddhism that become part of Elizabeth’s intellect, and concludes that Elizabeth rejects the totality of Buddhism because the “assumption...that suffering, oppression, is a given of life on earth does nothing to relieve the oppression of the colonized mind—it merely confirms the belief that escape from oppression is impossible in this life” (601). Instead, he argues that Elizabeth envisions a more “corporate god whose form is more Hindu or Tantric than Buddhist” (601–02). Tantra allows Elizabeth to see what is holy in herself and in every human being, and that holiness consequently gives her the strength to face the demons of her past so that she can “become an ordinary person in control of her life” (603).

Vanamali explores the Hindu connection in somewhat more detail. He notes Head’s interest in the Hindu doctrine of rebirth (159), and points out that Medusa—a figure of Greek mythology—becomes associated with the Hindu concept Maya, which “subsumes within itself the unity of opposites and as a consequence escapes reduction to a statement of clear significance” (165). What all this means is that Elizabeth can be God because of, not in spite of, the qualities that make her human:

the basic error seemed to be a 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. If there were any revelation whatsoever in her own suffering it seemed to be quite the reverse of Mohammed’s dramatic statement. He had said: There is only one God and his name is Allah. And Mohammed is his prophet.

She said: There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet. (205–06)

Every human being has the most intimate relationship possible with God because every

human being is God. Her famous “gesture of belonging” (206) becomes a laying on of healing hands and serves a similar function as Avey’s baptism on Carriacou.

Elizabeth finds a way to live with all the manifestations of God because what is common to all the gods and to all her experiences of the past and culture is herself, the human being Elizabeth. This intimate communion between divinity and humanity characterises Mbiti’s concept of religion and acknowledges the historical and social forces that shape human beings. To be completely herself, Elizabeth must be able to look at her past and at the history of her society and recognise how those experiences have created the woman who came to Motabeng. She can still reject those gods and those experiences, but her salvation lies in her ability to understand the general processes that work in human societies, and those processes are both good and evil, as personified in the characters of Dan and Sello, who torment and finally teach Elizabeth.

Margaret Tucker suggests that *A Question of Power* exposes the historical construction of power, and when Elizabeth “jumps out of Dan’s and Sello’s ‘big picture’ to form another time”, she is in fact reconstructing time so that it “is empowered by the community, not by some authoritative abstraction of History” (181). History, in this case South African history as it has been presented to her, does not and cannot serve Elizabeth. The patterns of that history only suppress her sense of self-worth and her understanding of human relationships. As she picks the patterns apart, with the help of Sello and Dan, she comes to understand what is valuable about her life and to recognise how the patterns of evil established themselves in her intellect and emotions. Elizabeth reinterprets her past so that she can also rearrange her present. History is not Henry Ford’s bunk; rather, it is an important element that can be used for establishing power, destroying power, *and* building human society.¹ Dan establishes power by asserting his superiority and Elizabeth’s inferiority using the patterns and definitions of her South African past. Sello destroys that power by proposing an alternate definition of love. Elizabeth takes that knowledge and contributes to building a new community in Motabeng, the place of her future.

Just as Avey in *Praisesong for the Widow* will confront Jerome Johnson during her Gethsemane on the balcony of the hotel, Elizabeth must confront the racist demons of her own past. Her own cries of anguish match Avey’s cries of “Too much!” but instead of questioning the meaning of her success, Elizabeth’s trial, like Job’s, questions the meaning of her suffering:

What is love?

Who is God?

If I cry, who will have compassion on me as my suffering is the suffering of others?

This is the nature of evil. This is the nature of goodness. (70)

To answer the questions, Elizabeth must go back to the Garden of Eden.

Elizabeth’s questions about good, evil, love, and God are answered in the activities of the co-op, a kind of a new garden. But Elizabeth’s actions are not the passive actions of someone who just wants to be left alone (what Elizabeth at first says she wants). In the garden, Elizabeth does not just hide from her past; she actively rejects the oppressive behaviour she learned in South Africa and adopts a new way of life, one in which the personal qualities of political life are acknowledged in the organisation of the spiritual “brotherhood of man”. The co-op is thus a secular Garden of Eden; its activities represent a world where human beings have not yet lost their holiness (in the past) to the corrupt ethics of an oppressive power, but it is also a world where the Fall is not possible (in the future)

¹Bessie Head’s later work was increasingly concerned with history: she produced a book of oral history and a historical novel. She believed that Africans ought to write their own history.

because human beings are the only God. When Elizabeth tries to apologise to Eugene, he stops her and affirms his faith in her: “He was that kind of man. People were always going up and up and up, never down and down and down” (204). Elizabeth has to learn to love, a lesson Head had already identified for herself in 1964: “I don’t think I have any obligation to my fellow men, except to love them—and I haven’t yet learned how to do that” (Cullinan 20).

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Marshall, unlike Head, appropriates and adapts both African and Christian mythology to create a new ritual most suitable for her protagonist: a middle-class, African-American widow. The blending of “Old” and “New” Worlds is nowhere more vibrant than it is in the religions of the Caribbean, and Avey, by eventually participating in the Beg Pardon, is able to bring a sense of that heritage back with her to the United States.

Abena Busia discusses these issues in two articles, “Words Whispered over Voids: A Context for Black Women’s Rebellious Voices in the Novel of the African Diaspora” and “What Is Your Nation?: Reconnecting Africa and Her Diaspora through Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*”. In the first of these articles, Busia argues that what makes *Praisesong for the Widow* such a strong novel is the incorporation of ritual and other elements of African oral traditions in what she calls a “progressive” way (“Words whispered over voids”, 26):

The aim is not to romanticize Africa or the lot of the African woman, as if the way to cure all present ills were to re-create the societies of the past; the past is not reclaimed for its own sake but because, without a recognition of it, there can be no understanding of the present and no future. (26–27)

The task that Marshall takes on is a reclamation of the past in much the same way that Busia envisions it; at the same time, Marshall transplants the concept to American soil in much the same way that Head transplants Elizabeth to the country of Botswana in order to recover her South African past. Avey must recapture the value of her life on Halsey Street and use the consequences of their life in North White Plains to create a future that has meaning in America, not Africa, just as Elizabeth must understand the processes of power in South Africa in order to avoid them and create a place for herself in the future in Motabeng. Busia writes,

Marshall articulates the scattering of the African peoples as a trauma—a trauma that is constantly repeated anew in the lives of her lost children. The life of the modern world and the conditions under which Afro-Americans have to live, the sacrifices they must make to succeed on the terms of American society, invariably mean a severing from their cultural roots, and, as Avey learns to her cost, this is tantamount to a repetition, in her private life, of that original historical separation. (“What is your nation”, 197)

Unless Avey can remind and teach her children and their children of their past, as she has had to learn it, the future will not represent anything new; it will merely reconstruct and replay the past, like the record that plays in Elizabeth’s mind. In other words, to break the hold of the past—to stop repeating it—Avey and her children must recognise and acknowledge it.

Avey and Elizabeth are both initiates, however, and they require mentors who will help them look backward as well as around them. In *A Question of Power*, Sello serves as Elizabeth’s guide. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Lebert Joseph is Avey’s link between her past, which he knows without being told, and her future, which must recognise the importance of and include the ancestors. He interrogates her about her family’s origins: “‘What’s your nation?’ he asked her, his manner curious, interested, even friendly all of a sudden. ‘Arada...? Is you an Arada?’ He waited. ‘Cromanti maybe...?’ And he again waited.

‘Yarraba then...? Moko...?’” (167). Lebert has the knowledge of the deity and the cunning and strength of the trickster. By acquiescing to his demands, however, Avey does not give up. Lebert is not a hostile trickster; his intent is not to trip her up but to help her back over the threshold between her long trial and her future as a *griot*.

Avey eventually learns to appreciate Lebert’s tricks, as Elizabeth learns to appreciate Sello’s dual nature. And like Lebert, Sello tricks Elizabeth and uses her for his own purposes as well as for Elizabeth’s salvation, explaining to Elizabeth why “they” had to put her through what they did, but he also honours her by saying that when “we” asked for perfection, “They sent you” (34). Finally, after he discloses his role in the drama of Elizabeth’s torment, Elizabeth recognises her debt to Sello: “Funny thing, though, she really adored Sello, as though they were two companions who shared a permanent joke” (200). Avey, too comes to appreciate Lebert’s tricks: “She then brought her face to rest against his for a long moment, forgiving him his duplicity, thanking him, saying good-bye” (253).

However, whereas Elizabeth’s reincarnation implies a reconstruction of her self on the basis of what she learns and understands about the past and on the basis of the person she has become in Motabeng (mother, co-op worker, friend to Kenosi and Tom), *Praisesong for the Widow* is more a tale of resurrection and redemption; it suggests less reconstruction or rearrangement of her self. Avey rediscovers a part of her self that was lost in the move to North White Plains. Whereas Head relies on concepts of reincarnation (rebirth of the soul into another body), Marshall emphasises the importance of Avey’s reclaiming the life on Halsey Street. The text itself is divided into four parts like the four gospels and, like the gospels, is concerned with Avey’s spiritual death and resurrection.

In Christian belief, Christ’s death shares human death, and his resurrection promises the union with God that takes place after the body has died. Just as Christ left his apostles after the Last Supper, Avey decides, after her experience with the peach parfait, to leave her friends on the *Bianca Pride* and to go ashore to catch a plane home. Christ’s Gethsemane took place apart even from the apostles he brought with him; he had to face his Father alone. Elizabeth must face Dan and Sello every night in her room, and Avey, similarly, checks into a hotel, and confronts Jerome Johnson on the balcony of her room where his ghost asks her if she knows what she is doing:

He meant the money: the fifteen hundred dollars she had just forfeited by walking off the ship; the air fare she would have to turn around and spend tomorrow; the cost of the hotel room tonight. From the anxiety in his voice, she could tell he was including other, more important things[...]. The whole of *his transubstantiated body and blood*. All of it he seemed to feel had been thrown into jeopardy by her reckless act. (87–88, emphasis added)

Here, Jesus has become Judas; Avey is poised on the precipice of abandoning everything that she and especially Jerome worked and *sacrificed* for. Avey spends the evening remembering Halsey Street in very great detail and the changes in their lives that led to their move to North White Plains (the second chapter of the novel, pp. 87–145). Calling up the memories of the pleasure that characterised Halsey Street cannot erase the pain of the betrayal she is about to commit; she is only aware of the empty opulence of their life in North White Plains and of the sacrifices they made to achieve it: “*Too much! Too much! Too much!*” Raging as she slept” (145). It is the same empty opulence she rejected when she abandoned the *Bianca Pride*, and her cries echo Christ, who also wondered if his Father was asking too much of him.

The preparation for her resurrection comes from an unlikely source: Lebert Joseph, an “Old Testament prophet chronicling the lineage of his tribe” (163) in his rum shop, takes it upon himself to instruct Avey in the ways of the Excursion, a kind of pilgrimage. He fills the

tabula rasa of her mind with the wisdom of the tribe and the history of his chosen people, and finally convinces her to join him on Carriacou, a place of baptism, where “a man goes to relax hisself. To bathe in Carriacou water and visit ‘bout with friends” (164). Like Moses before him, Lebert takes her over the water to the Promised Land, on a boat named for Christ, a boat with a crucifix on the prow.

The next day on Carriacou (the final day of the cycle of death and resurrection—Easter), Avey allows herself to be baptised by Rosalie, an Athena-like reproduction of Lebert (the prophet) himself (216). The resurrection is complete when she is able to ask forgiveness at the Beg Pardon (“Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy”), and the baptism is complete when she assumes her new and *old* name: Avey, short for Avatara, the name her Great-Aunt Cuney had always insisted on.

Avey’s full name Avatara is clearly also a reference to the Hindu concept of the avatar, an incarnation of god (Vishnu) who walks the earth as a human (or animal) being in order to restore order and virtue to the world where virtue is in decline. Avey’s world witnesses declining virtue in the materialism represented by the move to North White Plains, and Elizabeth’s world is declining in the way that human life has become valueless in a world of power-mongers. Avey can be the representative of her past, which is part of the life of every African-American. Avey’s name universalises her place in the world, just as Elizabeth’s reversal of Mohammed’s statement does for her. Both Avey and Elizabeth are human beings who have been chosen to restore the moral order of the world.

Praisesong for the Widow is more than the sum of its metaphors, however. Marshall joins two different and in many ways opposing mythologies in a new mythology that confronts and recognises both the “pain and pleasure” (to use Barbara Christian’s phrase) of being an African descendent in America. The description of Avey’s renewal relies very heavily on the Christian concepts of death, resurrection, and baptism, but the strongest image of the novel, and the one that is most important for understanding the interplay of past and present, is the image of crossing the water. Christian symbols and African history come together very powerfully on the *Emanuel C*, creating a new ritual for Avey and others like her. The figure who leads the way, of course, is Lebert. He is taking Avey over the last hurdle to her African past (the tribes of her community); he is also Moses parting the water to lead her to the promised land. The ship itself is Christ walking on water; yet the figure of the saint that had been carved into the bow of the boat is eaten away; “[o]nly the crucifix in its hand had by some miracle remained intact. This it held over the water as though it were a divining rod that had once led the way to a rich lode of gold” (193). The trappings of Christianity (in the figure of the saint) are present, but they are bankrupt (eaten away). They are also being supplanted by the symbolism of the African rituals: the crucifix is a crossroad; the mothers of Mount Olivet Baptist Church are on an Excursion, and Moses has practised deceit to get Avey over the water to Carriacou.

Lebert the trickster puts Avey into the care of two old women who are also making the excursion. They are midwives of a sort, guiding her through the process of purgation and rebirth that takes place on the boat. They also represent figures from her childhood (once again like the record in Elizabeth’s mind), and they provoke her final memory:

While her body remained anchored between the old women who were one and the same with the presiding mothers of Mount Olivet in their pews up front, her other self floated down[...]. The large, somewhat matronly handbag on her lap shrank to a little girl’s pocketbook of white patent leather containing a penny for the collection plate[...]. A bow of pale blue satin that felt bigger than her head matched the Easter outfit she had on. And above the racing of the silken sea just below the railing she soon began to hear[...]the inflammatory voice from the

pulpit. (197)

The sermon she hears is the Easter sermon of the resurrection, and it foretells her own resurrection. But like she did that Sunday in church, she now purges herself of her middle-class meal over the side of the *Emanuel C.* The thundering, rolling “voice from the pulpit that had become God’s voice” (203) is replaced by the “soothing, low-pitched words which not only sought to comfort and reassure her, but which from their tone even seemed to approve of what was happening” (205). The mothers of Mount Olivet take their places in the women on the boat and help Avey get ready for the ritual she will participate in on Carriacou.

Just as the journey over the sea to Carriacou can be compared to the journey to the Promised Land, it *must* also be compared to the journey of the slaves on the Middle Passage and to the reverse passage of the Ibos who were brought to Tatem. The Ibos, like Christ, walked on the water, but they rejected the “new” world and the life they saw. Others did not have the choice. Like the poor of the world coming onto Elizabeth’s bed in *A Question of Power*, Avey’s suffering calls up the ghosts of others who crossed the water but did not anticipate resurrection:

She was alone in the deckhouse. That much she was certain of. Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering—the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space—made hers of no consequence. (*Praisesong for the Widow* 209)

The journey of Christ and of Moses and the Israelites is transformed, and its corrupt symbols are called upon to bear witness to the suffering of the millions of Avey’s ancestors. The past takes its place beside *and within* the religions of Africa and the West; the past also takes its place in Avey’s memory and vision.

Avey is ordained as the *griot* at the Beg Pardon, when Lebert bows to her, “a profound, solemn bow that was like a genuflection”:

Rosalie Parvay nearby quickly followed her father’s example. Taking his place in front of Avey Johnson she swept down before her in an exact copy of his gesture.

To her utter bewilderment others in the crowd of aged dancers, taking their cue from him also, began doing the same. One after another of the men and women trudging past, who were her senior by years, would pause as they reached her and, turning briefly in her direction, tender her the deep, almost reverential bow. (250–251)

Just as Elizabeth becomes the prophet of humanity, so Avey is ordained as the new *griot* for the people she identifies as her nation: her children, the Ibos on the landing in Tatem, Marion’s “sweetest lepers”, her grandchildren, and the life on Halsey Street.

Avey rejects the bankruptcy of the system she has participated in for nearly thirty years in North White Plains, but she does not embrace the mythology of her African past in a way that would romanticise it. Instead, she brings her experience to bear on the future of African-Americans in a way that both Busia and Christian anticipate but do not articulate. She makes plans to return to North White Plains and Tatem, where she can spread the message of the Beg Pardon:

Her territory would be the street corners and front lawns in their small section of North White Plains. And the shopping mall and train station. As well the canyon streets and office buildings of Manhattan. She would haunt the entranceways of the skyscrapers. And whenever she spotted one of them amid the

crowd, those young, bright, fiercely articulate token few for whom her generation had worked the two and three jobs, she would stop them[...]As they rushed blindly in and out of the glacier buildings, unaware, unprotected, lacking *memory* and a *necessary distance of the mind*[...]she would stop them and before they could pull out of her grasp, tell them about the floor in Halsey Street and quote them the line from her namesake[...]. (255, emphasis added)

The fact that Avey's "territory" is North White Plains, Manhattan, and Tatem suggests her final and extraordinary initiation. She takes up the mantle of her Great-Aunt Cuney and becomes a *griot*, but not of the African history which is the property of the classic *griot*. Avey will tell the story of her past and the past of her people in order to understand the present and to achieve the future. At the end of *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey has become the kind of woman Barbara Christian means when she writes, "As we move into another century when Memory threatens to become abstract history, they remind us that if we want to be whole, we must recall the past, those parts that we want to remember, those parts that we want to forget" (341).

Bessie Head constructs a similar situation for Elizabeth—incorporating the horror as well as the joy of the past. *A Question of Power* makes clear the role of an oppressive past in affecting Elizabeth's reincarnation. Avey's experiences, too, beginning with the dream about her Great-Aunt Cuney and including the "meeting" with Jerome Johnson on the balcony of the hotel and being ill in the deckhouse of the *Emanuel C*, establish, or re-establish, her connections with her past. Avey's sense of the present gets mixed up in these encounters with her past, and, as Mbiti describes it, she experiences time both in her own life and in the lives of so many people who lived before her.

Mbiti's concepts of past and present are important for understanding how Head alters the nature and purpose of Elizabeth's madness. The past explains contemporary human society, but it can also be used to reconfigure the future, a temporal concept that does not feature in Mbiti's philosophy. The South African past creates the conditions for the onset of Elizabeth's madness: oppression has left her feeling inferior, and her hallucinations reflect those feelings. The past, and particularly Elizabeth's experiences of it in South Africa, explains contemporary human nature, but it does not, in the end, prevent Elizabeth from reshaping her life according to her own personal, spiritual experience of love with others: "She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man" (206).

At the end of her suffering, Elizabeth's religious consciousness encompasses the whole of human experience and her prophecy places her at the service of humankind, represented by Motabeng. After her ordeal, Avey's ordination recalls the Middle Passage and the *whole* of the African-American past and places her at the service of her children, her future. Vanamali, again, writes, "The multinational and multireligious nature of South African society naturally predispose Bessie Head to a quest for the meaning of life across cultures. What ultimately occurs is a rejection of mythic meaning to set right social imbalances" (169). Head's work, however, describes less a *rejection* of mythic meaning than a *reordering* of it so that social imbalances can be corrected, and she relies on historical understanding to do so. Head's vision entails recognising both the value of the individual in the community and the value of that community. Similarly, *Praisesong for the Widow* does not reject the myths of the past. Avey learns, not too late, the importance of the story told by her Great-Aunt Cuney about the legend of Ibo Landing, and she absorbs the experience of the Middle Passage on the crossing to Carriacou. Only by reasserting the significance of their experiences can Elizabeth and Avey tell their children about what their future can be. What

Marshall and Head have done is to put people in control of their own futures by having them regain control and understanding of their past.

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Unravelling the Life-Force: Male-Female Relationships in Bessie Head's Short Stories

F.-K. Omoregie

Preamble

The first of Bessie Head's writings I read was *A Question of Power*. On the surface it seems like another novel casting stones at patriarchy. Then I read *The Collector of Treasures* (the entire collection of short stories), and though most of the stories concern men "laying down the rules" through sexual dominance, and maintaining a straw hold on patriarchy, the stories move past sexual inequalities and patriarchy. They are a throwback to the Garden of Eden—where Adam and Eve lived together under conditions that were mutually favourable to both in pursuing the life-force—that is, of course, until the snake crawled in. Since this original sin, the life-force has become hard to achieve—as women have retained Eve's persuasiveness, and a hydra-headed society has replaced the snake. Considering the exacting myths society has trumped up since then, Head writes, "one cannot help but conclude that if a whole society creates a belief in something, that something is likely to become real" ("Witchcraft" 47). Most of the stories in *The Collector of Treasures* explore this collection of societal interfering myths in the lives of men and women, which leads me, on closer reading of Head's stories, to one conclusion, that the difference between a man and a woman is this: whereas a woman thinks for herself, a man allows the society to think for him. Sometimes this upsets the life-force. In this paper I intend to look at Bessie Head's treatment of the life-force using the short stories in the collection *The Collector of Treasures*.

First, however, I need to unravel the determinant words "life-force", and to do that I need to go back to the creation of the universe. The Bible opens with the words, "In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in darkness, and the spirit of God was moving over the water" (*Good News Bible*, Gen. 1.1–2). This image of desolation and despair brings to mind those moments of despair and loneliness when we feel lost, when life feels chaotic, when we feel we cannot go on, and in these dark moments we contemplate and feel the only answer is death. This is clearly the image and impression this passage conveys. But is death the only option? Can this formlessness, this desolation and darkness be altered? The answer lies in the following words, "Then God commanded, 'Let there be light,'—and light appeared" (*Good News Bible*, Gen. 1.3). Light is given here as the answer to darkness. Darkness in the opening passage is used metaphorically, so could the light commanded in this latter passage by God really be light as we understand it, that is, basically as a source of illumination? It cannot be, because it is not until thirteen sentences later, on the fourth day, that God creates the sun, the moon, and the stars. Since it cannot be coming from the sun and simple illumination, it has to be something more.

In the original Hebrew text, the Hebrew word used to denote this light is *Ohr*. And when we consider how the word *Ohr* is used in other places in the Bible (see Appendix), we begin to understand that it does not mean a source of illumination, but a supernatural light.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this fact. First, the one thing that existed before the world was created was darkness, which can be understood as death. The first act of creation was its opposite—life. Therefore, this light is specifically a divine life-force. Second, there will initially be darkness and chaos and confusion. We will feel the void of death all around us and lapse into despair. But something or someone, like God in the second passage, will bring a light (the life-force) to this darkness. The question is how do we, as human beings, begin to achieve this life-force? What does the life-force really mean to us as

humans?

The life-force

The life-force, apart from the ideas drawn above, is also the natural compulsion by any man or woman to achieve a higher status in life. In the “Don Juan in Hell” episode of George Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman*, Don Juan says, “The result of Life’s continual effort is not only to maintain itself, but to achieve higher and higher organization and completer self-consciousness[...].” (3.377–79). In other words, nobody’s life would have a purpose if there were no goals, aims, or a direction. Don Juan not only mentions the continual struggle to achieve higher things, but goes further into certain aspects of the life-force, such as marriage. A guaranteed way, he says, that life will continue on is through the institution of marriage. Don Juan says the life-force respects marriage because it continues to produce the “greatest number of children and care for them” (3.435–36). He echoes the words of William Shakespeare:

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
that thereby beauty’s rose might never die,
but as the ripener should by time decease,
his tender heir might bear his memory;[...]. (Son. 1, 1–4)

Apart from this important variable of the life-force, that is, the extension of human life through the institution of marriage, there are several other complementary aspects of the union between man and woman. Speaking from an emotional and moral level, Kenalepe, in “The Collectors of Treasures”, tells Dikeledi, “It’s not good for a woman to live alone” (96). Mutual financial support is another reason. In “The Collector of Treasures”, Dikeledi lives for eight years without her husband, Garesego, or without a man, and in those eight years she struggles, through her creativity and industriousness, to assert her potential and capability to live independently without the financial assistance of a man. As the story unfolds, she goes back to Garesego for help and confesses, “I have struggled to save money the whole year but I am short of R20.00” (99). Unfortunately, this reconnection between Garesego and Dikeledi ends with the death of Garesego. But things do not have to end this way.

There are many ways in which we can bring the light of the life-force into our world. For a start, we might begin by allowing ourselves to be more open. We can admit our vulnerabilities to those we love and be less guarded and more honest in our intimate conversations. We can, like Paul in “The Collector of Treasures”, be more supportive and encouraging of people around us. When we do so, we bring life affirmation to those people, and we then achieve, in the process, the capacity to also connect with not only the life-force that dwells within us, but also the life force that dwells within others. On the other hand, if we are constantly criticising, we are acting contrary to life affirmation. In essence, having been given this life-force, we can nurture it or corrupt it; this is the key to living in light or living in darkness.

Another aspect of the life-force that is necessary to humans also needs intellect. Intellect is the key that allows a man or woman to have a greater understanding of his/her environment, and allows him/her to survive in the physical world. This aspect of the life-force gives man/woman a will, a purpose, and his/her own sense of being, so that ultimately, a man or woman at the end will have a will and desire to choose his/her own path in pursuance and fulfilment of the life-force.

The life-force in Bessie Head’s short stories

Bessie Head's story, "Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration", shows that some men, in this case not just an ordinary man but a chief and leader of his people, are ready to go against the society in pursuit of the life-force. The central event of the plot involves chief Sebembele, paramount chief of Talaote, making himself subservient to the life-force by first claiming his father's most junior wife, Rankwana, as his wife on ascension to the throne. This may not be a crime, but Sebembele made the blunder of exposing "the secret that the fifth son, Makobi was his own child and not that of his father" (2). Soon after he makes the second blunder: "In a world where women were of no account," writes Head, "he said truthfully, 'the love between Rankwana and I is great'" (3). The effect of this statement was a split in the society. While one camp backed Sebembele, claiming Rankwana "is a lovely person, deserving to be the wife of a chief" (3), Head comes down hard in her assessment of women when the second camp asserts that Sebembele "must be mad" (3) because they feel "a man who is influenced by a woman is no ruler. He is like one who listens to the advice of a child" (3). Rankwana's father echoes this view when he says "Women never know their own minds" (4). If this judgement seems harsh, it is only because, as Head notes in "Witchcraft", "men never looked up as far as a quiet, sensitive face that might have suffered insult or injury. The only value women were given in society was their ability to have sex: there was nothing beyond that" (49). This view is, one may argue, society speaking through the male, but Head hastens to correct this misconception when, in "The Special One", Mrs Maleboge says, "Gaenametse has a very bad husband. He is off from woman to woman, but we are praying about the matter.' and she didn't have to add that women are just dogs in this society. I believed her then" (83). Whereas Gaenametse's husband is the one who hops from one woman to the other, the conclusion the narrator draws is that the women who allow him to come to them are the ones causing the trouble in Gaenametse's marriage. Is Head saying that, even when men err, women are to blame, especially by asserting through the men in "Deep River" that "women have always caused a lot of trouble in the world" (6)?

The answer is yes and no, at least in Head's eyes. In spite of the fact that when in the end Sebembele abdicates the throne and leaves the society with Rankwana, the people retort ambiguously, "It's Sebembele we love, even though he has shown himself to be a man with a weakness[...]" (6) and "The old men[...] say they lost their place of birth over a woman" (6), and though Bessie Head writes that, Sebembele "looked at them for a long moment. It was not hatred he felt but peace at last. His brothers were forcing him to leave the tribe" (5), it is Sebembele who takes the decision to leave. He charts his own course.

Sebembele had the free will to choose his fate. This is vital to the life-force, for if we allow ourselves to regard any person as so much material for us to manufacture into any shape that happens to suit our fancy, we are defeating the purposes of the life-force. We are assuming that the person does not know his/her own aims and aspirations, and that we do. This is wrong because every being feels the drive of the life-force and we cannot feel it for him/her.

The most potent force in nature is human will, and all honest civilisation, religion, law, and convention are an attempt to keep this force within beneficent bounds. What corrupts this civilisation, religion, law, and convention are the constant attempts made by individuals (like Garesego and Lesego of Head's stories) to thwart the wills and enslave the powers of other individuals. The powers of some men, and of their public analogue, the patriarchal society, become instruments of tyranny in the hands of those who are too narrow-minded to understand law and exercise judgement, and in their hands, law becomes tyranny. And what is a tyrant? Quite simply, as exemplified in Head's "Life", a person (Lesego) who says to another person (Life), "If you go with those men again, I'll kill you" (43). It usually

comes to this at last: the phrase “he/she has a will of his/her own” has come to denote a person of exceptional obstinacy and self-assertion. And even persons of good natural disposition, if brought up to expect such deference, are roused to unreasoning fury, and sometimes to the commission of atrocious crimes, by the slightest challenge to their authority. This tyrant is the kind of man I call “that man”.

“That man”: a being of destruction upon the earth who corrupts and destroys anything in his hands. Bessie Head writes that “there are really only two kinds of men in society. The one kind created such misery and chaos that he could be broadly damned as evil” (“The Collector of Treasures” 91). The force that drives this kind of man to these things is his greed and irresponsibility. Bessie Head, laying the foundation for the behaviour of Garesego (the archetypal “that man”) writes, “If one watched the village dogs chasing a bitch on heat, they usually moved around in packs of four or five. As the mating progressed one dog would attempt to gain dominance over the festivities and oust all the others from the bitch’s vulva[...]like the dogs[...]that man”] accepted no responsibility for the young he procreated” (91). The force of life, which drives him to accomplish things, is ultimately a force of defilement and death. Paul Thebolo says to Garesego, ““You defile life, Garesego Mokopi. There’s nothing else in your world but defilement”” (100). A typical “that man” has many excuses for his actions, but ultimately his actions lead to destruction. For instance, when approached by Dikeledi for financial help with Banabothe’s school fees, Garesego retorts, ““Why don’t you ask Paul Thebolo for money? Everyone knows he’s keeping two homes and that you are his spare”” (99). There is something of the Nietzschean in Lesego and Garesego, the principal characters in “Life” and “The Collector of Treasures” respectively, who cherish the dream of the superman. Head writes of the two, “then one evening death walked quietly into her bar. It was Lesego, the cattle man” (41) and “Garesego’s obscene thought process was his own undoing. He really believed another man had a stake in his hen-pen and like any cock, his hair was up about it. He thought he’d walk in and reestablish his own claim to it” (101). According to Head, “since that kind of man was in the majority in the society[...]he was responsible for the complete breakdown of family life” (91).

Through these men, one who kills and the other who is killed, Head confirms that “that man” justifies his own destruction through a set of rules and principles that is created by tradition, colonialism, and himself. In other words, this kind of man is blinded because he sees his actions as a means of life, and this vision leads to his destruction. In “Life”, Lesego made three pronouncements about the household:

He took control of all the money. She had to ask him for it and state what it was to be used for. Then he didn’t like the transistor radio blaring the whole day long.

“Women who keep that thing going the whole day have nothing in their heads,” he said. Then he looked down at her from a great height and commented finally and quietly: “If you go with those men again, I’ll kill you.” (43)

He killed Life for not adhering to these rules and was jailed for five years.

In “The Collector of Treasures”, Garesego

came home at sunset and found everything ready for him as he had requested, and he settled himself down to enjoy a man’s life. He had brought a pack of beer along and sat outdoors slowly savouring it while every now and then his eyes swept over the Thebolo yard[...]Dikeledi] noted that Garesego displayed no interest in the children whatsoever. He was entirely wrapped up in himself and thought only of himself and his own comfort. (102)

He was killed that night.

Neither man had to end up like this. Lesego’s friend, Sianana says with deep sorrow, ““Why did you kill that fuck-about? You had legs to walk away. You could have walked

away. Are you trying to show us that rivers never cross here? There are good women and good men but they seldom join their lives together. It's always this mess and foolishness..." ("Life" 46). In Garesego's case, "Any tenderness he offered the children might have broken [Dikeledi] and swerved her mind away from the deed she had carefully planned all that afternoon. She was beneath his regard and notice too for when once she eventually brought her own plate of food and sat near him, he never once glanced at her face" ("The Collector of Treasures" 102). Lesego needed to "walk away" and Garesego needed to show "tenderness". They did not. In other words, a man like Garesego does not have to be perfect to be tuned into the life-force. All that would have been required would have been for him to clear up the confusion of his present feelings, thoughts, and moods. In fact, he did not even have to clear up such confused concepts of male superiority ascribed by a male-oriented society. All he needed was to realise that he is confused, that he cannot fulfil the expectations heaped on him by the same society, one of them being to provide for his family, and reach out in action, thought, and desire for help. But being a typical "that man", all his actions do is put him on a road leading to his destruction and death.

Garesego suffers to be degraded until his vileness becomes so loathsome to the woman he oppresses that she is forced to reform it. I believe man was created to have his successes and failures, but only if he would respect the aspect of the life-force which requires him to venerate woman, motherhood, and the family. I also believe the beauty of creation is that reality is happiness, and the life-force that drives a person will provide a way for him/her to do anything that leads to that happiness. But the tragedy of a man like Garesego is that he painstakingly struggles against happiness by fearing truth and holding on to misconceptions ascribed by tradition and colonialism.

Head is acutely conscious of the impacts of tradition and colonialism on Batswana men:

Batswana men could be analysed over three time-spans. In the old days, before the colonial invasion of Africa, he was a man who lived by the traditions and taboos outlined for all the people by the forefathers of the tribe. He had little individual freedom to assess whether these traditions were compassionate or not—they demanded that he comply and obey the rulers, without thought... British colonialism scarcely enriched his life. He then became "the boy" of the white man and the machine-tool of South African mines. African independence seemed merely one more affliction on top of the afflictions that had visited man's life[...]. Men and women, in order to survive, had to turn inwards to their own resources. It was the man who arrived at this turning point, a broken wreck with no inner resources at all. It was as though he was hideous to himself and in an effort to flee his own inner emptiness, he spun away from himself in a dizzy kind of death dance of wild destruction and dissipation. ("The Collector of Treasures" 91–92)

Ever since, men seem to be in a constant learning process and are ignorant of the realities that surround them, such as the cunning of women.

Some men, on the other hand, can be like the deceitful woman and exploit the vulnerability of women; one such man is Kegoletile, the principal male character in Head's "Snapshots of a Wedding". Apart from the interesting anthropological description of the traditional marriage ceremony, Head also depicts cunning male exploitation of societal dynamism and women's folly in "Snapshots of a Wedding". Three variables worked in Kegoletile's favour. First, Neo's relatives "were anxious to get rid of her; she was an impossible girl with haughty, arrogant ways. Of all her family and relatives, she was the only one who had completed her 'O' levels and she never failed to rub in this fact" (77). Secondly, the society had changed and Kegoletile "knew that he was marrying something quite the

opposite [of Mathata], a new kind of girl with false postures and acquired, grand-madame ways. And yet, it didn't pay a man these days to look too closely into his heart. They wanted as wives, women who were big money-earners and they were so ruthless about it!" (78). Thirdly, though Neo knows she stands a better chance, because of her education, over Mathata, who was uneducated and who could only ever aspire to being a housemaid, and because "girls like [Mathata] offered no resistance to the approaches of men; when they lost them, they just let things ride" (77), Neo's relatives let her know they favoured Mathata and "the debate we have going", says her aunt "is whether a nice young man like Kegoletile should marry bad-mannered rubbish like you. He would be far better off if he married a girl like Mathata, who though uneducated, still treats people with respect" (78). Preying on Neo's anxiety, and being fully aware that marriage is popular because it combines the maximum of temptation with the maximum of opportunity, Kegoletile also got Mathata pregnant. Note that Kegoletile, like Garesego, controls the sexuality of his women, but while the latter is killed for being sexually overbearing, the same sexual behaviour in the former is condoned by the women. Kegoletile's maternal aunts see him as a responsible man, worth obeying, simply because, unlike Garesego, he takes responsibility for Mathata by paying a R10.00 a month maintenance fee while planning a future with Neo. So while Neo's maternal aunts counsel Kegoletile to plough and supply them with corn each year, Kegoletile's maternal aunts say to Neo, "daughter, you must carry water for your husband. Beware, that at all times, he is the owner of the house and must be obeyed. Do not mind if he stops now and then and talks to other ladies. Let him feel free to come and go as he likes..." (79). For me, this passage depicts the dual role of women in their own oppression and the ultimate inferiority. Kegoletile, being a cunning man, is aware of and duly exploits this fact. True, the aunts were speaking as women would in society, but this is a clear encouragement of the polygamous ways of Kegoletile.

One explanation might be that the aunts in "Snapshots of a Wedding" represent the old order, whereas Lesego and Dikeledi, who punish their wayward partners, represent the modern man and woman respectively. If this is so, Head would be saying, though men are dominant their position of power over women is not absolutely secure, especially when women speak from a modern perspective. In other words, men's dominance is safe only from a traditional perspective but is insecure in modern times because political development in modern times has made it possible for women to challenge men's dominance. Is this a question of power, a question of wrestling with patriarchy? In "The Collector of Treasures" Head depicts men as sexually overbearing and equates their sexual behaviour, in a negative sense, with that of dogs and pigs. She attacks sexual dominance, using the image of castration—the physical emasculation of the male—to point out that it inflicts misery in the lives of the women and quite succinctly uses Dikeledi and the other four women prisoners in the story as representatives of a rebellion against patriarchy and sexual imbalance in traditional as well as modern Africa.

Head's use of the castration motif may suggest that dominance by men is related to their manhood. This image is used effectively in her novel *A Question of Power*, but she shows in the stories of *The Collector of Treasures* that the relationship between man and woman can be rejuvenating. Paul Thebolo is life-affirming and a representative of the "new kind of man". Paul Thebolo is depicted as emotional, co-operative, loving, and caring. Though these traits are generally classified as feminine traits, Paul's co-operative attitude is underscored by his helping "illiterate men, who wanted him to fill in the tax forms or write letters for them" (95). In this portrayal, Head shows a distinction between Paul and Garesego in relation to women—and men. There is a noticeable shift in portrayal of the male character, from being oppressive and dominant as a character (Garesego), to being helpful and tolerant

of women (Paul). Paul sexually treats women with tenderness and care: In his wife Kenalepe's words, "he takes care of that side too" (96). Paul's sexual prowess is also verified by Kenalepe during her dialogue with Dikeledi when she says, "'Paul knows a lot about all that[...]. I can loan Paul to you if you like'" (96). Head associates him throughout the story with power in the positive sense, specifically with power of virility. By so doing, Head draws attention to the virile imbalance between Paul, Garesego, and Life.

Bessie Head underlines her abhorrence of sexual promiscuity when she writes concerning Life's profession as a sex worker,

what caused a stir of amazement was that Life was the first and only woman in the village to make business out of selling herself[...]People's attitude to sex was broad and generous—it was recognised as a necessary part of human life, that it ought to be available whenever possible like food and water, or else one's life would be extinguished or one would get dreadfully ill. To prevent these catastrophes from happening, men and women generally had quite a lot of sex but on a respectable and human level, with financial considerations coming in as an afterthought. (39)

She describes her aversion to perverted sex when she describes the sexual demands of Gaenametse in "The Special One":

"She was driving the husband mad. She pestered him day and night for the blankets, and even wanted him to do it during the time she was having her monthly bleeding. Many women have killed men by sleeping with them during that time. It's a dangerous thing and against our custom. The woman will remain alive and the man will die. She was trying to kill the husband, so the court ruled that he'd better be parted from such a terrible woman." (84–85)

Bessie Head is, however, quick to point out the rejuvenating usefulness of wholesome sex in the same story. She writes, "'Even old women like Mrs. Maleboge are quite happy. They still make love.'... 'When you are old,' she said, 'that's the time you make love, more than when you are young. You make love with young boys. They all do it but it is done secretly. No one suspects, that is why they look so respectable in the day time'" (84). Sex is important to the fulfilment of the life-force and engenders a situation of mutual complementarity.

In such a relationship the man and woman must act as guides to each other. In "Heaven Is Not Closed", Head creates an interface between traditional African religion and Christian religion, represented by Ralokae and a missionary man respectively. Although the story is centred on Galethebege, a Christian woman, it is also about lives of men like Ralokae steeped in traditional African religion. Ralokae typifies men in most African societies at the time, who did not wholly embrace the Christian religion and remained loyal to the old African traditional religion and customs. His brother says, "'I was never like Ralokae, an unbeliever, but that man draws my heart. He liked to say that we as a tribe would fall into great difficulties if we forget our own customs and laws'"(8). As the story unfolds, Ralokae's loyalty to his customs is challenged by Galethebege, whom he wants to marry, but due to her devotion to the Christian religion would prefer to be married in church according to Christian custom. Ralokae asserts his position "very quietly and firmly": "'I took my first wife according to the old customs. I am going to take my second wife according to the old customs too'" (9). Even though the missionary priest rejects Galethebege's request to be married according to Setswana customs, she and Ralokae eventually get married according to Setswana customs.

What the action of Galethebege proves is that the life-force, a necessity to man, also needs intellect. Intellect is the key that allows man to have a greater understanding of his environment, and allows man to survive from the physical world. Galethebege was caught

between her devotion to the Christian religion and her affections for Ralokae. But when Ralokae argued that, “The God might be alright, he explained, but there was something wrong with the people who had brought the word of the gospel to the land[...]. They had brought a new order of things into the land and they made people cry for love. One never had to cry for love in the customary way of life” (9–10). Galethebege concluded, “What could a woman do with a man like that who knew his own mind? She either loved him or she was mad. From that day on, Galethebege knew what she would do. She would do all that Ralokae commanded as a good wife should” (10). In this story Head reinforces the integrity of traditional African religion through Ralokae but more importantly, the intellectual need for a life-force. In “The Village Saint”, Mompoti says, “I’m sorry...I never do anything without first consulting my wife...” (18). In both these cases, the upholder of the life-force—Galethebege and Mompoti—seeking greater purposes in their lives requires an intellectual guide to lead them to greater things in life. Therefore, a life-force with some intellectualism is needed in life to strive for a higher status. This brings me to my final question: what then is this higher status, and how have Bessie Head’s short stories helped in locating it?

It is evident that instances of the life-force abound in Bessie Head’s short stories. It is also evident that she believes in the powers of life-force to make life more pleasant for any human being. For instance, Bessie Head believes sex is vital to life, and that it regenerates both man and woman. At the same time, Head abhors promiscuous sexuality—the killing of Life and Garesego testifies to this belief. Also, most of Head’s short stories seem to suggest that a person’s free will is responsible for his/her fate. She proves this with Sebembele and Galethebege. Head proves that men like Garesego (the prototype “that man”), with his little mind, cannot succeed on his own; he requires the greater intelligence (of women) to guide him. The same is true of women like Life. This does not, however, mean neither can strive for self reliance: Life almost succeeds. Head warns that as long as a man or a woman struggles against standing on his/her own feet, s/he will cling to an outside authority and rely on an externalised god to take the place of a benign partner, and this is life-threatening. This is true of Dikeledi who goes back to the wayward Garesego. Above all, Head’s short stories warn that it is wrong for man to unconsciously claim, like Kegoletile, that it is to his disadvantage to grow and to his advantage to remain statically in the status quo. Such thinking will never allow man to unravel the joys of the life-force.

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Appendix: References to Light in the Bible

All citations are from the *King James Bible* (<<http://www.jesus-is-lord.com/thebible.htm>> 20 January 2006).

1. Eph. 5.1–2: “Walk as Children of Light 1 Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; 2 and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us”

2. Ps. 27.1: “1 The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”

3. Isa. 60.1–2: “1 Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. 2 For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth,...”

4. Mic. 2.1: “1 Woe to them that devise iniquity, and work evil upon their beds! when the morning is light, they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand.”

5. Gen. 1.3–4: “3 And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. 4 And God saw the light,...”

6. Num. 8.1–2: “1 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 2 Speak unto Aaron, and say unto him, When thou lightest the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light...”

7. John 1.4–5: “4 In him was life; and the life was the light of men. 5 And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended...”

8. Ps. 104.2: “2 who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain:...”

9. Job 3.4–5: “4 Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. 5 Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it;...”

10. Lev. 24.2: “2 Command the children of Israel, that they bring unto thee pure oil olive beaten for the light, to cause the lamps to burn continually.”

Poetics of Madness: Representation of Psychic Disturbance in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

Tiro Sebina

There is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better. (Adorno 25)

This paper considers the depiction of psychic disturbance in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*¹. The reading is premised on the understanding that Head's complex novel is a representation of the experience of colonial trauma. Neurosis or psychic disturbance in its relation to dispossession and exile is a crucial ingredient of *A Question of Power*. No other work in the body of modern African literature dealing with the subject of mental disturbance depicts the intricacy and complexity of psychic disintegration as powerfully as *A Question of Power*. This study examines the way Head orchestrates novelistic techniques to depict the experience of subjection to power domination and the paranoia that it engenders. It assesses how Head uses the idea of psychic disintegration to aestheticise the constellation of colonial delirium in Southern Africa. It is important to assess Head's treatment of the conflicting modes of colonial subjectivity and the psycho-dynamics of colonial trauma.

A Question of Power, as a novel, addresses some of the most acute and obdurate ethical, social, and political dilemmas of our time and the strenuous conditions of our world. In a world that is driven by the urge to dominate and conquer, a world in which fear, insecurity, anger, frustration, and despair have become globalised, the key questions posed by Head in *A Question of Power* remain pertinent and unresolved. The dehumanising propensities of power are evident in current violent conflicts. *A Question of Power* is a fictional representation of a specific experiential instance of psychic, racial, spatial, cultural displacement and dislocation. The novel is a psychodrama that depicts a woman's agonising search for a place and an identity within the confusing spectrum of Southern Africa torn apart by power tensions.

The narrative depicts the neurotic life of Elizabeth, an exiled South African woman living in the village of Motabeng in postcolonial Botswana. The contradictions addressed in the work are filtered through her troubled consciousness. The protagonist in the process of the story undergoes a period of acute mental distress with repetitive cycles of nervous breakdown, from which she recovers more apprehensive about the world around her. The story of Elizabeth is that of a woman who triumphs over suffering, a woman who liberates herself from abjection, depression, and dependency on powers that seek to nullify her individuality and self-possession. The novel plumbs the depth of her psychic life, chronicling her psychic tribulation and her eventual transcendence of the mental condition.

Elizabeth survives and transcends a harrowing experience and achieves some form of spiritual growth. In the gruelling process of her epic battle with the forces that invade and upset her consciousness, she comes into possession of certain life-sustaining truths. She makes a transition from psychic paralysis to a particular form of philosophy and praxis. Elizabeth opts out of the clutches and seductions of power by re-envisioning a world of related equals who naturally sustain each other. She attains a level of consciousness in which she aspires for the possibility of a human society in which the interests of race, gender, caste, class, and nationhood do not determine human interaction. She manages to disentangle

¹Hereinafter cited in text as AQP.

herself, psychically and physically, from the stranglehold of the “shut-in worlds” that threaten to dehumanise her. (AQP 38) She leaves apartheid South Africa whose mad politics is the cause of her torment in the first place.

Elizabeth relocates to Botswana where she endures excruciating psychic agony. As she grapples with the complex challenges of settling in her adopted country and finding psychosocial purpose, her neurosis plays itself out. Elizabeth is disturbed by her mental retentions of South African life; her psyche cries to be cleansed of the incubus of racism and sexism. The residues of the contempt, shame, melancholy and despair that blighted her life in South Africa haunt her. Elizabeth’s neurosis is the dramatization of attempts to reconcile the ambivalent and contradictory racist and sexist attitudes bequeathed to her by the racially polarised South Africa, her unhomely place of birth. The attempt to reconcile her psychic complexes and come to terms with her traumatic past constitutes the strivings at the core of the symbolic nightmarish passages of *A Question of Power*.

By delineating the arduous and complicated process of intellectual and spiritual disentanglement of a lone woman whose psyche has been severely damaged by colonialism, the novel draws attention to the trauma of marginalised and alienated individuals. The philosophical investigation in this work is channelled towards the condition of the subaltern, the disenfranchised and displaced individuals in a disjunctive society fractured by divisions of race, class, gender, and religion. The novel speaks against political oppression and the violation of human essence. Head marshals her novelistic resources to propagate for the recognition of the overlooked and brutalised individuals, society’s most contaminated products and those who bear the most livid marks of history’s brutality. Head, through the character of Elizabeth, depicts the plight of individuals and groups who bear the brunt of subjugation, domination, displacement, and social marginality. Head is concerned with the representation of the physical and mental battering of ordinary people and the issues of male brutality, racial animosity, and prejudice. Elizabeth is presented as anxiously occupying a liminal region of un-belonging and estrangement and cultural homelessness. She endures an appalling synergy of discriminations and violent exclusions.

Drawing closely from her autobiography and particular experience of mental affliction, Head in *A Question of Power* has crafted a poetics of madness. She has constructed a text that speaks to and about the trauma that marks the history of Southern Africa. In this apocalyptic novel, she has constructed a grammar of psychosis or syntax of the nightmare and the hallucination to portray the destructive effects of insane political systems on the individual and collective consciousness. Head successfully translates her own personal experience into a gripping narrative of postcolonial anguish that provides a valuable examination of personal and political madness. Through a very personal experience, Head shows the social and spiritual consequences of a power structure based upon a philosophy of domination and oppression.

The novel is intriguing and ground-breaking because it forces the reader to reconsider the limits of the social as it is conventionally known and it opens possibilities for the rediscovery of alternative conceptualisations of political and personal agency within the civic and the psychic realms. Head’s novel stands out, in fiction depicting women’s depression, because it is a novel about the reconstitution of a damaged self. It is a novel of recovery and resolution of neurosis. It depicts a woman on the road to dis-alienation and decolonisation. The neurotic woman at the centre of the narrative recovers and plays a purposive role in the community. She defends herself against mental abuse and resists the demons of personal depression, the onslaughts faced by her exilic and gendered identity. She gets out of the asylum, assumes her responsibility of motherhood and a position of a prophetic figure, a self-appointed conscience of her adopted community. She also takes up horticultural activity and

becomes part of an agricultural co-operative.

Head uses the notion of mental distress to depict an unworkable situation in which the oppressors are caged in their superiority, and the oppressed are incarcerated in their inferiority, and each group behaves in accordance with a neurotic orientation while being locked in mortal combat with each other. The novel privileges and problematises the psychic dimension and evokes a colonial condition in which the colonial subject is, in Fanon's words, "over-determined from without" (116) and "sealed in a crushing objecthood" (109) by forces bent on annihilating her sense of self. It is a testimony of colonial dislocation that shows how colonial oppression displaces and defiles personhood. *A Question of Power* also addresses ethical matters, including issues of compassion, equality, fellow-love, the opposition and collusion destructive and creative forces, the complex relations between life-denying and life-enhancing powers.

The profundity of *A Question of Power* lies in the fashion in which it engages with issues of power, abjection, loneliness, exile, and more particularly insanity in the context of the gruelling realities of racism, sexism, poverty, political domination, and oppression. *A Question of Power* can fruitfully be read as a meditation on the experience of dispossession and dislocation, at both psychic and social levels. Head exposes the warped thought patterns and the dissolute practices of society's would-be rulers, saviours, and leaders in terms of a brutality and depravity that is at the expense of creative powers and the subjectivity and lives of others. In more specific terms, *A Question of Power* can be read as a dramatisation, in psycho-existentialist terms, of the destructive nature of apartheid as a socio-political system. The novel depicts and indicts the apartheid system's disastrous effects of threatening human sanity and disrupting social harmony. Head in this work denounces racial discrimination and social segregation. She preaches against a life obsessed with the pursuit of material wealth and power. She condemns oppression and exploitation in all its facets. The novel shows how the socio-political system of apartheid creates tension in society. In a sense it illuminates the madness of racism and articulates the problem of colonial political and cultural alienation. What Head demonstrates in this novel is that the conflicts, vicious tensions, and crudities of life within a racially polarised society can lead to a dissociation of the psyche. She denounces the mobilisation of the power of intimidation, exclusion, and discrimination of the racist regime in South Africa as a practice of psychic tyranny or terrorism. While the novel reconfigures a specific Southern African socio-autobiographical psychodrama it also speaks against political oppression and violation of human essence in internationalist and universal terms.

Elizabeth's psychic disturbance, which is described as a "tumultuous roar of mental confusion" (AQP 160) is a form of confrontation with the evil of racism. The narrator describes Elizabeth's psychic disturbance as a "nightmare world of no compassion that lasted for three years[...]a rigmarole of hell" (AQP 200). Head sustains this domain of nightmare until the resolution of the novel when Elizabeth realises that "she has emerged into a state of lofty serenity" (AQP 202). The nightmare is expressed in scatological and pornographic images describing the antics of fantasy characters. Elizabeth is subject to monstrous abuses, cruelties, and obscenities. Head merges realism and surrealism to depict the exceptional suffering and the terrible testing time that Elizabeth undergoes. The account of frightening insanity to which Elizabeth is prey is interspersed with lucid and humane moments and cordial encounters. The novel has properties that mark it as a psychodrama, a village romantic tale, and a gothic African horror narrative. Head successfully fuses some of the conventional ingredients of novel writing such as a coherent concept of characterisation, plot development, symbolic imagery, dialogue, and description of setting and circumstances to create a novel of remarkable intensity.

A Question of Power is an open-ended, self-reflective, and writerly text that is constantly and unpredictably revising itself. Head constantly re-works and re-configures her terms and expression in such a way as to introduce uncertainty into habitual readings while simultaneously showing how the fixtures of history can be expressed quite differently. Head makes Elizabeth to question herself and to underscore the inexplicability of the experience she is describing. Elizabeth is continually asking “why”. She is desperate to find answers for the horrors she is experiencing. The self-reflexiveness of the novel manifests itself in the way Head creates a protagonist who is a teacher by profession and is able, through self-reflection, to find her way “back to land”, like a shipwrecked sailor. Elizabeth survives madness and tells her story. As an educated woman who likes reading literature and philosophy, she has the intellectual resources to comment on her own predicament. Like a diary writer she can engage in self-diagnosis and reflect upon her experience.

The novel coaxes the reader to try and reconfigure the aetiology of her neurosis. The exploration of Elizabeth’s inner psychology does not neglect issues concerning social injustice. The psychic molestation that Elizabeth experiences is linked to her marginal status as a political refugee from South Africa. She exists on the periphery of Motabeng’s highly structured society. She is excluded by her inability to understand the local language and the complexity of village life. The deep feeling of shameful with which Elizabeth is overwhelmed is that she is of mixed racial parentage, that she is not a “true” African. This troubling thought recurs throughout the novel.

Elizabeth’s distress arises in part from the environment and in part out of the purely personal way in which she responds to that environment. The symptoms of instability in perceptual identity, in racial identification, in place, in name, and in sexual identity manifest themselves in the form of psychosis and hysteria. In Elizabeth’s nightmarish transportations, the temporal and the spatial categories are collapsed, and points far apart in place and time are comprehended in a single act of consciousness. The past situation, apparitions of distant and improbable figures, are experienced as though they were present. She experiences a neurotic regression in which “things I’d never have thought of get to dominate my mind and create neurotic fears. They just move in[.]” (AQP 192). She is demented by the torture of those obscene hisses. Her consciousness is invaded by terrible sounds of barking all the time. Elizabeth is tormented by phantoms that perform obscene acts of multiple sex, incest, and bestiality.

Two male apparitions and a female one turn the protagonist’s mind into a battlefield as they contest for domination and possession of her personality. The soul personalities invading Elizabeth’s consciousness are named Dan, Sello, and Medusa. Dan is presented as the most demonic of these phantoms. Dan Molomo, a nationalist who is also a wealthy cattle baron in the real life of the novel, appears in Elizabeth’s nightmare world as a “big-time guy from hell”(AQP 126) or a horrible super-slick Casanova who is always “flaying his penis in the air” and boasting about his depraved sexual exploits (AQP 13). Even his harem of seventy-one women and numerous male sexual cohorts cannot satisfy his gargantuan sexual appetite, as his massive member is always erect (AQP 128). Dan’s brand of mental torture is linked to the harrowing exclusions that Elizabeth experienced in South Africa. His indefatigable lust seems to embody racist stereotypes of the African males as bearers of irrepressible libidos. Dan taunts Elizabeth by performing obscene sexual acts in her presence.

Elizabeth’s psychic haunting by malevolent and sex-mad Dan is offset by another phantom, Sello, whose apparent purity of spirit is suggested by his early appearances in a monk’s robe. At times, however, Sello lapses into the bestiality of Dan, and thus the two phantasms become merged as horrors in her mind. Sello is presented as alternating a life of sainthood “with spells of debauchery” (AQP 175). The two phantoms appear to be so real to

Elizabeth that she talks to them and feels her life literally threatened by them. The two figures persecute Elizabeth in ways that are sexist, racist, and xenophobic.

Sello and Dan use every power they have to destroy Elizabeth psychologically. In the process she loses her sanity, and to regain it she must ward them off. Medusa, the female accomplice of the two male apparitions, also unleashes mental thunderbolts that worsen Elizabeth's hysteria. Medusa taunts Elizabeth with her sexual profligacy and derides her for not knowing any African language. Elizabeth experiences hallucinations in which propaganda records and repetitive images of filth, evil, and perversity shatter her sanity into a thousand fragments. Her head is replete with shifting ghostly shapes and images crashing her in a slow death dance. She feels as if a terrible weight was exterminating her. She has a feeling of being stuck in an abyss of utter darkness in which all appeals for mercy, relief, and help were simply a mockery. She is troubled by the "swirling turmoil in her mind" (AQP 174). The experience of going insane manifests itself in her untoward actions of snapping at people and often walking past them without returning greetings. She also consistently collapses with a "high delirious fever" (AQP 164).

The two key points in Elizabeth's three-year sojourn into an infernal hell of depression are her dramatic nervous breakdowns. The two breakdowns occur in public. In the first occurrence Elizabeth goes to the village shop to buy a radio. A shop assistant directs her to an office at which she has to record her purchase for purposes of radio licensing. In the process of this seemingly innocuous bureaucratic procedure, she snaps and starts hurling racist abuse at Batswana: "Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana! Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana!" (AQP 51). During the second breakdown she takes a mad bicycle ride to the post office and sticks a note on the wall bearing the unutterable words, "Sello is a filthy pervert who sleeps with his daughter" (AQP 175).

Elizabeth becomes a medium through which tyrannical and destructive forces construct and enact their truths and ideologies at the expense of her active consent and involvement. Sello uses her to oppose Dan's authority and power, which is based on the distorted self-image of possessing a phallus and a black skin: "The two men were conducting...a fierce struggle over her nearly dead body" (AQP 187). Elizabeth sees herself as "an open territory easily invaded by devils. They just move in, carry on, mess around...and smash everything up and then they grin..." (AQP 192). According to Caroline Rooney, Elizabeth "experiences directly in herself the operations of an evil 'master-minding' by the soul personalities of Dan and others. She becomes the appropriated medium in which rudiments of philosophies, ideologies, mythologies, religions...are concretely and painfully experienced" (109). The apparitions that haunt her represent "the power people who lived off other people's souls like vultures" (AQP 19).

The opening pages of *A Question of Power* present a fairly naturalistic account of Elizabeth's early life in South Africa and her exile in Botswana. Elizabeth has internalised the sexual and racial exclusion mechanisms of white apartheid and reproduces them in a distorted form as markers of her insecurity in her new home. Elizabeth first experienced feelings of alienation in racist South Africa, where she was born in a mental institution as a product of an interracial liaison that was considered to be illegitimate and illegal. The twin stigmas of being mixed-race and being predisposed towards madness had a devastating effect on Elizabeth. The experience of racial animosity and prejudice that marred her childhood constitute the bulk of memories that plague her. In South Africa Elizabeth, as a person classified as coloured, suffered racial discrimination. Her experience of living in South Africa is likened to "living with a permanent nervous tension...[and being]... the butt of hate and loathing" (AQP 19). As an orphaned, adopted, and rejected product of miscegenation, a daughter of an "insane" white mother and an entirely unknown black father, Elizabeth was at

the receiving end of all sorts of prejudice, occlusions, and stigmatisation.

Elizabeth emerges from the excruciating and taxing mental anguish that the narrator describes as her “nightmare soul journey” with a rehabilitated consciousness (AQP 35). From the “dark, heaving turmoil” (AQP 50) of her life had arisen “a still, lofty serenity of a soul nothing could shake” (AQP 202). In her moments of recuperation she would soothe her mind by reading *The Gift of a Cow*, a classic Hindi novel that exalts the lives of poor people. She also finds relief in reading and meditating on Buddhism and Hinduism and interrogating some of the premises of Christian theology. Reading literature and making fragmentary notes in her diary are some of the strategies that form part of Elizabeth’s healing process. As Elizabeth sits quietly and peacefully sipping a cup of tea in the evening trying to “jot down some fragmentary notes” (AQP 205), her original thoughts are blocked by lines from a D. H. Lawrence poem as they well up in her consciousness. The title of the poem, “Song of A Man Who Has Come Through”, provides a hint that Elizabeth is inclined to see herself as a survivor. She is also beginning to think about recording her recollections of her turbulent life. The lines quoted below of the poem that comes to her mind suggest that she has attained a new level of consciousness:

“Not I, but the wind that blows through me! A fine wind is blowing the new direction of time. If only I let it bear me...If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and am borrowed by the fine wind that takes its course through the chaos of the world...Oh, for the wonder that bubbles into my soul...”. (AQP 205)

Elizabeth evolves a secular utopian philosophy of internationalism based on the inclination to be ordinary. She realises that the only alternative to destructive power is a connected “ordinariness”. She calls for universal egalitarianism, yet the eerie insights that the ordinary are those who are utterly and perpetually vulnerable to the depredations of power renders such a dispensation unlikely: “How easy it was for people with soft, shuffling, loosely-knit personalities to be preyed upon by the dominant, powerful persons” (AQP 12). This observation shows that Elizabeth continues to be disenchanted and uncertain about the realisation of her ideal of universalism based on love and the wish to be ordinary. In the opening lines of the novel, Sello is depicted as an embodiment of humility and modesty: “He seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements. ‘I am just anyone’.[...]the kind of humility which made him feel, within, totally unimportant, totally free from his own personal poisons—pride and arrogance and egoism[...]” (AQP 1). The attitude she adopts embraces compassion, humility, and equality. She embraces the land and throws off her marginalised status. She returns to the land through the help of peasants, revolutionaries, and practical visionaries. Her trusted friend is a village woman called Kenosi. Kenosi is depicted as a character of quiet strength. She is hardworking and has a “knowingness and grasp of life” (AQP 90). The relationship between Kenosi and Elizabeth is one of mutual respect, genuine solidarity, and co-operation.

The other character who provides support for and inspires Elizabeth is Eugene, an Afrikaner from South Africa. Eugene is the founder and principal of the Motabeng Secondary School, who initiated various co-operative projects in conjunction with the school. The narrator informs us that “he had a thousand and one things going on at the same time[...]youth-development work-groups, building, carpentry, electricity, printing, shoe-making, farming and textile work, stonemasonry, wool-spinning and weaving[...]” (AQP 68). He is depicted as the centre of purposeful, expanding, and hopeful activity. He is an example of men who “opposed death, evil and greed and have surrounded themselves with creative ferment” (AQP 57). As an outsider Eugene identifies and empathises with Elizabeth in her distress: ““I suffer too, because I haven’t a country and know what its like. A lot of refugees have nervous breakdowns””, he diffidently confides in Elizabeth (AQP 52). It is

practical visionaries like Eugene and ordinary, non-elite people like Kenosi who provide models for her concept of global egalitarianism based on values of objective complementarity. She conceives of “Love as two people feeding each other, not one living on the soul of the other”(AQP 11). She becomes inclined to a flexible, heterogeneous, and de-centred praxis based on small-scale agrarian ventures, localism, and egalitarianism. Head’s novel, I would argue in conclusion, is consequential because it offers a nuanced treatment of the issues of mental oppression of the colonised, advocates for solidarity among the oppressed, and emphasises the power of mass unity. The model of the envisaged fruitful and creative co-operation of ordinary people on the basis of non-hierarchical relationships is the kind of experiments going on in Motabeng village. The experiments are those “of tentative efforts people of totally foreign backgrounds made to work together and understand each other’s humanity[...]" (AQP 158).

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Character, Role, Madness, God, Biography, Narrative: Dismantling and Reassembling Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

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This paper is not a scholarly analysis of *A Question of Power*. It is a rather personal account of an engagement with Bessie Head's work through a collectively created play about her life and death. During the academic year 1995–1996, students at the University of Botswana, enrolled in a drama course entitled E423, “The Theory and Practice of Drama”, for which I was the course tutor, created the play through research and improvisation. The play, entitled *The Death and Life of Bessie Head* (henceforth *Death and Life*), provides my point of entry for this paper and probably the only unifying reference point for a series of otherwise fragmented insights about Head's life and its relationship to *A Question of Power*.

This paper does not, however, focus on such pedagogic issues as the usefulness of drama for students' reading, interpreting, and researching the humanities. I have tried to do that elsewhere, with respect to the same course.¹ Instead I focus on the heuristic value of the play-creation process for my own understanding of Bessie Head, and the article ranges, I suspect disconcertingly, from the anecdotal to the theoretical.

The collective nature of the play-creation process makes it necessary for me to use a rather vague “we” throughout the paper which sometimes refers to my work with the whole group of nineteen students, and sometimes with selected members, tackling specific aspects of the play. The nature of workshopping a play demands remarkable levels of mutual trust and consensus in order to create a unified art work with which all individuals can identify. Building that trust was an important aspect of the early workshopping process, and I hope partly justifies my rather presumptuous use of “we.” I cannot legitimately speak for the students, but neither can I delete their role in my engagement with the text. The paper is thus at one level a rather unconventional contribution to criticism of African literature from a reception theory viewpoint, but at a pedagogic level is also a lengthy acknowledgement that I probably learned more from my students than they did from me.

Most articles about literature assume an undifferentiated, unproblematised readership. This tendency is related to the European roots of the novel, which ascribe the genre to an individual private reader absorbing the experience within a secluded, domestic environment. Ironically, such atomisation creates, when multiplied, an anonymously mass readership. In an African context, I have found that alternative, communal traditions of artistic reception can carry over to the novel. At the University of Botswana, it is not uncommon to find a mini-*kgotla*² of literature students reading a novel collectively under a tree, identifying passages for discussion. This paper describes an even more extreme case of collective/selective “reading” of a novel, *A Question of Power*, by a group culturally close to the society about which the author wrote. The obstacles and bridges arising between the text and a specific set of readers illuminates the way socio-cultural norms hinder and contribute to an understanding of the text.

By the beginning of the 1995–96 academic year, the E423 course had been running for three years and had established a pattern in its practical component, whereby the students workshopped a play through research games and improvisation, using this relatively democratic process as an experience for learning both drama skills and theoretical issues related to drama. The topic for the play was/is chosen by the students. Previous plays, *You Are Not Dead*, *Proper Channels*, and *I Love My Country But...* had focused on fairly

¹David Kerr, “Drama as a Form of Action Research: The Experience of UBE423 at the University of Botswana,” *South African Theatre Journal* 11.1–2 (1997): 133–54.

²Traditional adult male assembly.

controversial legal and social issues concerning the rights of women and of the “Basarwa” (San/Bushmen).

In the 1995–96 group there was a hot debate, fracturing mainly on gender lines, about which topic to promote. Most of the women wanted to do a play about Bessie Head, since 1996 was to be the tenth anniversary of her death, and a biography about her life had conveniently just been published.³ Most of the men in the group, led by two mature students from the Kalanga people of Northern Botswana, wanted to do a play about ethnic prejudice in Botswana. Since there were more women than men in the group, the Bessie Head topic won the vote, but it was agreed, for reconciliation purposes, that issues concerning ethnic prejudice should receive prominence in our interpretation. Many students, familiar with *The Collector of Treasures* and *Maru*, realised that issues of ethnicity, marginality, and alterity were in fact central to Head’s work.

The Eilersen biography became a major research source. Since there was only one copy it was not possible for the whole group to read it. Instead the group was given a synopsis of the major events, and interested individuals were able to borrow the text to examine some parts in detail. In addition, there were many people in Gaborone who had met Bessie Head during her years of exile in Botswana, and these were able to provide valuable anecdotes, gossip, and information about her tastes, speech habits, and mannerisms. Finally, the novels, short stories, letters, essays, and autobiographical writings were themselves very important sources, particularly *A Question of Power*.

Since one of the motivating reasons for choosing the play was to celebrate the anniversary of Bessie Head’s death, the first improvisation which we did was an imagination exercise, where each actor imagined her/his own death. Different actors then described the experience to the rest of the group. One or two actors were encouraged to dramatise the imaginary death, by using fellow actors as spirits of the after-world. One of these was a very effective and moving creation. Though we did not know it at the time, it was to become the hub of the whole play.



Bessie signs her statement

The large group split into smaller groups in order to improvise different scenes from actions, such as her betrayal of Pan African Congress (PAC) comrades after she was interrogated by the South African police, or her decision to leave her husband Harold and flee with her son Howard to Botswana.

We began to realise that these debates could become the basis for the fundamental conflict in the play. We decided to start the play with Bessie’s death, show her being judged by ancestral spirits, and have Bessie’s interrogation

by the “Great Spirit” as a frame for linking the different scenes in Bessie’s life. For this we needed two actors to play Bessie: one to portray her alive, from the age of fourteen until her death, the other, on stage throughout almost the whole play, portraying Bessie’s ghost, narrating the gaps between episodes, and explaining her actions to the spirits. A small script committee, consisting of myself and two students, began the task of creating a script out of

³Gillian Stead Eilersen, *Bessie Head. Thunder Behind her Ears: Her Life and Writing* (Portsmouth, NH; London; Cape Town: Heinemann, James Currey, David Philip, 1995).

the research and improvisations.

The play's theological apparatus was established with little time for thought. I was in favour of having a masked, female, Great Spirit supervising over the other spirits. My gender preference was partly pragmatic (male actors were in short supply in a group which had to rely on doubling up to fill the play's more than fifty roles), but partly aesthetic/ideological in that a female "God" (perhaps modelled on the Hindu goddess Kali) might provide an interesting set of moral/theological challenges to the audience. The group of actors, however, including the women, disliked this idea, and voted to cast one of the mature men, with a rich bass voice, to play the part of the Great Spirit. The other spirits were played by both male and female actors, wearing sinister, glittery black costumes made from cut-up plastic bin bags, and with each actor carrying a candle.

The decision to have a male Great Spirit with a very authoritative voice greatly affected the moral tone of the play. We were anxious not to give *Death and Life* an excessively Christian theological apparatus, given Bessie's ambiguous attitude to Christianity from her youth and her interest in oriental religions. The spirits were meant to give the impression of African ancestral spirits, especially the Great Spirit with his mask modelled on a Congolese ancestral masquerade design.

Some aspects of the theological apparatus, however, had obvious Judaeo-Christian overtones, reinforcing the Old Testament *gravitas* of the Great Spirit's resonant male voice. The main suspense in the play was whether Bessie would be admitted to the realm of the ancestors (off-stage right through an illuminated, pink plastic shower curtain) or be condemned to the pit of oblivion (off-stage left in darkness). This rather un-African, pseudo-heaven/hell trope was partly modelled on medieval Christian morality plays, but more proximately on Brecht's radio play *The Trial of Lukullus*.

As the play took shape, I came to realise that the patriarchal Great Spirit had its own aesthetic advantages. Much of *A Question of Power* assumes the form of a medieval morality play with titanic clashes between the forces of good and evil; the spiritual Judgement structure of *Death and Life* made it possible to reflect that moral paradigm, but also to follow Bessie Head's example in subverting it. In particular, it became possible to mirror Bessie's opposition to a patriarchal, omnipotent God and to make the conflict between her and the Great Spirit into a micro-drama animating the play's frame. At one point Bessie's ghost, echoing the transgressive unconventionality of the live Bessie, accuses the Great Spirit of being cruel for allowing her to go insane (*Death and Life* 37). The defiant self-defence, which Bessie's ghost offers at the end of the play—"God lies in the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity" (*Death and Life* 47)—forces the group of spirits to reassess the basis of their own power.

The moral ambiguity which we tried to establish in *Death and Life* reflects a similar ambiguity (or sometimes deliberate aesthetic/moral confusion) found in *A Question of Power*. This in turn is reinforced by a tendency for Head to establish harsh sets of binary categories, only to obfuscate or subvert these distinctions in other parts of the novel. The categories are based on race, nation, gender, sexuality, and normality, none of them discrete, but each



The Great Spirit, the living Bessie, and Bessie's ghost

dialectically interacting with the others.

The category of race is perhaps the most obvious, owing to the circumstances of Bessie's birth, which provided the trigger for the plot of *A Question of Power*, as they did for *Death and Life*. The group discussed race at some length, in the context of South African apartheid, Botswana, and even the dynamics of our own group, with its "white" teacher and "black" students, the latter assuming different racial roles—"white", "black", "Asian", and "coloured". Acting always involves an element of psychic risk. Playing with racial stereotypes allowed us the even more dangerous, but I believe ultimately liberating, opportunity to explore a variety of ethnic identities, as a way of vicariously experiencing the pressures unleashed by racial aggression.

The group debated whether Bessie was racist (both against whites and blacks), and if she was, whether that was not inevitable, given her childhood experiences. This debate became built into the moral framework of the play, and led to our collectively growing awareness that race is not an absolute biological given, but more what Appadurai calls an "ethnoscape", or an imagined world "constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the world" (296–97).



Bessie taken from her foster mother

Closely associated with the category of race is that of "tribe" or ethnicity. The moment in *A Question of Power* where Elizabeth, under stress from her imagined bewitching, feels that "the evils overwhelming her were beginning to sound like South Africa from which she had fled" (57) became a crucial discussion point for the group. A debate, vigorously led by the mature Kalanga men in the group, centred on whether Tswana prejudice towards "lesser tribes" (Bakalanga, Bakgalakgadi, and especially Basarwa) could be equated with apartheid.

We explored Bessie's experience as a "coloured" (particularly the teasing experienced by Howard in Francistown) and how this encouraged the recently arrived refugee to project her alienation onto the Mosarwa protagonist of *Maru*, Margaret Cadmore. We read these literary narratives of power and ethnicity alongside more historical/sociological overviews of ethnic power relations in Botswana.⁴ The general conclusion was that though ethnic power relations could not be equated with the institutionalised injustice of apartheid, Head had indeed put her finger on ethnic-based "radical inequalities" in her adopted country. This seemed to be confirmed by audience reactions to Bessie's *Ghost's* lines when she explained her feelings about Howard being called a Mosarwa by Tswana children: "I was horrified that Howard was being victimised for his colour. The viciousness was the same as in South Africa, from where I had fled. But this time the faces were black" (*Death and Life* 37). The predominantly Tswana audience at the first performance received the lines with a kind of astonished catharsis.

The exploration of Bessie's difficult entry into Tswana society helped us understand her psychological alienation. We realised that her status as refugee, deprived for many years of citizenship, was itself alienating. Even for people without Bessie's load of crippling psychological baggage, "crossing boundaries always means," as Ahponen says,

⁴Kenneth Good, "At the Ends of the Ladder: Radical Inequalities in Botswana," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 31.2 (1993): 203–30; Margo Russell, "Slaves or Workers? Relations between Bushmen, Tswana and Boers in the Kalahari," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 2.2 (1976): 175–97.

“facing[...]mental boundaries” (171–30). Our early conceptualisation of this was within a simplistic centre/periphery paradigm, but we came to realise (especially from a reading of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*) that Head’s concept of Serowe was not that of immutable and peripheral isolation, but one which embodied powerful traditions of syncretism, and linked to a region able to absorb “imperialists, missionaries, migrant workers, prostitutes, school children, teachers and armies that score Southern Africa” (Nixon 244).

Head’s alienation from society in Serowe was, in fact, caused not only by ethnic and linguistic isolation, but also by gender problems. The debates in our group about gender and sexuality were probably even more animated than those about race and ethnicity. I expected the men in the group to react negatively to Head’s view that one of Africa’s main social defects is “the African man’s loose, carefree sexuality” (*A Question of Power* 137). In fact, the men *were* prepared, albeit with different degrees of enthusiasm, to accept a negative view of male sexuality within Botswana gender relations.

What did cause problems was the language that Head sometimes used to convey her ideas. The young man assigned the part in *Death and Life* of the Serowe head-teacher who sexually harasses Bessie at first point-black refused the role when he realised that it stimulates Bessie’s Ghost to say the lines “Such a man felt he was the only penis in the world and the women should just scramble for it” (*Death and Life* 33). The actor was only persuaded (by the whole group) to continue with the role when he realised the lines were taken straight from Head’s text (“The Collector of Treasures” 91) and became convinced that they were perfectly compatible with his own strict, Christian principles.

Another cause of anxiety in the group was the link between sexuality/gender and ethnicity. A close reading of *A Question of Power* convinced us that Elizabeth’s apparently paranoid visions are largely motored by the obsessive replaying of a psycho-drama which links sexuality with ethnic stereotypes. The diabolic Dan character is a gross travesty of white South African stereotypes of rampant black manhood—in Calvin Hernton’s words, “the dark sexual monstrosity that rages in the racist’s concept of himself” (89). The Sello character, by contrast, appears to be the antithesis of Dan, the type of saintly black male Head calls “a poem of tenderness” (“The Collector of Treasures” 92). Many of the most horrific moments in Elizabeth’s visions come when Sello drops his saintly disguise and assumes the devilish attitudes of Dan.

The female *dramatis personae* in Elizabeth’s psycho-drama also seem to reinforce white stereotypes of African sexuality. Medusa, in addition to being Sello’s goddess-like consort, appears as a terrifying and destructive witch. Apart from Medusa, there are Sello’s seventy-two prostitutes, with their voracious sexuality, embodiments of what Zoë Wicomb calls “black woman as icon of concupiscence” (6). Sello taunts Elizabeth on the grounds that, as a coloured, she does not have the authentic erotic allure of African women (*A Question of Power* 127).

The passages in this section of *A Question of Power* seem to recreate a battle of stereotypes. Elizabeth, as a result of her childhood exposure to the problems of inter-racial taboos about sex, and of the sexual harassment she experienced in Serowe, has introjected some of the most virulent apartheid stereotypes about African sexuality. Her efforts to exorcise those preconceptions leads to the psychic strife which contributes to her breakdown.

The psychic dangers which confronted Bessie in this scene made themselves felt on the group. Having a white director/co-ordinator asking black actors to camp up racially biased sexual stereotypes put all our earlier work of mutual trust under a severe test. A lot of normally unspoken fears, self-doubts, and taboos had to be brought to the surface. In the end, I believe we all learned a lot from the experience, and as so often happens in drama, the work of playing through taboos was curiously emancipating.

The “madness” scenes in *Death and Life* also caused the group the most difficult interpretative and practical problems. One dramaturgic trope which we found very useful was that of confinement. Throughout the play, Bessie is subjected to acts of confinement—in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital after her birth, in Nellie Heathcote’s house during the 1948 Natal racial riots, at St. Monica’s home after she ran away from school, in a police cell when she was interrogated by the apartheid authorities over her involvement in the PAC, by the police over the Serowe Post Office poster incident, and, climactically, in Lobatse Mental Hospital. Foucault’s words illuminate this: “Confinement is the practice which corresponds most exactly to madness experienced as unreason, that is in the empty negativity of reason” (116). The group did several improvisation games based on notions of space and confinement in order to work at the relations between reason and unreason, power and victimhood. These games helped us understand the words Head put into Elizabeth’s mouth: “‘The victim is really the most flexible, the most free person on earth. He doesn’t have to think up endless laws and endless falsehoods. His jailer does that’” (*A Question of Power* 84). The association Head diagnoses between power, reason, political institutions, and male aggression allows the apparent negative of her madness to become a positive, what Huma Ibrahim calls a “resistance/space” where “through her created nightmare of Medusa[...she[...]]can begin to understand [her] victimhood” (58). It feeds the psychic energy which allows Elizabeth/Bessie to embrace the negation of the power categories and through this rebellion seek a utopia based on “ordinary” human bonds of love and mutual respect.

In the “mad” scenes, we decided, for the sake of economy, and following Lloyd Brown’s suggestion that “Dan and Sello are[...]opposite sides of a single moral awareness” (178), to elide Sello and Dan into one character, a devil/saint in a red monk’s robe. Medusa wore a flamboyant red twirling costume and black make-up. Three prostitutes (Miss Sewing Machine, Miss Womb, and Miss Wriggly Bottom), with outrageously whorish costumes, contributed to Bessie’s torture. The costumes and make-up had to be very carefully harmonised in order to make clear to the audience the three categories of character simultaneously present on stage—the dead (Bessie’s Ghost and the Great Spirit) with black as the dominant colour, the living (such as Bessie and Howard) in motley subdued costumes, and the figments of Bessie’s imagination (Sello, Medusa, and the prostitutes) predominantly in red.

My references to costuming brings me back to the formal aspects of *Death and Life*. It will have been noticed that I glide rather carelessly in this paper between talking about Elizabeth as *A Question of Power*’s protagonist and Bessie/Bessie’s Ghost, the twin protagonist of *Death and Life*. This brings us inevitably to an examination of the relationship which Head’s novel and the *Death and Life* play have, not only to each other but to (auto)biography.

One of the interesting features of *A Question of Power* is that Head chose not to use first person narrative, unlike Dambudzo Marechera, who did use the first person for his autobiographical description of a descent into mental hell, *The House of Hunger*. The creation of Elizabeth allows Head some distance between herself and the experiences which brought her to Lobatse Mental Hospital. This distance means that *A Question of Power* seems a much more controlled and “realistic” work than *The House of Hunger* with its multiple layers of flashbacks and its densely metaphorical stream-of-consciousness prose. At the end of *The House of Hunger*, the reader feels s/he is still lost in the protagonist’s self-lacerating delirium. At the end of *A Question of Power*, the famous, almost oceanic, rhyming epiphany, “she placed one soft hand over her land” (206), successfully exorcises the demons in the central part of the novel. Elizabeth’s survival of mental hell and her artistic recreation of it re-links her to the “normal” world of family, friends, and agricultural development. In a quite

literal sense of the word, the novel is therapeutic.

Of course, all autobiographical works, even those using a non-fictional “I”, in fact create a semi-fictional protagonist. Thus the distinctions between autobiography, the autobiographical, first-person *roman-a-clef*, and third person narratives are porous. Non-fictional biography, such as *Thunder Behind her Ears*, introduces an element of mediation. *Death and Life* tried to negotiate the tension between biography and fiction by using Eilersen’s account and some of the students’ oral research into Head’s life in order to create a yet more mediated type of narrative—the theatricalised biopic. The employment of Bessie’s Ghost as a narrator turned the narrative from third person (in both *A Question of Power* and *Thunder Behind her Ears*) into the first person. Where, for example, the novel says “she [Elizabeth] hated in a final way and loved in a final way” (77), Bessie’s Ghost says, “I hated in a final way and loved in a final way” (*Death and Life* 33). And so on.

There was no attempt, however, to be faithful to *A Question of Power*; many phrases came from other Head sources, and about 85% of the dialogue and 70% of Bessie’s Ghost’s narrative were invented. The whole text, mostly in English, but with two scenes in Setswana and some phrases in Afrikaans and Zulu, was an exercise in artistic *bricolage*. The script committee’s task of creating words which could seamlessly blend with Head’s own was itself a rigorous linguistic exercise in identification with Head’s sensibility.

What *Death and Life* had in common with *A Question of Power*, as opposed to Eilersen’s biography, was an attempt to create a literary form which aestheticises Bessie’s emotional alienation. Where *A Question of Power* builds to a climax and a rather unexpectedly peaceful denouement upon Elizabeth’s release from hospital, *Death and Life* built to a climax at the ancestral spirits’ final judgement on Bessie’s Ghost. Just as the novel tries to reconcile the binary opposites of black/white, good/evil, power/weakness, man/woman, central/peripheral through the alchemic, transcendental, unifying power of art, the play made Head’s artistic creativity the resounding positive to outweigh the accumulated negatives of her life, and for this she is allowed to enter the realm of the spirits (*Death and Life* 49).

In one sense this ending is reductively artificial; theatrical conclusions usually are. The need to concretise (Bessie’s Ghost walking through the stage-right, illuminated shower curtain) entails gross simplification. But the naïve stage business acts as a correlative for complex issues which the play, Bessie’s life, and her work raise for the audience, and even more so for the play’s creators. As with the novel, the play—I suspect for the audience, I believe for the creators, and certainly for myself—was also therapeutic.

I am well aware that this account of dramatic creation has not engaged deeply with any one aspect of Head’s work. That is best left to specialised scholarly articles. Drama, of its nature, demands a broad interdisciplinary approach, linking psychological, literary, sociological, historical, and even economic insights. What I hope to have achieved by this narrative of a narrative of a narrative is to show an alternative way of reading Head, one in which communal creativity, dialectical, speculative debate, and contested interpretation can provide a tool for exploration, alternative to, but perhaps in its own way just as useful as, individual, theoretical/critical contemplation. What it lacks in accuracy and intellectual rigour I hope it gains in a quality also essential for authentic engagement with a text—the sense of danger which arises when preconceived notions are challenged.

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While reading Bessie Head I am often reminded of the sombre procession that escorted her to her final resting place. The procession was well over two kilometres long, and it contrasted sharply with the simplicity and poverty of the two-roomed brick “hut” in which Bessie spent her last days in Serowe. The whole village of Serowe seemed to have turned up to honour this simple woman who in her own way had made that village famous. It was not the village alone that was now honouring Bessie Head. There were hundreds of people from other parts of Botswana and from South Africa. Bessie Head’s funeral made news even in the apartheid papers of South Africa. As we perched ourselves on whatever mound we could find in that cemetery and listened attentively to the sermons and the eulogies, it dawned on me that this also was yet another crossing of boundaries by someone whose life had been characterised by the crossing of racial, political, and economic boundaries that separate people in Southern Africa.

Even in the short stories that she wrote early in her career, Bessie Head appears to be preoccupied with questions of belonging and of transcending geographical, ethnic, and community boundaries.¹ We see in one story (“Let me tell a story now...” 16–18) the absurdity of looking at one’s locale as the beginning and end of the whole world. Someone who has saved for and planned a holiday in Durban suddenly calls off the trip at the railway station because he will “not leave Cape Town and go gallivanting[...]in a foreign place like Durban[...].” (18). In the short story “Oranges and Lemons” (19–27), two pillars of society shatter their community: one suffers a cruel and senseless death, while the other experiences a shameful and moral downfall. The cruel death is all too real even in today’s South Africa where the newspaper headlines on crime appear to have been frozen in a time-warp going back to the 1950s. Quite early in her writings, Bessie Head had developed a keen sense of place and time and an understanding of the organic unity running through every community. The man who suffers a cruel and senseless death is also the kindest and most loved member of his community. Throughout his life “Old Ben”, a butcher’s messenger, makes sure that there is meat at the table of every one of the butchery’s customers, whether or not they were able to pay, “even if this kindness made ‘Old Ben’s’ pocket empty” (20). His hearty laughter turns Old Ben into a joyful presence whose entrance into any poor, poky, and stuffy little house comes “as though the sun was entering through the doorway” (20). Things fall apart when Old Ben is brutally murdered by young boys “who had recently formed themselves into a gang and he was to be their first kill” (20–21). The community has reached the end of its innocence. For every member of this community something vital and central to his or her sense of belonging has been shattered: “And the stunned crowd of people who gathered around the body of ‘Old Ben’ perhaps sensed this; that something hideous had been unleashed in their midst and would consume them all” (21).

The second incident to shake this community’s sense of belonging is the moral lapse of an otherwise God-fearing pillar of society. Jimmy Motsisi is a respectable family man who is one fine evening seduced by a gangster’s moll whose life-style is way above that of everyone else in the community where she lives. Poor, God-fearing and loving family man Jimmy fails to reach his home only a few houses away from the house of his temptress. His understanding and long-suffering wife does not nag him. She does not ask where he has been all night. All she says is, “Tell her not to smear your cheek with lipstick” (26). We see the boundaries of belonging being crossed here. In Jimmy’s case those boundaries have been

¹*Tales of Tenderness and Power*, ed. and introduction by Gillian Stead Eilersen, Oxford: Heinemann, 1989. All subsequent references to the stories will be cited parenthetically.

crossed so effortlessly that we begin to wonder if Jimmy had really belonged to his community in the first place. We wonder if indeed he had been the family man that his community had all along taken him to be. He had not belonged to the world of gangsters' molls either. Perhaps he was no more than your average run-of-the-mill pillar of society who belongs to the safe, untested world of moral indecision. His temptress naturally returns to one of the gangsters, who has meanwhile liquidated his rival. The moll lives happily ever after while poor, God-fearing and loving family man Jimmy Motsisi lands in prison. That is the price he has to pay for his naïveté.

The theme of belonging unites those of Bessie Head's stories set in South Africa with those set in Botswana. The unity in the short stories is also fostered by Head's own experiences, which make the stories strongly autobiographical. Bessie Head left South Africa as a young woman, but the discrimination and humiliation that South Africa represented in her mind never left her. That continuity is at the heart of the complexity and lyrical beauty of the novels *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1974). In the 1950s and 1960s, Botswana was a laid-back rural backwater, while South Africa was already in the throes of industrialisation. We see South African communities in the cities fast losing their organic unity, while communities in Botswana are held together by their attachment to their roots as well as by the demanding and harsh conditions of living that the natural environment of Botswana creates. In such an environment the bonds between people come into bold relief because other than such bonds, the environment has little else to offer. There is no distraction from the things that matter in life. Bessie Head brings this out in a short story appearing in a group entitled "Village People" (42–55). The piece itself is called "The Old Woman" (42–43).

In this story the central character, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Bessie Head herself, helps an old woman who has collapsed from hunger. The relatives of the old woman meet to decide on how to show their gratitude to this kind stranger. They come up with the idea of offering the stranger a pail of water. Their decision is based on the fact that they have seen the stranger pass by every morning on her way to the village well. This is one story where Bessie Head pays her most poignant tribute to the kindness and simplicity of the people of Serowe. The young woman who brings the stranger a pail of water keeps her face averted as she speaks through an interpreter: "Tell her the relatives discussed the matter. Tell her we had nothing to give in return, only that one relative said she passes by every day on her way to the water tap. Then we decided to give a pail of water. It is all we have" (43). In answer to this touching form of gratitude the stranger seems to be saying to the reader, "Tell them too. Tell them how natural, sensible, normal is human kindness. Tell them, those who judge my country, Africa, by gain and greed, that the gods walk about her barefoot with no ermine and gold-studded cloaks" (43).

In the works of Bessie Head human kindness enhances our sense of belonging. It builds a sense of community among people and creates a certain organic tie between people of different backgrounds. Bessie Head was to return to this important theme of the ties that bind people of different backgrounds again and again in her later work. We have here a motif which takes different shapes and sizes and still remains recognisable throughout all its manifestations.

In the story "The Green Tree" (45–47) we meet a protagonist who finds that dealing with the harsh external environment around him is a much less demanding task than dealing with the inner turmoil that the hearts and minds of human beings have to go through. This man's sense of belonging falls apart the moment he falls in love with a strange woman from another country. She clearly does not belong to his community, but does he? He only feels secure with the women of his community and yet he does not appear to love them, either. He

loves the stranger whose ways are not the ways of his people:

Everything I ever wanted I have had through force, cunning or calculation. Now I lie awake at night, craving something I fear to possess. Just as our cattle would go insane at the unaccustomed sight of a hill covered with greenery; so do I live in fear of the body of a woman that has been transplanted by upheaval and uncertain conditions into harsh and barren soil. (47)

The fear felt by the protagonist in this story would appear to contain something that touches Bessie Head herself. The reader would find it hard not to assume that the transplanted woman is Bessie Head. Most of the stories in *Tales of Tenderness and Power* do contain elements of an autobiographical reminiscence. It is as if Bessie Head was writing one major story in which she is the central character and then continually shifted the episodes the way a person using a computer might shift big chunks of document to fit into a newly discovered coherence. The protagonist of these stories sometimes calls herself Elizabeth and sometimes refers to herself in the first person singular. The voice we become familiar with is the one that also gives us the point of view of the unnamed narrator. In “The Green Tree” we are led to conclude that the woman from strange shores is Bessie Head herself. In the story that follows “The Green Tree”, we find that it is not a man who is mesmerised by a woman but a woman who is spell-bound by a man. The story is called “Tao” (48–55) after the name of the politician who represents the party of the aristocracy and the rich. Here the narrator falls head over heels in love with this fire-eating speaker. She tries to compare and contrast the nature outside herself and the nature within her. She speaks of the tender green things that sprout after any little rainfall. These tender green things die or fall asleep in the parched earth to await the time when the seasons might again be favourable to a new life, a new birth and a future growth:

They wait patiently. But the life force in man is too powerful. It makes the world tumble and fall to pieces about him. I have no courage in this upside-down world. I flee. I would rather efface myself than face the torment of a naked and unashamed desire for an unattainable man with the face of a brooding thundercloud. (55)

When this story is compared and contrasted with the novel *Maru*, we get the feeling that the outsider is attracted to powerful figures in society and is in turn the object of desire by the mighty. Tao is as powerful as the aristocrat Maru who marries the Mosarwa woman Margaret Cadmore in *Maru*. It would be idle to speculate on the loves and attractions that Bessie Head came across in Serowe. It would not be so idle to conclude that such loves and attractions played a major role in her literary career.

Outsiders have a way of breaking a community’s sense of belonging. They also have a way of uniting the communities they join by leading such communities into the future. They force such communities to revalue their cherished values and change what needs to be changed. In “The Woman From America” (56–60) the protagonist plays such a role. She forces the community to look again at its cherished values. What needs to be changed is now seen from an angle that allows the community to change it. In the story “Chief Sekoto Holds Court” (61–64) we find that the powerful chief and a healer save someone accused of witchcraft from the wrath of a mob that mistakes pneumonia for a disease created by a witch. In the story called “Property” (65–71) the man who refuses to treat his wife as a piece of property carries the day. He beats her up when she has really insulted him and ignores the inquiries of his in-laws when they build up a case for a material compensation for that beating. She returns to her matrimonial home without her relatives receiving the material compensation they were looking for. The man’s son turns out to be as progressive as his father.

The various characters walking the stage of Bessie Head's short stories ultimately prepare us for her novel *A Question of Power*. This novel is Bessie Head's most outstanding achievement. It is a masterpiece. In it we come across the good, the bad and the ugly of the external environment out of which the author's written work emerges. We are also forced to come to terms with those demons and those angels from a troubled and abnormal psyche in which the alternating moments of madness and sanity are real, as they were for quite some time in Bessie Head's life.² As in many forms of madness, we see in this novel a lucidity that surpasses all translucent forms of awareness. The very first paragraph of the novel makes us aware of this fact. The dominant motifs are those of the outsider versus the community that we have so far seen in the short stories we discussed earlier. Although the matrix of the novel still carries within it some autobiographical elements, the power behind the imaginative faculty at work is of a different and higher level than the one to which as readers of Bessie Head we would have grown accustomed. The narrative sophistication to be found in *A Question of Power*, as well as the flow of the prose, functions at its own plane of discourse. It has moved to a higher order than the one supporting the author's other achievements. We see in this novel that Bessie Head was a well-read writer. She had read far more than her level of formal education would have led us to expect. The philosophy coming into the visions of Buddha shows that Bessie Head understood the significance of the Indian philosophy she had read. We see in the figure of Sello someone who identifies himself with the universe rather than with his particular environment. He is a saintly figure who has looked upon all desires and found them wanting. He is someone whose existence transcends time. But is sanctity real? Can it be attained? Those characters who crowd Elizabeth's fantasy would seem to disagree. Those characters who also exist in Elizabeth's daily quotidian world would also seem to disagree. The "question of power" is a question of boundaries and of the enclosures that such boundaries create. It is a question of belonging. Elizabeth and Sello break such boundaries and such enclosures. They belong to all time and all communities. They are free.

²This fact was told to me at the very first meeting I had with Bessie Head at a friend's house in 1982.

Bessie Head (1937–1986)

Albert G. T. K. Malikongwa

I

Gone but yet still with us
A rare product
Forever to be remembered
Her intellect prodigious
Dropped and showered pearls of wisdom
Sanity, reasonableness and provocative challenges

Her works brilliant, forceful, penetrating yet innocuous
Capture the hearts of the literary world
Wherein they imbibe her wisdom
The philosophies of her creations
The Anglophones or Francophones
Cannot resist the touch of her Universatility

She is a true product of her times
Who cherished freedom and human dignity
To her last hour
Her simplicity, humility, modesty
Endeared her to the common folk
She belongs to a generation
Of great contemporary thinkers
And intellectual heavyweights
She has flung herself to world fame

II

Her works have transcended the racial divide
Through them gleam the greatness of our tomorrow
A jewel of great renown
Her works defy and outstep seasonal changes
Though the stretch of time separates us from her abode
And the invisible hand of the Almighty
Directs the pulse of the universe without a pause
Yet before us lies the spring of hope and continuity
For the secrets of her art, real and durable
So fondly and proudly treasure we
The memory of this great woman from Africa

Today and tomorrow and tomorrow
As she lies beneath the carpet of earth
And cannot adjust the lids or brackets of her eyes any more
Death failed to rob us or undo her works
For as she watches or peeps from heaven's gates
To gaze on earth's shadows

Of varied hues, her heart is ahum with joy
For her works remain forever a spring and fountain
To those with a thirst for knowledge and wisdom
She remains forever a beacon to the African Renaissance
And the vanguard of the dynamics of Africanism

Though the tempests of the hour
And rugged fronts of life and politics
Tried to ambush her real being
Her native self or personality tells the story
As she travelled across tracts of barren deserts
Traversing the entire sweep of wild bush
Or the rich bleak coloured soils of our land