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# LIVING ON AN HORIZON: THE WRITINGS OF BESSIE HEAD

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## ABSTRACT

LIVING ON AN HORIZON: THE WRITINGS OF BESSIE HEAD

Bessie Head's writing illustrates a rich fusion of styles, subjects and philosophical and literary influences. I explore this range by drawing both on postcolonial and feminist theories and on the variety of cultural references that Head acknowledges and that her writing evokes.

Postcolonial perspectives are used to confront Head's attention to the discursive foundations of social fictions, relations and identities. Postcolonial theories also shed light on the figurative resonance of Head's writing. Her fictional insights into power are extremely concrete, but also fathom many fundamental and enduring patterns of power and subject constitution. My emphasis on the breadth of Head's political vision leads to an exploration of universal and archetypal emphases in her work. Focusing on her alertness to ubiquitous social experiences, I consider her use of myths and trans-cultural fictions or storytelling modes to convey critical knowledge about her immediate world and the historical domains beyond it.

I also turn to postcolonial theories to examine Head's distinctive exploration of liberating subject positions, social exchanges and cultural encounters. Contesting the idea that personal and collective subjugation engenders an irreversible victimization, Head discovers inventive textual strategies for exploring liberating hybrid and reciprocal exchanges. These exchanges range from her celebration of hybrid subject positions for individuals and groups to the heterogeneity and admixture of her own literary themes and textual strategies.

By drawing on feminist theories, I show that Head's writing is sharply sensitive to the role of gender in interpersonal relationships, cultural fictions and the legacy of communication and writing in which she is situated. Head develops plots, themes and creative realms that unsettle male-centred narratives. Her multivocal plots, in particular, indicate the importance she attaches to configuring voices, stories, desires and creative realms that are suppressed by patriarchy.

While my analysis of Head's texts is influenced by current literary theories of representation and subjectivity, I foreground the particularity of the


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writer's perspectives. Focusing on her critical insight into her life experiences and the official positions available to her, I develop a biographical approach that is sensitive to the construction of life texts and author personae. My biographical reading draws on Head's large body of correspondence to analyze her autobiographical storytelling. I show that the author's autobiographical vision generates an idiosyncratic exploration of personal injustices as well as the broader processes they signal. I also concentrate on Head's indebtedness to Hinduism, showing that her recourse to eastern philosophy helped her to expand explorations of subjectivity, creativity and human experiences. It is stressed that Hinduism allowed her to explore existential questions and spiritual concerns in ways that are not always possible within cultural materialist frameworks.

A consistent focus in this thesis is the claim that Head produces fictions that function as compelling creative worlds. I therefore demonstrate that she resists certain influential ideas about the need for directly referential art in contexts of deprivation and injustice. By using language auto-referentially and symbolically, by drawing on resonant myths and by developing abundantly textured metaphors, Head produces fictions that manifest the notions of freedom and serenity she urgently endorses. I draw on critics who explore the productive roles of language and textuality to show that Head's fiction is as concerned with challenging the realities she confronts as it is with conveying visions of utopia.

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# CHAPTER ONE
# BESSIE HEAD'S "BROADER PLATFORM"

> No one could understand a word of what I was saying and even today there is a huge joke going the rounds - "It doesn't matter what Bessie says because no one will believe her." (Bessie Head in a letter to Randolph Vigne, 1991:150)

For some critics, Head's mysterious biographical circumstances have been an even greater source of fascination than her writings. Raised as an orphan in South Africa, she settled in an isolated Botswanan village at the age of twenty-seven. She wrote most of her published works in Botswana, where she lived off a meagre income supplemented by small-scale farming. Considerable speculation surrounds the circumstances of her birth. Head often claimed to be the child of a white mother who was committed to a mental hospital because of her relationship with Head's black father, the family's stable hand. Captivating many of her readers, this story shockingly configures the personal tragedies associated with apartheid South Africa.

The reception of Head's writing has varied. When it was first published, her work was relatively well-marketed and admired by readers abroad.[1] But she attracted less attention from South African critics than did other writers from the country. Her comparative neglect is largely a result of her deviation from existing political standards. Head's major writings were published between 1968 and 1984, a period when apartheid established rigid political standards for writers. Njabulo Ndebele explains this in the following way:

> In societies such as South Africa, where social, economic and political oppression is most stark, such conditions tend to enforce, almost with the power of natural law, overt tendentiousness in the artist's choice of subject-matter and handling of subject-matter. It is such tendentiousness which, because it can most easily be interpreted as 'taking a position', earns a work of art displaying it, the title of 'commitment' or 'engagement'. Clearly then, according to this attitude, artistic merit or relevance, is determined ...by the work's displaying a high level of explicit political preoccupation. (1984:44)

Lewis Nkosi's appraisal of Head's writing sharply reflects this privileging of a "high level of explicit political preoccupation" (Ndebele,1988:44). Insisting that she "is not a political novelist in any sense we can recognize", he lauds the political engagement of Alex la Guma[2] and argues that a "lack of political commitment weakens rather than aids Bessie Head's grasp of character" (1981:102).

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[1] See, for example, Charles Larson, who writes that "Bessie Head has almost single-handedly brought about the inward-turning of the African novel" (1974:521).

[2] La Guma is well-known for his overt political alignment. A member of the South African Communist Party, his frequently didactic fiction often represented left-wing politics.

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One aim of this study is to reassess ways in which Head's writing represents and responds to "the political". I argue that it is often because she avoids the progressive political models of the sixties, seventies and eighties that she develops especially acute explorations of power and resistance. Head confronts many of the political relationships and situations that other South African writers explore. But she also interprets universal patterns associated with them, as well as the breadth of social and individual quests for freedom. Although this global perspective suggests an abstract vision, it is firmly grounded in relationships and subjects that the writer intimately knew. Head developed philosophies about oppression, resistance and social and creative freedoms in ways that were intensely personal and grounded in everyday experiences.

While Head's approaches to politics initially alienated her from a progressive cultural mainstream, they have become increasingly important to South African explorations of the discursive and psychological implications of power, and to varying and contextualized perceptions of freedom. These explorations have helped to generate a new interest in the politics of Head's writing, an interest reflected in the publication of her lesser-known works[3] and detailed textual interpretations of her writing.[4] Head scholarship has also been augmented by bibliographies,[5] archival work like Gillian Stead Eilersen's literary biography (1995) or the publication of a relative's testimony in a well-known South African literary journal,[6] and suggestive thesis research. Much of the recent criticism deals with encoded and compound meanings and composite textual strategies, precisely the areas that baffled or exasperated an earlier tradition of left-wing criticism.

It is noteworthy, however, that prescriptions and expectations persist - both locally and abroad - in readings that seem to acknowledge relative freedoms and multiple meanings. In a critical discussion of these, Linda Beard identifies the homogenizing trends of Bessie Head criticism where the "preoccupation with a single voice or an absolutist reading" displaces the ways that Head "problematizes the unitary 'political' reading, the 'feminist' analysis, the anthropological or allegorical critique, and so forth" (1991:582). As Beard shows, Head's writing defies boundaries, cultural expectations and univocality to

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[3] These include *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989), *A Woman Alone* (1990), *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965-1979* (1991) and *The Cardinals* (1993).

[4] Among these are innovative contextual studies by critics like Zoe Wicomb (1990), Linda Beard (1991), Dorothy Driver (1996), Rob Nixon (1996), Huma Ibrahim (1996) and Maria Olaussen (1997). Although many of the recent critics are not South African, their theoretical perspectives resonate in much recent South Africa criticism.

[5] See Gardner and Scott (1986) and Mackenzie and Woeber (1992).

[6] See Kenneth Birch, "The Birch Family: An introduction to the White Antecedents of the Late Bessie Amelia Head" in *English in Africa*, 22, 1, 1995.

challenge a canon of literary criticism that, even when it seems alert to complexity, continues to reduce multivocal texts. With its abrupt shifts, unexpected arguments and immense breadth of vision, her writing eludes the levelling procedures of past and present critical orthodoxy.

These disruptive effects are similar to those that Jacqueline Rose ascribes to the writing of the American poet, Sylvia Plath:

> Execrated and idolised, Plath hovers between the furthest poles of positive and negative appraisals; she hovers in the space of what is most extreme, most violent, about appraisal, valuation, about moral and literary assessment as such. Above all, she stirs things up...she lays bare the forms of psychic investment which lie, barely concealed, behind the processes through which a culture...evaluates and perpetuates itself. (1992:1)

Rose's seminal study of Plath's oeuvre offers a stimulating source for exploring Head's provocative writing. This is not because her study provides avenues for carefully comparing the two writers' texts. Rose, who has written about Head, implies that detailed searches for resemblance may lead to a simplified universalism.[7] But she does acknowledge connections between their writing strategies when she claims: "One of my paths to Bessie Head was via Sylvia Plath" (1994:417). My approach to Head is indebted to the interpretive directions that Rose opens up. As she claims about Plath, Head is an elusively subversive writer who "haunts" both her readers and the general wisdom of her cultural and political milieu. Specifically, Rose suggests leads for confronting a central preoccupation in Head's writing: the intricate relationship between the writer's biographical experiences and her writing, a relationship including critics' responses to the nexus of biography and fiction and the way these responses have reconfigured her texts. My exploration of Head will consequently draw on Rose's interpretive approaches to a writer who "haunts our culture", who is "a shadowy figure whose presence draws on and compels" (1992:1). This critic's broad method for disentangling her subject's texts from a web of self-authorizing criticism will be central to my methodological approach to Head's writing. In particular, I explore Head as the enigmatic "she", codified and appropriated in ways that often reveal more about the locations of her interpreters, than about the intricacies of the writer's own texts.

I also consider Rose's attention to the way a writer's shifting subject positions and eclectic deployment of literary sources, genres and styles unsettles ideas about her linear

[7] In "On the Universality of Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*", Rose writes that comparisons between the two writers are "hardly more promising" than criticism that explains Head's writing through psychological diagnosis (1994:406).

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ideological development and political partisanship. I therefore concentrate on Rose's perception of Plath's "inconsistencies", defined in the following way: "to say that Plath is not consistent is not to say that she does not articulate something very precise about some of the most difficult points of contestation in our contemporary cultural and political life. Plath is neither one identity, nor multiple identities simply dispersing themselves. She writes at the point of tension - pleasure/danger, your fault/my fault, high/low culture - without resolution or dissipation of what produces the clash between the two" (1992:10). It is significant that, even certain critics who acknowledge Head's path-breaking views about human experiences tend to dwell on the *problematic* status of contradictions in her work. Huma Ibrahim (1996), for example, frequently condemns Head's idealistic representation of the past, while Maria Olaussen (1997) is critical about her vacillating gender politics. I suggest that the intricacies of Head's writing can be explored not by normatively assessing her vision, but by showing how she constantly explodes cultural certainties to allow contradictions to function in arresting and imaginative ways.

This seems to imply that her writing will always pose insurmountable interpretive challenges. Following a strategy adopted by Beard, however, I trace a "chorus" of "multiple voices" (1991: 580) that generate the writer's creation of narrative. I show that these voices cannot be reduced to what Rose describes as "multiple identities simply dispersing themselves", and that it is their amalgamation that allows Head to write constantly at "the point of tension". In the chapters that follow, I examine how these intersecting voices generate complex narratives. At this stage, however, I identify their centrality in Head's oeuvre and also signal trajectories traced throughout this study.

A persisting and over-riding focus for Head is "the spiritual", the domain of awareness and experience that influences moral perceptions and points to esoteric concerns with personal well-being. This concern has been least extensively explored by critics.[8] It is also one that obviously distances the writer from traditions of emphatically secular and realistic writing in South Africa. Many critics have dwelt on her cultural materialism, rigidly situating her moral and artistic concerns in a contingent history. Yet moral, artistic and philosophical ideas in Head's writing confront particular histories, social circumstances or political relationships at the same time that they explore ubiquitous ones. Moreover, spiritual themes and states influence many of Head's other preoccupations. It is

[8] Considering the centrality of Head's emphasis on spirituality, it is striking how few critics have focused on this area. Studies by critics like Caroline Rooney (1991), Linda Beard (1991) and June Campbell (1993) illustrate different and innovative efforts to confront Head's "spirituality".

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her distinctively spiritual conception of individual liberation or moral good, for example, that inflects her exploration of secular and social experiences, her views about the powers of art, and her unique messages of emancipation.

Another voice to which I return is autobiographical. Various forms of self-narration have been central to South African writing, with writers turning to testimony and autobiography to present realistic accounts of individual experiences in relation to social process.[9] In contrast to this, Head's self-narration has often been anti-mimetic. It has formed a self-consciously textual strategy for questioning cultural assumptions about human and social experiences. Disavowing a tradition of documentary representation, she often questions consensual truths about her life experience, and transforms her self-narratives into dissenting knowledges or liberating artistic visions. Thus a consideration of how biography can assist criticism, of the relationship between biographical criticism and autobiographical writing, and of the flexible possibilities of self-narration are all crucial to a study of Head's narrative strategy.

A voice that is easily acknowledged by critics is the voice of the political commentator, the socially marginal writer who contests the power relationships in which she is situated. While earlier critics highlighted discrete social identities (like gender or race), more recent approaches dwell on the compositeness or incompleteness of Head's politics. These often indicate that her oeuvre does not exhibit a neat evolution towards "political maturity" or the salient unified voice of, for example, the feminist writer. In developing this analysis of Head's politics, I exploit a range of theoretical ideas that explore the politics of representation and the acquisition of social identities. Focusing on Head's attention to the cultural sources of individuals' senses of "self", I draw on postcolonial and feminist theories dealing with interdependent connections between socially-defined "margins" and "centres". Head's efforts to discover personal, social and creative freedoms are strongly echoed in postcolonial and feminist concerns with unsettling official identities and power relationships. I show that these theories can help to explore her ideas about power and freedom, but at the same time, remain alert to the distinctiveness of her own thinking. It is for this reason that I stress the writer's primary attention to "the spiritual". While postcolonial and feminist theories offer analytical procedures for exploring Head's textual interrogations of power, I consider the singularity of her entry into a matrix of power, subjectivity, knowledge and creativity.

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Head is frequently seen as a writer who, because of her fraught life experiences, responds with unrelenting gravity to moral and political concerns. The predominant tone of her work is often seen as bleak and despairing, and the assumption is that her "miserable and melancholic life" is starkly registered in her writing (Rasebotsa, 1996:1). Her imaginative vision is defined primarily as a reproductive response to known worlds, rather than as a creative envisioning of unknown ones. For many critics, therefore, her texts inhabit a very different space from literary practices that emphasize writing's immanent or transcendent force. In the chapters which follow, I show how textual pleasures and politics exist in a continuum in Head texts, with literary "play", immanent meaning, and an expressive creativity being crucially related to the writer's moral and political preoccupations. Head's exultant satisfaction in creating self-sufficient meanings through writing, language and symbol is often connected both to political concerns (a triumphant discovery of socially-subordinate and counter-hegemonic knowledges) and spiritual ones (an affirmation of the individual's psychic potential to find inner freedom).

This interface is evident in the author's Romantic assumptions about her creativity. Highly self-conscious about her unique suffering, Head often affirms the idea of the artist as a reclusive seer who is receptive to visionary realms of which most remain ignorant. Significantly, Romantic notions of artistic production link moments of inner distress to profound elation, a connection with which Head was obsessed. Romantic ideas about the generative implications of personal torments also signal the spiritual parameters of creation, isolation and art. As I shall show, Head's writerly position was often "paranoid". Perceiving relationships, events and encounters which others could not see, she vigorously defended her "vision" in the face of others' banal "truths". Romantic claims to visionary enlightenment are connected to spirituality in the way they suggest forms of epiphany and sacred enlightenment. Head was often emphatic about these connections. At various stages she claimed to be a reincarnation of certain Hindu gods, or validated her paranoia by maintaining that this was a characteristic of divinity.[10] Whether shaped by political urgency or spiritual belief, Head believed in the power of her writing to disclose experiences and perceptions beyond an immediate and known world.

Although I isolate currents in Head's work, I try to avoid circumscribing her texts. Describing the synthesizing effects of academic discourses, Sande Cohen writes:

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[9] This has been a consistent feature of South African writing, but it is particularly pronounced in the autobiographical works produced by black writers in the fifties, and in the upsurge of black women's writing in the 1980s.

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"Academia's role is to stabilize contradictions by producing pseudocollective meanings – 'painlessness' for the mind, as Nietzsche put it" (1988:15). Her conclusions are particularly apt in relation to Head, who painfully explores and unravels, constantly upending her abstruse "conclusions" at the same time that she struggles to articulate them. In the face of the excesses and flagrant paradoxes of her fiction, criticism is forced to confront its limitations, to acknowledge how it mutes, homogenizes and rewrites the compound creative processes of fictional texts. One way in which I trace these recondite processes is by turning to a variety of interpretive sources, including other fictional texts. Another approach to complexity involves an emphasis on coding and textual processes, rather than on discrete signifiers. Cohen explains the usefulness of this emphasis:

> The conceptual value of code is simply that it always refers to the act of coupling signifiers to something else (the signified, meaning, concepts) in which grammatical, syntactical, semantic, ideological and cognitive selections are made pertinent. To focus on codings is to isolate the seams where criticism can read back to the valorization of the signifier and there think out how thought has been organized to commit itself to ideals, theories and the like. (1986:22)

Many of Head's critics have focused only or primarily on signifiers. Connecting details in her texts to a world beyond it, they often reveal less about Head's writings than about particular theoretical interests. Reading beyond the signifier uncovers the routes through which signifiers generate meaning. It can also locate moments when signifiers are wrested from established routes to represent what is unexpected, compound and new. Reading coding processes can therefore lead to more receptive views about the distinctiveness of writers' texts.

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**Writing and "Spirituality"**

In their study of literary representations of the breadth of human experiences, Peter Malekin and Ralph Yarrow (1997) reactivate the superannuated concept of "spirituality". Drawing attention to a legacy of reason that has evacuated its creative and subversive potential, they develop an argument that is refreshingly commonsensical. "Current thinking about literature", they argue, "for the most part views it from within the domain of theory, which means that it is taken as a form of cultural materialism. Although theories have proliferated...they are based in a mind-set which reads works of art and the languages in which they are articulated mainly as evidence of the historical moment of their production

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[10] See especially Head's letters to Mona Pehle (GKMM34BHP122). For a detailed discussion of her perception of her links with divine figures, see Chapter Two.

and of the forces which shape that moment" (1997:1). Explaining their vindication of the term "spirituality", they go on to write:

> Our view of the spiritual, and of spiritual experiences, is that it is precisely a way of challenging the limits of understanding that conventional frameworks erect, since it changes the status of frameworks as such and the relationship of the mind to them...We view spiritual experience as a quality or degree of awareness which pushes at the limits of expression, language and accepted frameworks, and can indeed rise above them. (1997:1)

Head's texts consistently seek to transcend various limits of perception. In so doing, they often unsettle the relegation of consciousness and perception to conventional frameworks. Malekin and Yarrow's definitions of spirituality are therefore extremely suggestive in relation to her writing.

Head's frequent references to the divine, to ideas about good and evil, to esoteric states and processes of personal and collective liberation explicitly point to questions about spirituality. Some critics have simply labelled metaphysical elements, or universal elements, or general currents that seem to lie beyond material and historical realms.[11] While a number of critics have referred to the "universalism" of Head's writing, the frequent suggestion is that she resorts to liberal-humanist rationalism or that her metaphysical explorations are quite dislocated from socially-contextualized ones. Other critics have dealt intricately with Head's universalism. Citing her indebtedness to Hinduism, for example, Ibrahim argues that "it is a misunderstanding of Head's point of view to claim that she is whitewashing 'difference' altogether by introducing 'universalist' notions understood primarily as part of a hegemonic European discourse" (1996:86). Developing a related argument, Rose writes that for Head "perhaps oddly...universality is also contingency. Perhaps the key thing to note is the way universality as a concept starts to break up under scrutiny" (1994:412). Caroline Rooney (1991) and Catherine Campbell (1993) approach Head's universalism by connecting politics to spirituality. All these critics insist that historical contingency, the personal, the political and the universal are inextricably linked for Head, that existential being consists in what is simultaneously personal, social and spiritual.

A writer whose oeuvre is similarly shaped by notions of spirituality is Doris Lessing. Also often grounded in southern African experiences, Lessing's writing challenges criticism in ways comparable to Head's. Lessing's voracious reading, steadfast quest for self-education, and circuitous autobiographical and philosophizing fictions significantly

[11] In her "Power and the Question of Good and Evil in Bessie Head's Novels", for example, Virginia Ola (1990) dwells on the "metaphysical", yet does not explain its role or effects in Head's writing.

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echo patterns associated with Head. Both authors' textual politics led them to interrogate their social locations through idiosyncratic representations of southern African spaces and experiences. As Linda Beard (1979) observes, for both Lessing and Head, strongly autobiographical journeys of creativity meant traversing racial, gender and colonial discourses that were insistently southern African. Importantly, certain recent Lessing critics have followed the contours of her esoteric and theological ideas. Their explorations of her science fiction or indebtedness to Buddhism or Sufism, for example, draw on religious thought to grapple with ideas and languages that conventional literary criticism cannot adequately explore.[12] While I broadly exploit Rose's influential study of Plath, then, I refer to Lessing's writing to deal specifically with Head's provocative meshing of autobiography, epistemology, and religious philosophy.

For both Lessing and Head, autobiographical quests led to explorations of the unconscious and to religious philosophies which sustained their creative challenges to univocality and dogma. Frequently, epistemological questing resonated with eastern philosophies: in the case of Lessing, Buddhism and Sufism, and in relation to Head, and more cryptically and selectively, Hindu philosophy. In a typically qualified tribute,[13] Head wrote: "I am brought to the Lessing altar at last" (GKMM25BHP13).[14] She went on to commend Lessing's unconventional treatment of gender and her insight into psychic experiences and the unconscious. Writing further that she felt able to validate her own vision after reading Lessing's "An Unposted Love Letter",[15] Head expressed particular interest in Lessing's autobiographical vision, and concluded "I was so impressed that I made a silent bow – she can be great. great. great" (GKMM25BHP13). I do not contrast Head's oeuvre with intermittent but abiding parallels in Lessing's vast output; I do, however, refer to *Under My Skin* (1994), the autobiography that many would consider Lessing's most self-reflexive commentary on her developing vision in relation to her southern African experiences. I consequently consider parallels between the writers only to chart the discursive parameters of Head's writings, the spiritual meanings she invested in creativity, her deployment of eastern philosophy, and autobiographical representations of social and psychic suffering in relation to place, gender, race and colonialism. Lessing, unlike Head, was often very transparent and direct in her explanations of how and why

[12] See Shadia Fahim's study of Lessing and eastern philosophy (1994).
[13] As I show in Chapter Two, Head turned very selectively and ambivalently to all the writers to whom she expressed indebtedness. It is noteworthy that she later condemned what she saw as Lessing's strident feminism.
[14] References are to the Bessie Head Papers, Khama III Memorial Museum, Serowe, Botswana (KMM BHP).

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she wrote what she did. Because of this, her writing, and especially her autobiography, can help to explain Head's similar textual strategies.

I am concerned not simply with charting Head's erratic encounters with Hinduism and Buddhism. I see "spirituality" as central to her writings about experiences which are not only historically or socially contingent. In particular, spirituality shapes her distinctive notions of humanism and explorations of subjectivity and consciousness. Head consequently invests spirituality with a powerful critical force. As Malekin and Yarrow show, spirituality in the west is often defined by creed and religious dogma (1997). Frequently, then, it is perceived as part of, rather than as a challenge to restrictive thought. Like Malekin and Yarrow, Charles Taylor (1996) associates spirituality with exploration and critique, and so develops a vocabulary and analytical methods for examining more recondite literary challenges to orthodoxy and dogma. Malekin, Yarrow and Taylor expose a disturbing paradox in much literary criticism: while it makes claims to unravelling complex human experiences in literature, it is often dismissive about the use and implications of "spirituality". Revitalizing this term as they do, I show that Head's conception of the spirit and spiritual experience is part of her broader questioning of confining cultural situations and perceptions. It is particularly important that Hinduism is one of the few religions that does not clearly separate between the religious and the secular, between what in the west is often seen as the "spiritual" as opposed to the "worldly".[16] Confronting both the breadth and interconnectedness of human and universal experiences, Head embraces knowledge that resists the binding of human experiences to conventional and familiar frameworks. In a passionate defence of this vision, she condemned a reader who wrote to her that "'you bring re-incarnation into your calculations and this my theological training rejects'" (GKMM25BHP13). She concluded: "The man meant that it would be dangerous for him to think beyond his theological training. All thought ended there for him, irrespective of the fact that life is a vast riddle" (GKMM25BHP13).

Head's emphasis on spirituality explains the distinctive forms and effects of her storytelling about "life's vast riddle". In his discussion of the "articulation of the good" and the "moral sources" of spiritual concerns, Taylor considers how narrative and storytelling

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[15] Elsewhere Head wrote, "Oh yes, she is great, but one has to wait until she is recording one's own particular problem" (CKMM96BHP8).

[16] See Nirad Chaudhuri, who writes that with Hinduism "worldly activity is under the control of religion, and everything religious is involved in the world" (1979:10).

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powerfully configure moral meanings. His discussion of effective formulations of the good is especially suggestive in relation to Head:

> Some formulations may be dead, or have no power at this place or time or with certain people. And in the most evident examples the power is not a function of the formulation alone, but of the whole speech act. Indeed the most powerful case is where the speaker, the formulation, and the act of delivering the message all line up together to reveal the good...A formulation has power when it brings the source close, when it makes it plain and evident, in all its inherent force, its capacity to inspire our love, respect, or allegiance. An effective articulation releases this force, and this is how words have power. (1989:96)

Head's writing usually registers a profound moral force, while her comments reveal her tremendous faith in the ability of her words and stories to move her readers. Her evolution of a vision which created "new names for human dignity, new codes of honour all nations can live by" (KKMM243BHP3) led her to define her writing as a spiritual process:

> It was as though, in an internal and private way, I perceived the ease with which one could become evil and I associated evil in my mind with the acquisition of power. This terror of power and an examination of its stark horrors created a long period of anguish in my life and forced out of me some strange novels I had not anticipated writing. It was almost as though the books write themselves, propelled into existence by the need to create a reverence for human life in an environment and historical circumstance that seems to me a howling inferno. ( GKMM38BHP22)

The spirituality and epistemological inquiry in Head's writing is shaped by particular religious traditions and currents within them. Many subjects that fascinated her were suppressed by the Christian, rationalist and liberal-humanist traditions she was exposed to as a child and student in Natal. She consequently turned elsewhere for philosophical understanding. In her literary biography, Eilersen identifies Head's exposure to Hinduism during the writer's emotional and intellectual growth as a young adult in Durban:

> Bessie was curious and found the literature absorbing. Hinduism's all-embracing philosophy was diametrically opposed to the strict and narrow version of Christianity on which she had been fed for seven years. Its vast conglomerate of beliefs, making it tolerant of other religions and not compelling its followers to adopt any particular rites or sacraments, appealed to her strong sense of individualism. (1995:33)

Eilersen also describes the influence of Mahatma Ghandi, whose policy of non-violence and passive resistance considerably influenced South African oppositional politics, especially in Natal, during the fifties. According to Eilersen, Ghandi's Hindu-inflected politics profoundly affected Head - daunted by the limitations of anti-apartheid resistance - at a time when the militancy of the ANC Youth League and the PAC marked a disillusionment with personal and spiritual forms of resistance. Eastern philosophy in Head's texts eludes the mapping of sources in the way that Shadia Fahim (1994), for example, identifies Sufism in Lessing's writings. However fitfully and erratically, though, eastern philosophies permeate Head's writings and personal philosophy. In particular,

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they helped to anchor her persisting concern with a humanist philosophy beyond the cultural dualisms, entrenched in the unconscious, that often break down when scrutinized.

Head's concern with the myths internalized by the unconscious repeatedly surfaces in her published texts and lesser-known writings and letters. Some critics have explained them by drawing emphatically on psychoanalytic criticism.[17] This criticism, transcending the narrow sociological focus of certain earlier views, has contributed enormously to understanding Head's exploration of the unconscious. Yet it can easily trap the meanings of Head's texts in its theoretical assumptions, obscuring the evolution of her creativity and the sources to which she turned to legitimize her inquiries. Beard acknowledges the significance of these sources when she describes Head as the "unabashed collector of [all] treasures...at home with paradox", and shows how the writer "conceives the escape from the tyranny of monolith, hierarchy, and absolutism...[and] bespeaks process, relationship, and an on-going negotiation" (1991:580-1). To turn again to Lessing: it is noteworthy that recent criticism of this writer often extrapolates her own idiosyncratic evolution of a personalized philosophy, with critics often turning to sources which Lessing herself used, rather than drawing solely on mainstream theories.

Thematically, religious philosophy surfaces explicitly in *A Question of Power*, a diffuse text which links the experiences of the protagonist to archetypes, especially to icons, philosophies and deities drawn from Hinduism, Christianity and bygone religions. Obscure philosophical claims in this novel are also obliquely related to Hinduism. A key example is when the central character, cryptically referring to her divine status, describes herself as displaying the "evil" of the world which persecutes her. *A Question of Power* also frequently confronts madness and the unconscious, "censored" in the language, political paradigms and moral and religious codes Head confronted as a developing student, a young teacher and an embattled writer, but accommodated within Hinduism's inclusive outlook on human experiences. Head's eclectic borrowings from eastern philosophies profoundly shaped her discursive matrix. This allowed her to develop a gestalt which, as Rose explains in relation to Plath, is neither consistent nor multiple, but "articulate[s] something very precise about some of the most difficult points of contestation in our contemporary cultural and political life" (1992:10).

Hindu philosophy in Head's oeuvre is encoded not only in her subject-matter, but also in her style and register. Especially important here is a tone of visionary seeing in her

[17] See, for example, Patrick Hogan's Lacanian reading of *A Question of Power* (1994).

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writing. This is often manifested in grandiloquent statements that have either puzzled or irritated critics. A gestalt cohering around eastern philosophies is evidenced in the lyricism and mysticism in *Maru*, as well as in later works like *The Collector of Treasures, Serowe: Village of the Rainwind,* and *A Bewitched Crossroad.* In all of these, social realism and ethnography constantly intersect with visionary philosophizing. As Alain Severac (1991) shows in relation to *Maru*, predictable social analysis and realist techniques are unsettled as Head plunges the reader into a metaphysical ethos and yokes her social concerns to spiritual ones. This suggests consistently abstract meanings in her work. Yet the metaphysical mode is also secular. Underlining Head's belief that: "I believe it is only people who make people suffer and not some hidden, unknown God or devil" (1990: 63), Rooney writes: "In her terms, spiritual matters pertain to ethical matters - questions of compassion, equality, fellow-love - and to creative, life-enhancing powers. These ethical and creative issues, though the terms may yet be inadequate, have crucial bearings on sociopolitical realities and aspirations (1991:122). Head's use of a metaphysical register therefore indicates her interest in communicative strategies with the force to affect her readers. Disavowing the characteristic language and images of protest, she believed that they restricted her insight into the complexities of diverse powers and freedoms. She therefore avoids culturally fixing these notions and favours the sort of generalization that sees "evil as a narrow self-centred world that leads to death and destruction and goodness as a wide universe full of hope and endless possibilities" (KKMM457BHP23).

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**Autobiographical Authority**

Head once commented that she wrote for postgraduate thesis students,[18] wryly challenging readers who laid claim to definitive meanings in her writing. I go on to show that her texts frequently defy conclusive interpretation. She covertly develops clues that prompt a broader exploration of seemingly clear-cut characters and themes. While the labyrinthine meanings of Head's texts will be stressed, I also show how profoundly her writing is linked to her social and political circumstances. Although her philosophical views take recourse to Hinduism and eastern philosophy, her epistemology, emerging from her social locations and her interrogation of these, is also firmly rooted in cultural materialism. My analysis of Head's texts consequently accords a central role to biography. For Head,

[18] See her letter to Mary Benson (CKMM84BHP37).

the extra-textual circumstances that shape the "self" producing her texts are visible and insistent throughout her writing.

Having insisted on the centrality of biography, it becomes important to consider current views about the relations between authors and their texts. Where conventional biographical criticism assumed that authors' "real lives" self-evidently shaped their writing, poststructuralism questions commonsensical dichotomies between lives and fictions, between literary texts and their authors. The conventional "author" as the unified originator of a "work" has been dislodged, with authors' lives being seen as cultural scripts that are irreducible to conclusive "real life experiences". What, then, are the implications of deconstructing previously stable notions of authorship for biographical criticism? Does the deconstruction of the author, reflected particularly clearly in Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1977) necessarily lead to popular wisdom about a political impasse: the impossibility of writers' efforts to disentangle their discursive locations.

Many criticisms of poststructuralist views about authorship suggest that they *are* radically at odds with the efforts of postcolonial, black, women or "minority" writers, to reconfigure subjectivities. This is reflected in Elizabeth Fox Genovese's "My Status My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women" (1990). Fox-Genovese deplores the way that black women writers search for empowering subject positions while poststructuralism, insisting on the textual coding of all biographical experience, seems to challenge all efforts to reconfigure subjectivities. Commenting on the "implied blackmail" of what she sees as the centre's new critical orthodoxy, Fox-Genovese has this to say:

> The death of the subject and of the author may accurately reflect the perceived crisis of Western culture and the bottomless anxieties of its most privileged subjects - the white male authors who had presumed to define it. Those subjects and those authors may, as it were, be dying, but it remains to be demonstrated that their deaths constitute the collective or generic death of subject and author. There remain plenty of subjects and authors who, never having had much opportunity to write in their own names or the names of their kind, much less in the name of the culture as a whole, are eager to seize the abandoned podium. (1990, 181)

It is in her claim that there are plenty who are "eager to seize the abandoned podium" that Fox-Genovese signals her capitulation to dominant notions of authorship. In other words, she ultimately speaks in the name of defining "Sameness", rather than with the aim of what Homi Bhabha describes as "the third space", where "we will find those words with which to speak of Ourselves and Others...and elude the politics of polarity" (1988:131).

Diana Brydon helpfully explains the connections between postmodern deconstruction of subjectivity and postcolonial and feminist forms of self-representation. Questioning an argument associated with Fox-Genovese, she insists that postcolonial challenges need not pursue "a unified subject along the nineteenth century European

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model", but may search for quite different understandings of multiple and changing subjectivities (1991:79). For Brydon and many other postcolonial thinkers, it is both desirable and possible for socially marginal writers to search insistently for new humanisms, rather than for the "abandoned podium" defined by Fox Genovese. A postcolonial perspective that is both deconstructive and humanist can therefore concur with Barthes when he says: "it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is...to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'" (1977:143). It may agree too with the idea that it is not a free-floating or homogeneous "identity" which shapes the writing subject, but shifting and manifold discursive locations. This, as Barthes insists, means that "everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*" (1977:147). Acknowledging Barthes' view about authorship at the same time that I accord a central place to a writer's location in different cultural fictions, I question the reading of Head's texts as straightforward testimonies of experiences. I also depart from views that assume authorial stability and reduce texts to final signifieds. The author is defined not as a fixed presence expressing consistent and consciously articulated truths, but in relation to a constructed set of positions shaped by gendered, racial, class, geographical and other biographical circumstances. Similarly, the text is "not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes, 1977:146).

In "Persona Criticism and the Death of the Author", Cheryl Walker (1991a) provides useful pointers for a deconstructive approach to biographical interpretations. Her model confronts the circumstances that shape textual production while remaining alert to textuality - both of authors and of what Barthes describes as the "multi-dimensional space" which is the written text. Walker writes: "Rather than erasing the author in favor of an abstract textuality, I prefer a critical practice that both expands and limits the role of the author...by finding in the text an author-persona but relating this functionary to psychological, historical and literary intersections quite beyond the scope of any scriptor's intentions, either conscious or unconscious. The persona functions more like a form of sensibility in the text than a directional marker pointing back toward some monolithic authorial presence" (1991a:114). With the "author-persona", intention is not a decisive index of textual meaning. But it does mark adopted postures and is consequently one lens through which the meanings of texts are produced. The author-persona allows us to confront the combined forces that impinge on the text without abandoning awareness of psychological and discursive complexity. Exploiting Walker and Barthes, then, I define the

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author as "scriptor" whose "text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue" (Barthes, 1977:148).

Head was often emphatic about the connection between her writing and her social, political and biographical circumstances. In a letter to one of her literary agents, she underscored these connections with a conclusiveness bordering on self-irony: "I work well and quickly with material drawn from living experience. *Maru* was lived for one year and then rapidly typed out in three months. *A Question of Power* was lived for three years and rapidly typed out in six months" (BKMM27BHP119). But her recognition of how biographical circumstances influenced her life was coupled with a highly self-conscious interpretation of her life. And in the same way that Head's fiction sought to challenge oppressive social myths, so did she transform the details of her life history (as the dominant cultural narrative of her "self"). In this way she asserted her right to name herself, seizing society's position of authorship to - in a sense - write her own life. Head's own perception of the links between life and writing was often self-consciously textual, and, in ways similar to the pattern that Barthes associates with Proust, she too often made of her "very life a work for which [her] own book was the model" (Barthes, 1977:144). Her inventive self-narration and urgent yearning towards discursive authority testify to her constant struggle with the official scripts in which groups and individuals are situated.

Letter-writing as rhetorical performance and as situated criticism was pivotal in this respect. The numerous letters that Head wrote and carefully preserved during her isolated life in Botswana not only reveal that her correspondence might have become a substitute for more direct relationships. They also signal her impulse to resist textual repression and to assert independent meanings in her life. The yearning for this emancipation resonates in wistful claims about her proposed autobiography: "I would like the book entitled as LIVING ON AN HORIZON - a title definitive of one who lives outside all possible social contexts, free, independent, unshaped by any particular environment, but shaped by internal growth and living experience" (BKMM27BHP119).

The related experiences of social deprivation, group exclusion, geographical dislocation, racial and colonial domination and gendered subordination were central to the "living experience" that shaped her desire for independent and liberating self-definition.

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Head can therefore be seen as a writer who develops a standpoint epistemology.[19] This implies a vision of the world emerging from a particular set of positions within it, the desires shaped by these positions and the self-conscious expression of positions and desires. As defined by feminists in the nineties, standpoint epistemology means that critical positioning is shaped by marginal social locations to produce a revolutionary "seeing from below".[20] Head's preoccupation with different patterns of domination in her own life recurs in her fiction. But specific sites and forms are also modified or expanded. She therefore develops models of power that are concrete and specific, yet simultaneously very broad and philosophical. Scrutinizing the details of her own lived experiences, she sets out to explore how power generally operates. I suggest that Head's epistolary self-narratives illustrate her manoeuvre of generating a broad critical standpoint from immediate personal experiences.

Head was the unlawfully conceived "mixed-race" child in an obsessively colour-conscious South Africa, "the sort of person who is the skeleton in the cupboard or the dark and fearful secret swept under the carpet" (Head, 1990:3). She saw herself embodying a repressed sexual history, evidenced in legislation that sought to make "inter-racial" sexual unions unlawful. Often revisiting this theme, her writings explore both the political and psychological implications of the official label, "coloured". Raised in orphanages and foster homes, she was frequently subjected to institutional discipline. She has described her childhood when, until the age of thirteen, she was raised by a foster mother, in the following way: "There was sly, secret supervision of my life, which was unknown to me. Each month a social worker turned up with a notebook to jot down notes and records of my day-to-day existence" (1990:3). As these comments reveal, her status as an orphan, her absence of family ties, and her officially-regulated custody reinforced a profound sense of solitude and victimization.

Her departure from South Africa did not entirely dissipate her perception of her social persecution. Obliged to remain in Botswana after leaving South Africa on a visa that prohibited her return, she often described her sense of rootlessness: "Any biographical detail takes in innumerable people of my generation who are scattered throughout the world as refugees" (1990:27). She was refused citizenship in Botswana for many years and often lamented her stateless condition. Although Botswana remained her home until

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[19] Standpoint epistemologies may be right-wing (like fascism) or leftist, but always challenge liberal or other claims to "objective" or non-partisan knowledge. They self-consciously acknowledge the speaker's social locations and interest.
[20] See Donna Haraway (1988).

her death, she made numerous plans to settle in other countries. She was therefore acutely conscious that "nothing can ever take away the fact that I never had a country; not in South Africa or in Botswana, where I now live as a stateless person" (1990:28). Head was affected by protracted bureaucratic procedures and Botswana's anxieties about political refugees, and repeatedly applied for citizenship. After one of her failed applications, she wrote desolately to the President of Botswana about the condition of refugees: "Black people tolerate suffering and oppression in South Africa only because they are completely powerless; we experience the same powerlessness as refugees... But the conditions under which we live in Botswana are so psychologically damaging - this sense of being permanently unwanted and excluded... a sort of sick, inward-turning thing where people are thrown back entirely on their own resources to survive" (EKMM333BHP2). For Head, therefore, the status of refugee painfully reinforced the injustice and psychological distress of being a social outcast.

As an exile with few material resources, she often described the persecution and impoverishment she experienced in Botswana. Her letters to Randolph Vigne, an acquaintance from South Africa, are typical of these descriptions. In 1966, for example, two years after leaving South Africa, Head lost one of her precarious posts. She wrote desperately to Vigne: "I am at the moment homeless and stranded in Palapye...I don't know what's going to happen but it would be a relief to be free of malice, intrigue and unfathomable, weird, weird people who are shockingly cruel... I'm holding on" (1991:33). Head's life in Serowe, the village in which she spent most of her life in Botswana, was solitary, and she often considered herself as being inexplicably persecuted by others. In a letter to Vigne in 1965, she condemned Serowe as "a ruthlessly cruel place...[where] there are powerful people in the background fixing things... Have all my mail opened. Have the police terrorising anyone who talks to me" (1991:14). Her descriptions of oppressive communities repeatedly surface in her fiction. While these are often linked to power relationships like racial persecution, class exploitation or the abuse of women, they are also rooted in a very particular observation of the village intrigues and prejudices with which she was familiar.

Head's correspondence testifies consistently to her complicated financial affairs and destitution. Her first published novel appeared in 1968, four years after her departure from South Africa. Following the publication of *When Rainclouds Gather*, her novels appeared in an evenly spaced sequence, and she also submitted stories and articles to publishers in South Africa, Britain and the United States. While these details suggest that

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her output was consistent and fairly well-received, she struggled throughout her life against destitution. One of her strongest grievances was a feeling of being exploited and over-taxed as an author. As a stateless writer with English and American publishers, Head was simultaneously taxed by the American, English and Botswanan governments. She condemned the unfairness of triple taxation as well as being taxed by a government that refused to grant her citizenship. In a letter to the High Commissioner for Refugees in 1975, for example, she wrote: "My affairs only appear complicated due to the sequence in which they occurred, but they are all related to tax - tax in America, tax in England, and tax in Botswana. For six years the Botswana government has maintained a silence about a letter I wrote to them due to their treatment of refugees in this country" (EKMM421BHP6). The image of the embattled artist, of the writer resolutely struggling in a hostile environment recurs in Head's fiction.

What repeatedly surfaces in Head's interpretation of her life is an emphasis on various forms of social exclusion and political and psychological persecution. Yet while there are many indications of her suffering the circumstances of her life, there are also hints that this suffering inspired her philosophical and artistic vision. Situations of compound domination were seen both as locations of political powerlessness and as empowering enunciating positions. The boundless critical consciousness that Head associated with these positions is evident in her claim that "The African writer ought to look out beyond the small closed group of tribe and nation. The writer ought to look out over the world and see mankind" (KKMM457BHP26). It is the logic that multiple experiences of injustice liberated a visionary understanding of human circumstances that often led Head to "exaggerate" her suffering or to behaviour and attitudes that many have described as paranoid. The claim that "I am anxious to re-capture a state so low and pinpoint it as a great achievement" (1991:160) partly explains Head's compulsive mistrust of others, her vacillating relationships and explosive behaviour, her constant references to feelings of vulnerability, and what one might generally call paranoia.

While Head struggled to define multiple writerly positions, some of her critics have trapped her in stable ones. These are often the basis of very dogmatic interpretations of her texts. Nobantu Rasebotsa, for example, offers the following diagnosis: "Essentially, Bessie Head, a South African born of mixed black and white parentage, grew up with a sense of dual identity, of half-belonging to each group. Despite the fact that she shared an identity with these racial groups, she had been set apart from both by South Africa's laws of racial classification which defined her as a member of the 'coloured' race with a special

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'coloured' identity. As a result of this separatist programme of apartheid, she suffered the ambiguous barriers of colour, of race, and even of status" (1993:25). Rasebotsa assumes that the writer, acquiescing to official designations, simply testifies to stereotypes of "coloured" cultural, racial and ideological dislocation. In this critic's reading, Head's texts merely become expressive of a "problematic" identity. Barthes, explaining the kind of reductive critical manoeuvre revealed here, writes that with this "giving of a text an Author...when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' - victory to the critic" (1977:147). Categorical readings like Rasebotsa's invalidate writers' struggles with imposed identities, struggles that are particularly complex in Head's case. In describing her life, Head deals at length with her exclusion, with having been cast out of groups that rigidly distinguished insiders from outsiders, with her abiding feeling of inhabiting outsider positions. Yet she also revisions these outsider positions and symbolically redefines them. This metaphoric reinvention is conveyed in her response to the circumstances of her birth, where her compound disinheritance is imbued with an assertive personal freedom:

> There must be many people like me in South Africa whose birth or beginnings are filled with calamity and disaster... The circumstances of my birth seemed to make it necessary to obliterate all traces of a family history. I have not a single known relative on earth, no long and ancient family tree to refer to, no links with heredity or a sense of having inherited a temperament, a certain emotional instability or the shape of a fingernail from a grandmother or greatgrandmother. I have always been just me, with no frame of reference to anything beyond myself. (1990:3)

Head's redefinition of subject positions can be explored in relation to Stuart Hall's notion of hybridized identifications. In his formulations about identification, rather than identity, Hall writes: "identity, although it has to be spoken by the subject - collective or individual - who is being positioned, is not a question of what the inside wants only. And it's not a question of how the outside, or the external dominating system, placed you symbolically: but it is precisely in the process - never complete, never whole - of identification" (1996:130). By drawing attention to process, rather than to product or any essentialist conception, Hall offers a way of thinking through exchanges between dominant discourses and marginal positions as well as the performative, provisional and always unfinished motions of *identification*. He also shows that *hybridization* is determined not by social location or passive interpellation, but by the subject's performative encounters with surrounding fictions. In this model, identity construction is always a process of negotiating available fictions rather than one of discovering a final fullness within them.

Exploring Head in relation to this performative process of identification, Rob Nixon offers a view that directly contests Rasebotsa's. Nixon argues that Head's life

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and work "provide one of the richest anticipations of Salman Rushdie's simple but resonant remark that 'notions of purity are the aberration'. Head made herself into what Rushdie calls a 'translated person' – she was the ultimate *metissage*. For in negotiating her impacted sense of loss and her imposed sense of deviancy, she admitted a whole new range of possibilities to the phrase 'mixed ancestry.' Remote from racially charged determinisms, those words came to celebrate the hardwon if fitful freedom to elect and reject one's affinities and provenance" (1994:130). Non-essentialist processes of *metissage* and hybridization are central to the politics of Head's writing. As early as the seventies, then, when many African writers were espousing unified anti-colonial identities, Head was to associate freedoms and subversion with performative, hybridized and incomplete subject positions, with non-essentialized forms and implications of "coming to voice".

**Textual Politics**

One consequence of the range of Head's scrutiny of oppressive relationships is that she develops an understanding of their recurring psychological and discursive patterns. Unravelling both particular and general forms of oppression, she diagnoses power as a process, rather than simply indicting its particular manifestations. Her explanation constantly unearths two principles. One is that power, although sometimes explored only as a material phenomenon, is also discursively constructed. Head suggests that systems of representation that include seeing, speaking about and writing are often more sinister, insidious and difficult to dislodge than economic and political forms of oppression. A related concern is that the social categories and myths in which groups and individuals are located profoundly shape their sense of themselves and their worlds. Concerned primarily with the conditions for existential freedom, Head constantly examines how "being-in-the-world" may constrain or enable liberating forms of self-identification as well as interpersonal and social relationships.

By exploring specific instances of power as systems of representation and subject-formation, Head prefigures many of the concerns of postcolonial theory. At the same time that it points to the historical phenomenon of colonialism, postcolonial theory deconstructs paradigmatic ways in which hegemonic centres are constructed in relation to dependent margins. Head conveys its figurative adaptability, but focuses on specific racial, gendered and colonial forms of subjugation. She shows that "colonialism" may be defined metaphorically and operates universally, but that it also encompasses specific oppressive

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relationships, such as the colour-caste oppression described in *Maru*, or the violation of women by men in *A Question of Power*, or the imperial conquests represented in *A Bewitched Crossroad.*

Head's deconstructive, yet emphatically localized interrogation of power also anticipates the contestation about "new" subject positions and cultural practices in postcolonial theory. Many postcolonial theorists have stressed the intractability of colonial binarisms. This emphasis on hegemony is clear in the interventions of two well-known theorists of colonial discourse in literary texts: Edward Said (1978) and Abdul JanMohamed (1985). JanMohamed dwells on the omnipresent Manichean allegories of self and other, while Said explores ubiquitously reproduced dualisms between "Occident" and "Orient". Their accent on binaries tends to assume that all forms of self-representation or political struggle on the part of the dominated simply reinscribe oppressive discourses. Other proponents of postcolonial theory concentrate on subaltern agency in the face of dominant discourses. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin identify this optimism in postcolonial fiction:

> Most post-colonial writing has concerned itself with the hybridised nature of post-colonial culture as a strength rather than a weakness. Such writing focuses on the fact that the transaction of the post-colonial world is not a one-way process in which oppression obliterates the oppressed or the coloniser silences the colonised in absolute terms...It lays emphasis on the survival even under the most potent oppression of the distinctive aspects of the culture of the oppressed...Finally, it emphasises how hybridity and the power it releases may well be seen to be the characteristic feature and contribution of the post-colonial, allowing a means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past and developing new anti-monolithic models of cultural exhange and growth. (1995:183)

I show that Head discovers ingenious strategies for challenging a range of oppressive myths and fictions through the hybrization described above. Rather than affirming essentialized voices, she develops a reflective exploration of how to write within, but also against entrenched discourses. Homi Bhabha is especially suggestive in considering her preoccupation here. Focusing on the "ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority" (1985:154), he defines a "third space" that eludes both dominant narratives and their marginal projections. This third space is not disconnected from established processes of representation. Drawing on and through dominant narratives, it inscribes and reinscribes, charting spaces that elude the essentialism of both colonialism and the contestatory politics it often generates. Current explorations of "hybridized" subjectivities and representation illuminate the epistemological complexities of resistance and counter-hegemonic writing. Although "hybrid" has roots in colonial

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knowledge and essentialized identities, it helps to explore cultural practices that radically contest dominant ones. According to Robert Young, therefore, "'Hybrid' is the nineteenth century's word. But it has become our word again" (Young, 1995:6). The fluidity suggested by hybridization is a feature of all discursively constructed subjects and cultural experiences. In self-consciously disruptive theoretical, writing and political practice, however, hybridization becomes a subversive response to fixed positions and binarisms.

Head is acutely self-conscious about the provisionality of knowledges. She registers that they matter politically in relation to particular situations, that - as her short stories and prose pieces directly indicate - it is the particular moment, the ordinary, the everyday that anchors and legitimates the subversive knowledge associated with social marginality. Feminist ideas about standpoint epistemology are useful in exploring this. Feminist theorists like Sandra Harding (1983) and Nancy Hartstock (1981) started out by exploring the epistemological consequences of gender divisions and the implications of women's seeing from the location of their gendered marginality. Subsequent to this, Donna Haraway (1988) and Patricia Hill Collins (1991) considered the liberating consequences of "seeing from below" not as women, but in terms of compound power relations that shape multiple marginalities. Haraway in particular raises questions about "how to see from below", arguing that conventionally-recognized subordinate experiences are not automatic guarantees of marginal standpoints, that "identity, including self-identity, does not produce science, critical positioning does" (1991:46). Although many (including Haraway herself more recently) would question the idea of scientific or objective knowledge, the crucial intervention of standpoint feminists is their insistence on the provisional critical "authority" of marginal standpoints.

Haraway's cyborg politics (1991), a refinement of her standpoint epistemology of the eighties, defines a politics of non-hegemonic resistance that accepts the uniqueness of intersections and multiplicity. Haraway's cyborg is thus a metaphor that avoids the tricky fixing of definitively marginal standpoints. It is constituted by a textual struggle against "unity through domination or unity-through-incorporation [that] undermines all claims to an organic or natural standpoint" (1991:157). The deferred naming of struggle and freedom that her metaphor opens up becomes, as Nira Yuval-Davis claims, "transversal politics" (1997). These "organise and give shape to heteroglossia without denying or eliminating it" (1997:10). Heteroglossia that is given shape without fixity helps to explain how and why Head conceived of the "authority" of her marginal standpoints. According to her, the naming and exploration of freedoms, confounded by the way naming itself undermined

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those freedoms, was a constant and persisting quest. And in Head's terms, this quest meant "captur[ing] a state so low and pinpoint[ing] it as a great achievement" (1991:160). Crosscutting practices of postcoloniality, hybridization and standpoint can thus be extrapolated in relation to Head's vision and epistemology. The intersection helps to explain the politics of her writing while avoiding the pure oppositions that often delimit criticism of her work.

In demonstrating the relevance of hybridization to Head's politics, it is useful to consider her perception of herself in relation to other black writers in Africa. Like many of these, she saw herself as reconstructing the subjectivities of groups whose humanity was denied by colonialism and white racism:

> Everything had been worked out by my time and the social and political life of the country was becoming harsher and harsher. A sense of history was totally absent in me and it was as if, far back in history, thieves had stolen the land and were so anxious to cover up all traces of the theft that correspondingly, all traces of the true history have been obliterated. We, as black people, could make no appraisal of our own worth; we did not know who or what we were, apart from objects of abuse and exploitation...In a creative sense I found myself left only with questions. How do we write about a world long since lost, a world that reflected only misery and hate? (1990: 66)

These claims explicitly testify to a broad opposition to colonialism, white domination and their oppressive cultural and ideological practices. But Head was also uneasy with a fixed form of political alignment: "We learn bitterly, every day, the details of oppression and exploitation so that a writer automatically feels pressured into taking a political stand of some kind or identifying with a camp. It was important to my development to choose a broader platform for my work, so I have avoided political camps and ideologies because I feel that they falsify truth" (1990: 63).

Her "broader platform" involved a quest for constantly interruptive modes of representation. One of the clearest indications of the writer's "broader platform" is her treatment of South Africa from the vantage point of a Botswanan setting. With the exception of the posthumously published novella, *The Cardinals*, all Head's novels are set in Botswana. She has commented on this situation in the following way: "I found myself performing a peculiar shuttling movement between two lands. All my work had Botswana settings, but the range and reach of my preoccupations became very wide... I began to answer some of the questions aroused by my South African experience" (1990:13). From the perspective of her broader platform and quest for "truth", white racism in South Africa was one shifting facet of domination. Her "peculiar shuttling movement" allowed her to identify facets beyond those linked to this country's racial politics. This shuttling is clearly registered in *Maru,* a novel dealing with the subjection of a San woman in an African

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context. By representing the specific example of the Batswana's domination of the "Masarwa", Head explores a contextually-specific injustice. Yet her example is also emblematic. She speaks both to South Africa's racial politics, and to the ethnic and gender patterns largely ignored in South African politics during the seventies. It is the unorthodox breadth of Head's response to questions posed by colonialism, white racism, social domination and diverse "questions of power" that have baffled certain critics and alienated her from the protest, nationalist and Marxist traditions of South African and other literary establishments. Head did not disavow "social and political pressures that shape southern African writing". But her comprehensive interpretation of these pressures is what led her to claim: "The broader, all-embracing terms, such as mankind, the human race and love of one's neighbour, were invented by individual philosophers and thinkers and the writer ought to be a part of this creative stream of thought" (KKMM457BHP26).

Head's "broader platform" not only locates differently configured forms of oppression; it also stresses intersecting social locations. Time and again, she returns to instances of compound dispossession, exploitation or political domination. Examples such as rural women, or stateless refugees, or a "mixed race" South African woman in a post-independent African country reveal that social experiences cannot be neatly explained in any single framework of power, or even in a combination of different frameworks. Instead, they are manifested in intersections that elude separation. Postcolonial formulations of "subalternity" provide one among other tropes for considering how Head interrogates intersecting marginalities. Gayatri Spivak has paid particular attention to the subaltern woman, theorizing about the way gender hierarchies complicate definitions of a homogenous colonized subject. Spivak describes a subject within simultaneously functioning hierarchies of domination which render her voiceless: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears"; the subaltern woman is constantly spoken for, while "there is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak" (1985:128-9). Spivak's attention to compound subject positions hypothesizes about particular conjunctural situations and avoids fixing a definition applicable to all colonized women. Head's wary investigation of power therefore dovetails with the postcolonial emphasis on "subalternity" and alertness to the hidden and pervasive forms of cultural silencing and political domination. It signals awareness also of the shifting nature of these forms of domination. Generally, it indicates that whether subjugation shapes an individual's subject position as in *Maru* or interpretive

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practice as in *A Bewitched Crossroad,* it emerges out of particular hegemonizing discursive practices.

Offering leads for considering Head in relation to feminist ideas about standpoint, Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd emphasize the pitfalls of essentializing experiences to explain marginal or minority discourses:

> The theoretical project of minority discourse involves drawing out solidarities in the form of similarities between modes of repression and struggle that all minorities experience separately but experience precisely as minorities. "Becoming minor" is not a question of essence (as the stereotypes of minorities in dominant ideology would want us to believe), but a question of position: a subject-position that in the final analysis can be defined only in political terms - that is, in terms of the effects of economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, social manipulation, and ideological domination on the cultural formation of minority subjects and discourses. (1990:9)

Head testifies to the forging of solidarity described by these critics in her claims about *Maru:* "The research I did among Botswana people for *Maru* gave me the greatest insights and advantages to work right at the roots of racial hatred...Nothing prevented communication between me and Botswana people and nothing prevented me from slipping into the skin of a Mosarwa person" (1990: 69). Superficially, her comments might suggest a straightforward identification on the basis of shared experience. But they signal Head's recognition of the intricate connections between experiences, critical positioning and knowledge. Head locates points at which her own subordination resembles the situation of other dominated subjects and draws on her reading of her own locations to interrogate the locations of others.

The force of Head's emblematic political relationships becomes evident when we consider how readily her politics overlaps with the perspectives of writers from apparently very different contexts. This study will consider the intersection of her methods, subjects and philosophy with a cross-cultural body of represented marginalities, an approach justified by Francoise Lionnet in her comparative study of Head, Gayl Jones and Myriam Warner-Vieyra:

> It is important to deal with cross-cultural comparisons without falling into the trap of essentialism nor that of false universalism. To state that comparisons are warranted on the theoretical basis of sites of literality and textuality is to bypass the culturalist/essentialist approach that tends to naively assume that a common ground necessarily exists among these various fictions simply because their authors share some common...origin. But what I want to stress here, is...a performative intertextuality which is a function of the ideological and cultural matrix that generates the works (1993: 136)

Lionnet deals with black diasporic women's writing. I broaden this framework by exploring Head in relation to writers as varied as Doris Lessing, Sylvia Plath, Zora Neale Hurston and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. My aim is not to examine the strikingly similar themes with

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which Lionnet is concerned, but to extrapolate what she defines as "the ideological and cultural matrix generating the works".[21] This matrix is not always discovered through detailed and systematic comparison, or through obviously connected similarities in themes or techniques. But it does draw attention to the ways in which literary texts often speak to each other, and may offer interpretive paths in ways which literary theory and criticism do not always allow. Head's concern with what Lionnet terms "performative intertextuality" also sheds light on the self-conscious cross-references in her texts. It helps to explain the nature of her reading interests, literary indebtedness and exploration of eastern philosophies. Head turned to other writers not so much to initiate or generate the learning of new knowledge, as to confirm (often firmly defended) knowledge emanating from her locations and her discursively positioned "seeing from below". In this process she was able to establish what Chandra Mohanty, redeploying Benedict Anderson's concept, has described as an "imagined community", "imagined not because it is not 'real' but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across diverse boundaries" (1991:4).[22]

**Textual Pleasures**

Some critics interpret Head's writing as though its main effect is to bear testimony to already known worlds. This approach is evident in projections of the writer primarily as a victim, projections that tend to underplay her agency as the creator of compelling fictions. A collection of essays edited by Cecil Abrahams is titled "The Tragic Life" (1990) and emphatically fixes an impression of the writer as the casualty of circumstances. Head's evocative metaphor[23] appears in Eilersen's *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears* (1995), although the phrase, linked to the cover photograph of a tormented Bessie Head, connotes only suffering. The SABC's documentary film about Head, *A Gesture of Belonging* [24] dwells on the circumstances of her birth, her emotional instability and her solitude and tragic death in Botswana. Yet it pays scant attention to her status as a writer or to the visionary powers of her writing. While this study consistently acknowledges the oppressive social worlds Head confronted, it focuses on her writerly efforts to open up alternative realms in her fiction.

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[21] Head self-consciously turned to writers like Marquez and Lessing, although I discuss parallels with writers like Plath and Hurston. The matrix defined here is not confined to self-conscious literary influences, or efforts to establish conscious parallels. It is the figurative breadth that her works release.

[22] I return to the concept of "imagined community" in Chapters Two and Four to identify both the connections that Head consciously established, and that her writing yields.

[23] Head wrote: "I write best if I can hear the thunder behind my ears. Not even Rain Clouds was real thunder yet."

[24] Peni Flascas. Dir. *A Gesture of Belonging*. SABC 3, 1997.

Many studies of resistance writing have concentrated narrowly on subject-matter, on the extent to which writers challenge oppression in the content of their works. Certain critics, however, insist that figurative processes of representation lend force to subversive representations, and a more effective "talking back" to the fictions of the centre. Presenting arguments for a theory receptive to the textual intricacies of "resistance" in black writing, Henry Louis Gates argues:

> Because of this curious valorization of the social and polemical functions of black literature, the structure of the black text has been repressed and treated as if it were transparent. The black literary work of art has stood at the center of a triangle of relations...but as if it were invisible, or literal, or a one-dimensional document...Accordingly, mimetic and expressive theories of black literature continue to predominate over the sorts of theories concerned with the discrete uses of figurative language. (1984:5-6)

Dealing with a specifically South African context, Leon de Kock identifies gaps similar to the omissions that Gates locates in approaches to black American writing:

> To talk of "counterhegemonic" writing while ignoring the struggle around the adoption and re-use of form...is to dilute the notion of "resistance" to little more than yea-saying...South African criticism of black "literature" in English would do well to...understand the conditions of emergence, within wider contexts, of written discourses in different forms, and the continuing negotiations and reappropriations of inherited forms by writers and other players who have been thrust into using language which is loaded with a dense history of struggle. (1992: 49)

Together, the interventions of Gates and De Kock identify important trajectories in Head's construction of narrative. One involves her inventive writing within a tradition of inherited forms and styles, a process that De Kock identifies as the "continuing negotiations and reappropriations of inherited forms". The process implies Head's ongoing efforts to inflect established meanings through and with the discursive resources available to her. This does not entail "capitulating" to a dominant tradition, or compromising postcolonial or counter-hegemonic voices. Rather, it is the fissured coming to voice of a writer who cannot simply disavow or transcend a cultural heritage. As suggested by recent discussions of hybridity, the reassembling and admixture of existing forms may function more interruptively than any notion of a purely anti-hegemonic or "entirely new" representational practice. A central index of Head's counterhegemonic strategy is her restless deployment of language, genres and styles. Her narrative techniques ranged from realism to modernism, while she resourcefully used novelistic, historical and ethnographic forms in her work. I show that particular plots, styles and genres in her writing - far from communicating *a priori* meanings - themselves form a site of struggle with representation and about interpretive control. I explore, for example, the persistence of autobiographical themes in apparently non-autobiographical historical and ethnographic works like *Serowe* and *A Bewitched Crossroad*. Tracing the continuation of earlier concerns in these works,

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emphasis will be placed on the author's appropriation of apparently impersonal forms in her quest for viable representational strategies.

Another path in Head's textual practice leads to "creativity", a productive power that she constantly celebrates through her metaphors and fictional strategies. Head's fictional worlds release cognitive domains rather than simply respond to those she confronted. In exploring her creation of imaginative worlds, I draw on some of the insights of phenomenology. I show that these can be linked to artistic and philosophical views that the writer idiosyncratically elaborated. Phenomenological insights also help to clarify other theoretical strands in this study. Central to phenomenological thought is the insistence that consciousness is inextricably connected to a surrounding world. While some phenomenological thinkers postulate the idealist notion of a transcendent constituting subject, Martin Heidegger emphatically historicizes the subject and consciousness. Terry Eagleton describes the way his views both ground human experience and stress an earlier phenomenological concern:

> Heidegger's major work...addresses itself to nothing less than the question of Being itself – more particularly, to that mode of being which is specifically human. Such existence, Heidegger argues, is in the first place always being-in-the-world; we are human subjects only because we are practically bound up with others and the material world, and these relations are constitutive of our life rather than accidental to it. The world is not an object 'out there' to be rationally analysed, set over against a contemplative subject: it is never something we can get outside of and stand over against. We emerge as subjects from inside a reality which we can never fully objectify, which encompasses both 'subject' and 'object', which is inexhaustible in its meanings and which constitutes us quite as much as we constitute it. (1983:62)

Influenced by Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur explores the cultural framing of human cognition with his emphasis on language. Contesting a legacy that has equated imaginative perception with vision, Riceour draws attention to how imagination operates linguistically. As Richard Kearney (1998) suggests, Ricoeur is concerned with the functioning of language through cultural codes, but also examines how it operates transformatively. Using the evocative notion of "semantic shock", Ricoeur insists that language can discover "new horizons of meaning" when old ones are juxtaposed, mixed, or dislodged from familiar contexts (1977:6-7). Ricoeur's theories help to explain the productive force of Head's inventive coding of signifiers and hybrid forms. Hybridization therefore explains many of the cultural parameters and forms of Head's textual practice. It interprets the cultural meanings of signifying practices in similar ways to a formulation like *bricolage*.[25] Ricoeur's emphasis on the imaginative implications of these signifying practices, however, illuminates the vision that her writing evokes and that she frequently

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alluded to. And since Ricoeur is constantly receptive to linguistic and cultural processes, his insights elucidate how Head worked with notions of immanent artistic meaning while yoking these to a profound sense of liberating social and human experiences.

Phenomenology also helps to explain some of Head's abstruse ideas about human consciousness and surrounding worlds, ideas that her recourse to Hinduism helped her to develop. Head's existential questions often focus on social relationships and circumstances, on the way that power relationships and cultural texts shape the individual's sense of self. But her questions are also explored metaphysically. On this level she broadly considers how human perception and a sense of being are constituted in relation to a surrounding world. Hinduism, as I shall show, progressively led her to the view that the perceiver and the world perceived were indistinguishable, that their conventional separation was not natural but culturally regulated. With its emphasis on the way the mind constitutes what appears to lie beyond it, phenomenology helps to explain the metaphysical questions Head confronted.

Although Head's writing manifests an ongoing and intensely personal struggle to create imaginative domains and to represent knowledges associated with marginal experiences, it also conveys the tremendous fulfillment she attached to this struggle. Exploring the writer's linking of "creativity" with notions of discursive authority and freedom in *The Cardinals*, Dorothy Driver writes:

> The creation of a social world, whether by the artist, the prophet, the saint, or the political leader, involved watching the 'slow unfolding of the sub-conscious process' of a nation and interpreting it correctly, thus giving it proper direction. Only the prophet or saint with nothing to gain was capable of this. In good moments, Head saw herself as just such a saint, a `detached observer, in essence, with a soft, careless hand', but in tortured moments (sometimes one follows the other in quick succession) she feared she was a mis-interpreter, being a creature of the world (1993:17).

Driver suggests that Head's writerly position encompasses the doubts and triumphs of politics, religious mysticism and morality. Head's sense of the triumphs of this composite vision is fictionalized not only as the embattled artist's creativity but also through metaphors that tantalizingly connote creativity. From her earliest work, Head is concerned with how the representational impulse, the ability to speak disruptively and to convey a path-breaking vision can be nurtured, realized and described. Claiming that the overwhelming circumstances of South Africa crippled her creative impulse because they were "so evil that it was impossible to deal with, in creative terms" (1990:67), she turns to the struggling figure of the artist in novels like *The Cardinals* and *Maru.* In later writing, the

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[25] I deal with this process as defined by Claude Levi-Strauss in Chapter Two.

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figure of the battling artist gives way to jubilant metaphors of rebirth and creativity. Textually defining Botswana as a rejuvenating home, Head frequently associates a recovered creativity with her country of exile - both to describe her own visionary development and to create signifiers for a triumphant creativity in writing. She turns constantly to tropes of agricultural development, flight and exile, the discovery and creation of "homes", the everyday activities of Botswana's craftspeople or visionary historical figures who transform their environment.

While the metaphoric celebrations are utopian, Head configures freedoms which resolve the quests of autobiographical characters like Mouse in *The Cardinals*, Margaret in *Maru* and Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*. Nixon identifies the therapeutic representations of Botswana as metaphor, and of Head's transposing of the autobiographical into representations of place and an exultant creativity: "Emerging in the mid-1970s from her cycles of high inner distress, racial rejection, psychological breakdown, confinement in a Botswanan mental asylum, and the strange solipsistic creativity of *A Question of Power*, Head saw local history not least as a mechanism for survival" (1996: 245-6). Head's affirming representations of place are unique. She shifts definitions of southern African spaces from their anchorage in realism and discourses of colonialism and nationalism. At the same time she acknowledges that these representations are tactical and intensely personalized, that it is precisely her self-interested fictionalizing which validates them. It is this ease with flagrant contradiction and fictionalizing that allowed her to claim, without a sense of irony or contradiction, that Botswana was a "land of peace and rest. It was a bewitched crossroad. Each day the sun rose on a hallowed land" (1984:196).

Distinctively Romantic ideas about "genius" and epiphanic moments are often linked to this celebration of "hallowed land". And it is significant that both Hinduism and Romanticism posit a transcendent "ecstacy" that stems from intense introspection and exploration of the inner realms of human consciousness. Developing this idea, Nirad Chaudhuri quotes the German Romantic, Friedrich Schlegel who wrote: "It is in the East that we must look for the supreme Romanticism" (quoted in Chaudhuri, 1979:7). It is often in Romanticism's assumptions about individual genius, and in its privileging of art as the locus of higher meaning, for limitlessly extending human perception that Head found her models. Taylor writes that this Romantic preoccupation registers a "notion of the work of art as the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance; a

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manifestation, moreover, which also completes something, even as it reveals" (1996: 419). Two concerns that help to explain the development of Head's oeuvre are suggested by all this. One is that it emphasizes Head's perception of the expressive, rather than mimetic role of her art. This sheds light on what Nixon terms her "strange solipsistic creativity"(1996:246), her enduring fascination with the liberating potential of creative processes and their products. While part of this fascination stems from their role in configuring culturally suppressed voices, much of it derives from their perceived power to transcend the worldly and evoke a completeness within art. We could speculate here that Head's fascination with D H Lawrence is at least in part determined by the way this writer celebrates, in the face of a dehumanizing twentieth-century industrialism, individual vision and passionate artistic self-expression. Turning directly to the substance of Head's texts, we could also speculate about the recurring figure of the embattled artist or visionary in both her self-narratives and her fiction. The persistence of this figure is partially explained by Head's passionate conviction in the connected notions of individual genius, intelligence and creativity.

A second concern raised by Romanticism is Head's particular use of the symbol. Showing how Romantic writings "give articulation to an inchoate vision", Taylor identifies the period's distinctive conception of the symbol: "The symbol, unlike allegory, provides the forms of language in which something, otherwise beyond our reach, can become visible...It can't be separated from what it reveals, as an external sign can be separated from its referent" (1989:379). The concept of the symbol as that which may generate a "perfect" work of art aptly describes much of Head's use of figurative language, especially in her description of community, creative activity and place. I show in Chapter Eight that it becomes an important way of explaining the sense of closure offered in her final novel. It is noteworthy here that certain earlier works by Head were received by some as children's stories, presumably because their apparently clear-cut moral meanings, characterization and unadorned prose suggested a rudimentary engagement with individual and social experiences.[26] I argue that texts which appear to illustrate this rudimentary engagement (texts accordingly marketed when they were first published) extensively exploit symbolism to pursue a "freedom" that, beyond reach in social and material terms, can almost be made palpable within the text. It could in fact be argued that much of the South African

[26] It is interesting that Toni Morrison perceived some of Head's work as suited to young adults. After reading *Serowe* and *Village Tales* (later, *The Collector of Treasures*), she recommended that they be handled by Random House's schoolbooks or young adults department. See (AKMM42BHP 8).

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criticism of the politics of Head's fiction is traceable to the unconventionality of this writer's unapologetic and emphatic affirmation of creativity and the imagination, realms of meaning and pleasure which do not directly point to freedoms beyond the text.

As Gates shows, the neglect of imaginative notions of freedom in certain literatures is a function of the stereotyping of writers who confront certain political circumstances and of critics' expectations about their mimetic engagement with surrounding worlds. But it is also true that many southern African writers, especially South African,[27] have imbibed a highly instrumentalist view of fiction's pragmatic social role. In recent years, southern African writers like Mia Couto,[28] Yvonne Vera[29] or Chenjerai Hove[30] have - both in their subject-matter and narrative techniques - turned to the world of the imagination, to fantasy and overt-myth-making in order to discover new notions of freedom. The Mozambican writer, Mia Couto demonstrates an especially polemical endorsement of the imagination in contexts that appear to demand a strictly functional role for fiction. In *Voices Made Night*, his short-story collection, Couto uses fantastic techniques and subject-matter and disavows the idea that social realism is the most appropriate strategy for representing Mozambique's climate of poverty, civil war and political repression. Couto also turns repeatedly to characters' efforts to resist stultifying circumstances through extravagant flights of the imagination. In a foreword to the collection, the author emphatically defines a place for the struggle of the imagination when he cautions: "Faced by an absence of everything, men abstain from dreams, depriving themselves of the desire to be others" (1990). Couto's admonition resonates in a short episode in Head's *A Question of Power*, when the central character despairingly confronts her impoverished pupils' reliance on rote learning in a world of "harsh environments...where all magic was dead or had not even begun to live" (1974:68):

> English composition was the starkest, bleakest lesson of the day. Someone had set the pattern, and it remained the furthest reaches of the children's imaginations: Life in Botswana - `When the rain rains we go to the lands to plough. We plough with oxen. The cow is a very useful animal. We use every part of it. We sell its skin for leather. We sell its bones. Glue is made from its hooves...' They trusted nothing else. It was safe and thoroughly known by heart. (1974:67)

[27] I am thinking here especially of the canonization of black literatures between the fifties and eighties. The orthodoxies about political commitment that shaped criticism during this period have been noted. Also important is the way criticism created expectations about writing, so that the schools of black writing between the fifties and eighties were always shaped by highly instrumentalist notions of social engagement.

[28] See his *Voices Made Night* (1990) and *Every Man is a Race* (1994).

[29] Vera's most recently published novel, *Butterfly Burning* (1998), presents a particularly emphatic affirmation of imaginative powers through its style and the consciousness of the central character.

[30] Hove's *Bones* (1988) is set during the Zimbabwean war of liberation and stresses the centrality of cognition and creativity in struggles for human liberties.

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Like Couto, Head shows that the abstention "from dreams" or "the desire to be others" is possibly the definitive index of dehumanization in the face of overwhelming social circumstances. A faith in humanizing imaginative impulses is therefore vitally connected to her social vision where "Southern Africa might one day become the home of the storyteller and dreamer, who did not hurt others but only introduced new dreams that filled the heart with wonder" (1989a:143).

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# CHAPTER TWO
# ESTABLISHING CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION: BESSIE HEAD'S "IMAGINED COMMUNITY"

> I do write letters, sometimes so long they run to 16 pages, but I pace them very sensitively against the person to whom I am communicating because it is something outside of what you can buy and sell and it is intended to give happiness to the recipient. It is something that's for free. (Bessie Head in a letter to Nikki Giovanni, CKMM75 BHP25)

This chapter considers how Head's letters present writing strategies and interpretive challenges that recur in her fiction. I adapt Francoise Lionnet's term, "performative intertextuality" (1993:136), which she applies to writers who develop analogous themes. Concentrating on the performative aspects of Head's letter-writing, I show that she situates herself in different communities - of readers, writers and social groups. This positioning becomes a way of confronting a cultural terrain that is broader than, but for Head also connected to the cultural worlds she directly confronts in her writing. The chapter also shows how ideas (constantly raised in the themes and strategies of her fiction) about communication recur in her letter-writing. Identifying Head's dilemmas about communication in A *Question of Power*, Jacqueline Rose writes: "Perhaps the factor of madness in this book, the questions about communication inside and outside cultures which it raises, can serve to expose or lay bare the delusional component behind any uncritical belief that text or speaker simply speak" (1994:403).

Head is concerned with the ways in which social locations and cultural lenses affect speaking, writing, listening and understanding. As the creative struggles of her fictional characters often indicate, certain voices are never heard because they are trapped in frameworks that privilege speakers who are socially powerful. Like her fiction, her letters expose the fallacy of assuming that "text or speaker simply speak" (Rose, 1994:403). But her letters also configure communities in which liberating exchanges can take place. The sense of community defined here is expansive. It encompasses relationships with the numerous correspondents to whom she wrote as well as her recourse to certain literary influences and religious sources. The communities in which Head establishes dialogues redefine the utopian societies often delineated in her fiction. In these, reciprocal relationships guarantee each person's right to be heard. That Head envisages these ideal exchanges is not because she balks at the idea of sustaining her scrutiny of the cultural parameters of communication. Rather, her optimism reflects a belief that liberating communication is possible when differences between individuals and groups exist in non-hierarchical processes of interaction.

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A copious letter-writer who preserved others' letters to herself and retained copies of her own, Head wrote letters[1] that span the entire period during which she published her novels. Much of her correspondence was with publishers, literary agents, editors, patrons and fans, and often referred directly to her fiction-writing. Her seclusion in a small Botswanan village contributed to the importance she attached to written communication. The letters often convey the writer's thoughts and feelings in a remarkably intense way, even when her correspondents were sporadic or reserved letter-writers themselves. Most of Head's letters are humorous, thoughtfully-written and extremely readable. But the way they register her distinctive fictional practices makes them integral to an understanding of her epistemology and narrative practices.

Randolph Vigne's *Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965-1979* (1991), Gillian Stead Eilersen's biography and suggestive thesis research[2] all indicate that Head's correspondence has become the subject of growing interest. To date, much of this interest has taken the form of archival research and biographical commentary. Eilersen, for example, constructs the author's life story around the evidence provided in her letters and writes that it was "mainly a well-organised and extremely extensive correspondence (1995:vii) that led to her biographical study of Head. Since Head's texts draw so directly on her psychic and personal experiences, research like Eilersen's has contributed significantly to explorations of her fiction. Yet the status of Head's letters as texts, as codifications of psyche and subjectivity, remains largely ignored. Maria Olaussen comments on this when she justifies her references to "extra-literary material, above all Head's letters and notes" with the aim of introducing "Head's insights...and not her as a person" (1996:18).

Approaching Head's letters as textual representations of subjectivity, however, still poses analytical difficulties about the letter form. Jacqueline Rose helps to explore these difficulties in her study of Sylvia Plath, who, like Head, was a prolific and controversial letter-writer. Considering the ethics of critical attention to Plath's letters, Rose answers the question "Are they personal or cultural property?" with a provocative recasting of questions: "Or is the problem precisely that they are hybrids which sit on the boundary, or expose the delicacy, the artificiality, of the boundary, between the two?" (1991:77). It is by exploiting Rose's allusion to the dual status of the letter as both cultural and personal that I

[1] Much of this correspondence is housed in Botswana's Khama III Memorial Musem in Serowe.

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critically explore Head's letters. While accepting that letters are relatively diffuse and "private" communications, I show that the effect of Head's turning to epistolarity is to link psychic and subjective experiences to the production of knowledge about her worlds.

As various critics have acknowledged, epistolarity for many writers functions during periods of exigency, with letters self-consciously operating as cultural texts.[3] Letter-writing can heighten communication processes and addresser's intended meanings in situations where it is felt that writing and speech are usually misunderstood or socially constrained. In his study of African women's epistolary fiction, Christopher Miller explores the politics of letter-writing by arguing that the upsurge of the epistolary form among these writers is directly connected to their exclusion from literary canons (1990:277-285). For Head, the crisis confronted by epistolarity is both political and personal. In similar ways to the francophone women writers explored by Miller, Head's work was neglected in relation to the male-centred and politically prescriptive South African writing that constituted a canon at the time that she wrote. Her letter-writing, while not formally connected to her fiction, addresses the problems of exclusion and canonicity that much epistolary fiction does. At the same time, her letter-writing forms an intensely personal response to psychic and political circumstances. In similar ways to the patterns that Rose identifies with Plath, Head's letters convey a very particular interpretation of biographical and cultural experiences.

Because its aims are so apparently functional and self-evident, letter-writing is often taken completely for granted. With the exception of the epistolary form in narrative fiction, there is a paucity of theory on the rhetorical implications of letter-writing. What, then, are the challenges for treating the personal letter as a cultural text? In her suggestive study of Head's early journalistic writings, Colette Guldimann provides leads for exploring Head's lesser-known writings in relation to the politics of later writing. Arguing that later published works embed strategies for subverting romance, she reads retrospectively. In this way she considers how criticism can transcend a fixation with the signifier to confront the way signifieds are consensually fixed (or idiosyncratically unfixed) by yoking particular signifiers to certain signifieds. She therefore isolates key coding patterns in the apparently unremarkable writings Head produced when she worked for a magazine. Guldimann focuses especially on the way that Head's recoding of romance in journalistic writing

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[2] See, for example, Colette Guldimann, "Bessie Head: Re-Writing the Romance: Journalism, Fiction and Gender" (1997 and Maria Olaussen's *Forceful Creation in Harsh Terrain: Place and Identity in Three Novels By Bessie Head* (1997).

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anticipates the strategically ambivalent plots and symbols to which the writer later turns. I show that Head's letters hint at the codes of her fictional texts and can be analyzed comparatively and in similar ways to Guldimann's exploration of her early journalistic writing.

Many critics have drawn attention to the performative qualities of Head's texts, to their concern with specularity, and with relations of seeing and representing.[4] With the scope it affords for adopting personae, the letter is a site of enunciating performance that has much in common with dramatic performance. Moreover, the letter creates a fixed position for the addresser and addressee. Unlike many other forms of communication, letters offer writers tremendous opportunities to control the relationship between the sender and the receiver of messages. Head was often anxious about the ways that certain forms of communication shift and transform depending on the social locations and viewpoints of listeners. This is interestingly revealed in her comments on critics who interviewed her and in her research on oral performance.[5] In many ways, then, the enthusiasm of her letter-writing as well as her painstaking collection of letters suggest her belief that letter-writing was a powerful means of establishing control in communicative relationships. This special enunciative orientation is highlighted by Elizabeth Hardwick,[6] whose claims about letter-writing aptly describe Head's focused and self-conscious use of the form: "A letter is not a dialogue or even an omniscient exposition. It is a fabric of surfaces, a mask, a form as well-suited to affectations as to the affection. The letter is, by its natural shape, self-justifying; it is one's own evidence, deposition, a self-serving testimony. In a letter the writer holds all the cards, controls everything" (1974:36).

Tracing the rhetorical and performative aspects described above, I isolate three facets of Head's letter-writing. I start by exploring the writer's alertness to subject positions and communicative avenues available to her. Here I refer to film, performance and literary theories that deal with the deployment of masks among socially-subordinate subjects. Showing how she ambiguously situates herself in relation to correspondents with relatively privileged subject positions (her publishers, editors, patrons and well-known black

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[3] See especially Janet Altman who writes that "epistolarity tends to flourish...at crisis moments" (1982:212).
[4] See Jacqueline Rose (1994) and especially studies of *A Question of Power* by critics like Margaret Tucker (1988), Virginia Ola (1990) and Caroline Rooney (1991).
[5] By 1985, Head's unpleasant encounters with interviewers had led her to respond to a request for one in the following way "I no longer do the interview (sic) and I no longer receive people in my home" (NKMM89BHP4). Describing one interviewer as "rapacious", she claimed that "There is little that is beautiful about the University World" (NKMM348BHP2). As revealed by her comments on work for *Serowe,* she was often extremely sensitive to her respondents' views in her own use of oral testimony.
[6] Hardwick deals with letters in epistolary fiction and her claims clearly do not describe all letter-writers.

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American writers), I argue that, both explicitly and indirectly, she questions apparently clear-cut relationships. Focusing on the polysemy of Head's writing, I then go on to indicate that her correspondence with fans identifies a role for readers to develop the imaginative meanings of her texts. Head often constructs "messages" that elude the reader who assumes conventional reading strategies and therefore interprets her concerns - like the obscure themes and strategies of *A Question of Power* - as unintelligible "noise". By turning to Head's letters, we are able to follow the way the writer invites the reader to contribute dynamically to a communicative process initiated by her texts. We can consider the importance Head attaches not to presenting fixed messages, but to raising ideas that encourage the reader's imaginative discovery of further ones. The chapter also examines the extent to which Head's letters map literary, philosophical and religious influences on her work. I show especially how she validates her own creativity and philosophy by drawing on diverse fictional and philosophical texts. Drawing on Claude Levi-Strauss' discussion of *bricolage* (1966), I argue that Head "recreates" many of the cultural resources she discovered. Levi-Strauss shows that symbolic phenomena can be actively interpreted by agents who make sense of their world through their positioned "reinvention". I am therefore interested in the way that Head reconfigures others' texts in a manner similar to the imaginative interpretation she believed her own texts offered to her readers.

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### Letter-writing as Self-Production

> You meet someone and feel disturbed, repelled. You say nothing but smile and talk because your respectable face demands that you treat people nicely. Two years later after a lot of anguished water has gone under the bridge you make the truthful statement you could have made right from the beginning. (Head in a letter to Giles Gordon, BKMM44BHP124: 2)

In her study of Plath, Rose deals with the charge of "falseness" which many of Plath's critics, family and friends levelled at her autobiographical work.[7] Defending the distortion of "truth" in Plath's writing, she writes: "For Plath...this is not a process that can be measured (how far, how fairly does she distort?); distortion - dismemberment - belongs, without apology to the process of writing: characters 'netted' from the life who 'manage to turn up, dismembered or otherwise, in stories'" (1992: 75). Like Plath's, Head's autobiographical writing inhabits an explosive context of others' "truths" versus her "falsehoods". This is manifested particularly in perceptions of her "scandalous" letters. Two correspondents at the centre of a controversy here were Giles Gordon, her former

editor and Patrick Cullinan, an acquaintance from Cape Town with whom she built up a long-standing friendship. Initially Head defined them as close and trusted friends, yet later vilified them as predatory and abusive. Both Gordon and Cullinan were surprised and deeply hurt. As Rose suggests, these sorts of conflicts need not raise only the question of what licence is permissible for the author. Instead, they could lead us to consider to what ends the author distorted in the ways that she did.

In exploring these ends, it is necessary to take into account two recurrent poses that Head adopted in her letters. One is the pose of the amicable, grateful and obliging Bessie Head, the friend of well-known writers like Nikki Giovanni and Alice Walker or the self-deprecating woman who laughed at her physical appearance, at not being taken seriously, or at the stereotypes of her socially marginal position. The second and related pose is "paranoid", a position of extreme defensiveness through which Head, often traumatically, negotiated defiant enunciating positions for herself. Her vacillating positions often suggest the performativeness of women's gendered identities. Studies of these range from psychoanalytic and film studies of the masquerade, to literary studies of the "woman warrior". In psychoanalytic theory, "masquerade refers to the exaggeration by some women of feminine behaviours" (Kuhn, 1994: 259). Tracing the history of the term in feminist film theory, Annette Kuhn cites its appearance in the 1920s and charts its use by theorists like Laura Mulvey, Simone de Beauvoir and Jane Gaines to describe women's self-conscious and strategic performance of femininity (1994:215-6). Related to these studies of gender identity as "masquerade", analysis of the "woman warrior" in literary texts indicates that many authors may contradictorily combine in their women characters both "aggression against others and abjection of the self" (Walker, 1991b:115). As Cheryl Walker (1991b) shows in relation to the writings of Elinor Wylie, a divided persona registers both an official subordinate position and the desire for new modes of self-expression.

A range of theories about the feminine mask in cultural texts and performance therefore emphasize that women, positioned within patriarchal discourses, often self-consciously abandon prescribed subject positions and attitudes. Especially provocative about these theories is the suggestion that socially-subordinate groups are uniquely alienated from the "selves" constructed for them within dominant narratives: their public personae are rarely experienced as "true identities", but as postures, as easily abandoned

[7] She concentrates especially on the tampering with and distortion of her letters and journals to illustrate this.

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as they are adopted.[8] The conflict between characters' official identities and existential states or creative struggles that transcend them are central to Head's writing. I argue here that this conflict surfaces also in her letter-writing.

Two of the groups with whom Head established particularly close yet also tempestuous bonds were publishers, patrons and editors on one hand, and on the other, African-American women writers. Her relations with the former group were often very intimate. Their importance was magnified largely because of the author's sequestered existence in Botswana. Refused Botswanan citizenship and frustrated by her straitened circumstances in an isolated village, she increasingly viewed her life in exile as being less like a refuge after South Africa, than like a prison. Shortly after arriving in Serowe, she confided to Randolph Vigne, an acquaintance from South Africa who subsequently supported her literary career, that: "This is a ruthlessly cruel place... There are powerful people in the background fixing things...You know perhaps nothing about a little village. Everything is in-woven and everything about everyone known" (1991:14). Because of limited access to her reading public, precarious material resources and infrequent opportunities for travel, Head appeared to rely on her publishers, editors, agents and patrons for vital emotional and psychological support.

One of her closest confidantes was Giles Gordon, initially her editor for Victor Gollancz, and after 1973, her agent for Anthony Sheil. They began working closely together before the publication of her second novel. In 1968, Head formally addressed Gordon as "Dear Mr Gordon" and wrote him brief and business-like letters. By 1970 the address had changed to "Dear Giles", with Head writing long letters punctuated by confidential remarks like "as you know from the work we did on 'MARU' I get slightly hysterical when we don't see, eye to eye, on eternity" (AKMM24BHP19). Between the late sixties and mid-seventies, Head and Gordon were corresponding about their families, Head's reading interests, Gordon's admiration for her work as well as his own writing: "As to your extraordinarily detailed and perceptive reading of THE UMBRELLA MAN, I can only say how grateful I am and I am delighted that you enjoyed so much of the book as you did. As it happens I wote it eight years ago now, and not a word was changed since then, and I am glad that you feel it stands the test of time" (AKMM24BHP36).

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[8] The corollary that dominant subjects also misrecognize themselves does not necessarily mean that they experience misrecognition as alienation.

While the intimacy with Gordon could be explained largely in terms of Head's practical need for a supportive ally in the publishing world, the tone of her confidences to correspondents like Randolph Vigne and Patrick Cullinan is less easily explained. Both men were first encountered in South Africa. Her relationship with Cullinan started with a brief meeting in Cape Town, and developed when he and his wife helped her to obtain an exit permit in 1964. Head first met Vigne when he was working for *The New African* and she worked as a journalist in Cape Town. Following her exile to Botswana and Vigne's emigration to Britain, the two corresponded regularly. Striking about her exchanges with both men is her frequent reference to them as saviours. She often refers to Vigne as "daddy" or "angel papa" (1991:119), appealing to him, for example, in the following way: "Randolph, I deeply value your care and affection and concern for me. Please don't let go of me...Please Randolph, whatever else happens, keep a hold on me somewhere and please keep writing" (Head, 1991: 146-8). During the first few years of her arrival in Botswana, Head repeatedly turned to Cullinan for moral and practical protection. She also often shared her anxieties as a writer with him, and earnestly responded to his comments on her work. A tone of deep gratitude, vulnerability and dependence is pronounced in her letters to Vigne, Cullinan and Gordon; while she confided intimately in many other male correspondents who helped her, she did not adopt the same manner of gratitude and helplessness.

Head's emotional reliance on certain male mentors could be explained in terms of the idea of the father presence as generator and as occupying a position of authority in relation to a daughter. From this perspective, her preoccupation with fantasy patriarchs can be traced to the absence of a socially enabling father figure in her real life. The recurrence of authoritative father figures in her later work suggests that they do have some compensatory significance. But Head's responses to white male protector figures in her letters also reveal a refractory tone. Important here is her frequent vacillating between the vulnerable speaker who expresses gratitude or helplessness towards her patron, and the voice of outrage and independence evident in some of her letters. By the mid-seventies, Head was identifying both Cullinan and Gordon as treacherous. In a letter to Davis Poynter, she attacked Cullinan as a "business man, ugly and aggressive" (AKMM61BHP52) who had tried to coerce her into publishing her work for his personal gain. Shortly before this, she wrote that she would no longer rely on Gordon to manage her financial affairs: "Since June, with each letter you've sent me a new version of my 'tax problem'. The above is the last version I am going to take from you. I'm having no more of

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your monkey tricks. Since the problem is my own, I am taking it on my own shoulder" (AKMM44BHP187).

Her letters to correspondents like Gordon and Cullinan therefore reveal a tortuously divided persona. On one level, Head confirms her ascribed situation as a black woman and struggling writer. On another, she angrily rejects locations of subordination. Her mask of gratitude suggests the social situation of fictional characters like Mouse in *The Cardinals* and Margaret in *Maru*. In ways associated with the positioning of Mouse and Margaret in their male mentors' plans, Head's letters indirectly testify to the stifling positions that her social environment offers a black woman artist. In the case of her correspondence with Vigne, Gordon and Cullinan, she often situates herself in relations of dependency, subordination and supplication. But her letter-writing to these men also becomes an intensely personal and impulsive way of confronting tensions between a "self" dictated by social circumstances and the possibilities for other defiant modes of being.

In the first volume of her autobiography, Doris Lessing retrospectively extricates the watchful private selves - which largely fuelled her philosophical and literary development - from the public personae she adopted:

> What I learned then was how strong in me was the personality I call the Hostess...This Hostess personality, bright, helpful attentive, receptive to what is expected, is very strong indeed. It is a protection, a shield, for the private self. How useful it has been, is now, when being interviewed, photographed, a public person for public use. But behind all that friendliness was something else, the observer...You will never get access here, you can't, this is the ultimate and inviolable privacy. They call it loneliness, that here is this place unsharable with anyone at all, ever, but it is all we have to fall back on, Me, I, this feeling of me. The observer, never to be touched, tasted, felt, seen, by anyone else. (1994:20)

In her views about a "public person for public use", Lessing disparagingly refers to the personality of Tigger, "that healthy bouncing beast" (1994:20) whose posture of aggression and brash humour resolutely censored and protected a hidden sensitive self. Lessing clearly deals with control over a private self. In contrast, Head's letters testify to the violent eruption of this vulnerable self, as well as to the unsettling effect that this eruption has for her writing. A comparison between the masks assumed by the two writers throws into relief the extent to which Head painfully dredged up from her unconscious "the observer, never to be touched, tasted, felt, seen, by anyone else" (Lessing, 1994:20). Head's ambivalent epistolary masks poignantly reveal how social relationships dictate positions from which to speak. At the same time, they suggest the difficulties of seeking to reject these official positions.

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Head's convoluted self-production is continued in her letters to the black American women writers with whom she corresponded. Her long correspondence with writers like Alice Walker, Nikki Giovanni and Toni Morrison was often initiated by their mediating roles in relation to her writing, but developed into intimate communications. As her communication with certain white male patrons does, these frequently convey her adoption of shifting masks. In the persona evident in letters to African-American writers, she dramatizes a profound longing for intimacy. One revealing exchange here is her communication with Alice Walker. This started when Head was asked to submit stories and articles to *MS* magazine, for which Walker then worked as an agent. By 1974, Head was addressing her as "My Dearest Other Half" (CKMM76BHP6), and emotionally disclosing her philosophical and emotional thoughts. Head began writing to Toni Morrison when her relationship with Giles Gordon broke down. Morrison, then an editor for Random house in New York, was her first choice of a replacement editor. In an early letter to Morrison, she lambasted Gordon for mismanaging her tax affairs and harbouring resentment about her criticism of his later novels. The candour of her revelations is intriguing, since she opened her first letter by stating that "We are acquainted with each other in a very indirect way" (CKMM42BHP2). Confiding intimately in the American author and editor in her second letter, Head appeared to transfer her need for an editor-confidant immediately to Morrison and passionately unburdened herself about Gordon's incompetence. But of all her black American confidants, Giovanni was the closest. Head wrote frequently to her after 1973, when the two were involved in radio talk shows and interviews in Botswana. After the African-American writer's visit to this country, Head wrote passionately: "Lord Lord Lord--what I [sic] lovely time I had with you all in Gaberone! Since I've come back I've had to go from house to house with your picture because everyone wanted to see it. I had to recount those five days from beginning to end" (CKMM75BHP9).

Head ardently adopts the manner of earnest friend and confidant in many of her exchanges with African-American women writers. While her adoption of a mask is again crucial, the posture of sisterly intimacy clearly differs from the pose of supplicant textualized in letters to correspondents like Vigne and Cullinan. Her communications with other black women writers conveys a subliminal awareness that positions of identification and belonging are enormously gratifying. The enthusiasm and spontaneity conveyed in many of her letters are evidence of her deep need for reciprocity, for frank communication about common areas of concern and literary endeavour in particular. They also express a

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yearning for non-oppressive interpersonal interaction, the spiritually and socially-liberating sphere that she so often projects in her fiction. A preoccupation with interaction surfaces explicitly in the interpersonal exchanges represented in novels like *The Cardinals*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. Here, dominant discourses, especially of race and gender, constrain the opportunities that socially disempowered black women have for communicating with others as equals. In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, fetters on communication are explicitly linked to oppressive forms of collective identification. Both implicitly and explicitly, Head's fiction affirms the social and psychological implications of mutual sharing and of equal exchange. We can therefore see her letter-writing as an intensely immediate process through which she unravels the constraints on, or the possibilities opened up by enunciative acts.

The sudden shifts in Head's relationships reveal her tremendous sensitivity to the power dynamics and social rules that limit interpersonal interaction. Importantly, it was in her most confiding and trusting relationships that Head often saw traces of deception and abuse. Epistolary masks that suggested a special closeness to correspondents were often replaced by attitudes of extreme hostility and suspicion. In alternating between starkly ambivalent postures, Head testifies to the precariousness of dialogue between equal persons, to the difficulty of discovering relations unaffected by social inequalities or socially-conditioned reserve. The intensity and unpredictability of her responses indicate her impulsive recognition of how social hierarchies or conventions affect reciprocal exchanges. But her passionate outbursts of animosity also imply the rhetorical effects of conspiracy narratives and paranoia. "Paranoia" is traditionally defined simply as a form of psychological or cultural instability. But recent attention to it in socially subordinate subjects, in popular culture and in literary texts focuses on the potential it opens up for interrogating and gaining control over apparently natural practices or dominant social messages and structures.[9] Head's paranoia, customarily seen merely as delusion, can be reassessed in similar ways. Although it may not be controlled or self-conscious, her sense of personal victimization and of being targeted by particular people cryptically conceptualizes the naturalized rituals and power relationships of her social world.

Frederic Jameson (1992) considers how conspiracy narratives constitute forms of counter-hegemonic representation and interrogate massive, ubiquitous and usually concealed systems of repression. Jameson connects these systems to late capitalism, but

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provides a compelling framework for viewing conspiracy narratives as textual interrogations of dominant systems or narratives. In particular, he reads the patterns in conspiracy narratives allegorically, identifying symbolic details that represent social dynamics and so provide a "form of realism" (1992:33). In similar ways to Jameson's treatment of conspiracy narratives, critics of "literary paranoia" show how certain writers create narratives of elaborate persecution and in this way gesture towards forms of textual and interpretive control. Many critics of Thomas Pynchon, probably the twentieth-century's best-known paranoid writer, focus on his comprehensive presentation of patterns that demand careful decoding. Louis Mackey argues that "Pynchon's book bombards us with data, tempts us with a surfeit of clues. But the data never entail a sure conclusion, and the clues lead not to solutions but to further problems...There are signs - too many signs - but nothing assuredly signified" (1986:60). In similar vein, Tony Tanner claims that with Pynchon's writing, "The reader does not move comfortably from some ideal 'emptiness' of meaning to a satisfying fullness but instead becomes involved in a process which any perception can precipitate a new confusion, and an apparent clarification can turn into a prelude to further difficulties" (1986:70). As an exemplary form of literary paranoia, Pynchon's writing refuses official versions of truth, strongly defends subjective perception, and dwells on the paranoid's apprehensive prediction of surrounding intrigues. As I go on to show, these patterns, anticipating many of the themes and strategies of her fiction, surface in the subjects and codes of Head's correspondence.

A strongly paranoid perception of her status emerges in Head's claims about Cullinan, who started his own publishing company in the mid-seventies. Following a disagreement with Pantheon about the publication of *Serowe: Village of the Rainwind,* Head approached Cullinan with her new book at the beginning of 1975. By the middle of 1976, she had linked Cullinan to Gordon's treachery, attacking both for claiming that she was insane, and Cullinan for pressurizing her for the publishing rights to *Serowe.* Until the end of her life, Head disseminated stories that Cullinan had abused her trust and attempted to "steal" her work. The shift in her relations with Cullinan is echoed in those with Giles Gordon. Shortly after a letter praising her editor's recently published novel, she submitted *A Question of Power.* This appears to mark the start of a complicated rift between the two. Gordon was unenthusiastic about the book, claiming that its treatment of the central character' psychological experiences and breakdowns were too close to

[9] See for example, Jerry Flieger's "The Listening Eye: Postmodernism, Paranoia and the hypervisible" (1996),

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Head's own. Towards the end of 1975, Head appeared to displace her anger at Gordon's criticism of her novel by writing that she would no longer rely on him to manage her financial affairs. She went on to insist that he, like many others, ruthlessly victimized her, and that the person with whom she communicated was quite different from the friend she had known previously: "This letter is to sort out you and me. I'm not hurrying anywhere with contracts or anything, so I have time to value people. Every time someone tries to kill me, I ask myself: 'Why me?'...This time I have part of the answer...You are so broken now because you've lost your way among unreal people who are so horrible to themselves...that you've got nothing to keep you going" (AKMM44BHP187). From this point onwards, the relationship deteriorated steadily, with Head frequently vilifying Gordon in her writings to others.[10]

Head's fluctuating relationships with editors, agents and publishers were a recurring pattern. Others with whom she had ties that started off amicably and later turned sour were Reg Davis-Poynter, James Currey and Heinemann's employees. Her interaction with Davis-Poynter was particularly stormy: Head had arranged to contract her collection of short stories to him, but changed her mind after claiming that the British publisher had been lax about assisting her with taxation and the distribution of *A Question of Power*. She went on to describe Davis-Poynter as one who "wished to inflict suffering on me" (AKMM61BHP53) and announced that she would terminate their alliance and retrieve the typescript for her short story collection from him. Ten years later, she made the same conclusive break with Heinemann when she informed Vicky Unwin, a Heinemann editor that she "wish[ed] to have no further communication with you and Heinemann AWS" (AKMM59BHP250). Again, her reason for severing ties was a belief that she had been exploited and that Heinemann had signed an illegal contract for *Maru*. It is noteworthy that Head passionately attacked both Cullinan and Gordon at a time when many critics and readers were condemning *A Question of Power*. Her outbursts, although not always isolating particular insecurities during this period, convey a veiled sense of her vulnerability as a writer in the face of a reading market that assessed her work. The disadvantages of the artist who is a poor black woman in relation to a world that stifles or misunderstands her creativity, repeatedly surfaces in Head's fiction. Her angry letters often targeted figures within the public world that she herself had to confront as an artist.

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exploring the value of a paranoid perspective in the face of the excessive visual display in contemporary society.

[10] Head did not maintain her hostility towards Gordon; in January 1981 she wrote an amiable and fairly contrite letter to him following her visit to London. See AKMM44BHP220.

Many of Head's complaints about Gordon were communicated to Toni Morrison. Judging from the delay and caution of Morrison's reply, it appears that her lengthy outburst took Morrison by surprise. The African-American guardedly informed Head that the *Serowe* and short story manuscripts could be better handled by Random House's "school book or young adult department" and concluded: "What I am eager to receive from you is a novel. If ever you have something like that to show, please let me know. I would consider it an honour to be your American publisher" (AKMM42BHP8). Head interpreted Morrison's response as treachery, and in a letter to another editor described her behaviour as "highly alarming and not at all honourable" (AKMM43BHP15). The turnabout in intercourse was more pronounced with Giovanni. Although Head wrote enthusiastically to Giovanni in 1974, by 1975 she wrote: "I can see that the prospect of writing letters fills you with a terrible anguish. Why not let us be mutual post card senders. When you scrawl: 'I've just come back from the Barbados. I worked really hard on my sun tan...' I can scrawl back: I've just come into Serowe on my bike for meat and mail. I had to work hard pushing it against the wind" (CKMM75BHP25). Anxiety that her own enthusiasm about intimate communication was not reciprocated led to the termination of their friendship. After her letter in January 1975, she wrote a bluntly denunciatory letter, claiming: "How long does the human lie go on? We have nothing in common, no human communication, no friendly chit-chat NOTHING! There's nothing on the horizon but NG billing NG and I for one have had enough" (CKMM75:BHP34).

The fervour with which Head embraced someone like Giovanni as a friend, then, is integrally connected to her anger and sense of betrayal when she confronted the remoteness of an ideally interactive relationship. This sense of betrayal is also acutely reflected in her letters to Alice Walker. Head wrote long and thoughtful letters, although Walker's responses were often brief and cursory. Despite the African-American's claims that "Your letters are the most beautiful and thick-with-thought letters I think I've ever had ... very much like a kind of grace, a blessing" (CKMM76BHP5), Walker rarely responded to Head's letters with the same ease, spontaneity and enthusiasm. Communication with Walker ended by the end of 1976, when Head accused the American writer of plagiarizing her work (AKMM76BHP26). While she did not ever send her the enraged letters she sent Giovanni, her comments elsewhere indicate her deep bitterness about Walker's disinterest.[11]

[11] See her letter about Walker to Giovanni: AKMM75BHP9.

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These patterns of exchange indicate that where Head often wrote as though her correspondents could unreservedly share her experiences and feelings, she also painfully acknowledged the limitations of this sharing. More specifically, she was to recognize that the disclosure of experiences according to criteria like race or gender could never straightforwardly guarantee effective communication. Her ardent declarations of intimacy were largely an expression of her desire, while her sense of persecution painfully registered the extent to which the misunderstanding, miscommunication, and everyday and social problems of a real world frustrated this desire. Her letters to correspondents like Morrison, Walker and Giovanni frequently tell stories of deception, of treachery, of her correspondents' betrayal of the trust she showed them. In this way they allude to the exploitative, predatory and competitive behaviour sanctioned by dominant social relationships and attitudes.

Many of Head's encounters with organizations reflect the anger and sense of persecution she often demonstrated towards her editors, publishers and agents. Although she led a secluded and materially precarious life, she received, after the publication of her major novels, invitations to a variety of conferences, seminars and workshops. She was a regular and enthusiastic participant in minor local organizations such as the Peace Corps and the short-lived Writers Association of Botswana.[12] Conversely, her relations with organizers and participants at international events were often strained. She complained bitterly, for example, about the racism of participants at the Berlin International Literature Days Conference in 1979 (FKMM189BHP20) and the Iowa Writers Conference in 1977, and admitted that she dreaded travelling since "too many people tried to humiliate and degrade me" (FKMM187BHP19). Her notes on her experiences in Berlin in 1979 are revealing about her sense of isolation from internationally acclaimed writers. She claimed to feel alienated from the worlds of power and ambition she felt they inhabited. This alienation often over-rode the literary concerns and political views she might have shared with them. By 1985, she confessed that "I am absolutely paranoid about attending writer's workshops and conferences" (FKMM383BHP28). Generally, conferences and formal literary contacts became a source of deep anxiety and confirmed her preference for "a quiet shuffling lost humility...far removed from worlds of power and ambition" (FKMM181BHP11).

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[12] It is noteworthy that Head took her contact with this small organization very seriously. She prepared talks for it and sent members her work even though she was at the time struggling with her own career and the Association clearly had little, in terms of money or publicity, to offer her.

Head's perception of her outcast position could reach extravagant proportions, evident in the way she connected apparently unrelated problems in her life. For example, in an attempt to avoid the 1983 Zimbabwe Book Fair at which she was to be honoured, she claimed to be dying of lung cancer. After confessing that her excuse was a lie, she linked the Book Fair to the South African poet, Mongane Serote, who, she insisted, had laughed at her story about being physically assaulted. In a letter to Heinemann's Vicky Unwin, she wrote that the Zimbabwe Publishing House had publicized her Book Fair appearance simply to continue, along with Heinemann, "stealing my books" (AKMM59 BHP250). This letter illustrates the author's tortuous transformation of the details of her life into an elaborate story of conspiracy. Writing of this in relation to Pynchon, Louis Mackey argues: "The paranoid's faith - his substance of things hoped for and his evidence of things not seen - is: someone's out to get me" (1986:60) Mackey continues: "The paranoid - it figures - can't win. He is doomed either to destruction or to dissolution. ... Destruction if his paranoid faith (that is, fear) is warranted, dissolution if his anti-paranoid hope (that is, anxiety) is confirmed" (1986:60). The logic of this painful yet curiously fulfilling impasse accounts for Head's fervid emphasis on her persecution. Her anguished entrapment in the paranoid's "fear" and "hope" generates the urgent compulsion to situate her revised version of events in the big picture that "someone's out to get me".

Head's fiction deals repeatedly with the need for those oppressed on the basis of race, gender, class and other power relationships to discover subjectivities that transcend the preconceptions of those who are socially dominant. Mouse, the aspirant black woman writer of *The Cardinals*, Makhaya the black South African exile of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Margaret, the persecuted "Masarwa" artist in *Maru,* Elizabeth, the traumatized exile in *A Question of Power* all covertly or directly challenge their prescribed silence or submission. *A Question of Power* clearly identifies a source for the victim's resistance in her subjective "paranoid" perception. Elizabeth frequently inhabits a world of bizarre hallucinations. As figures in Elizabeth's self-created illusory world, the predatory Dan and Sello display an aggressiveness that the protagonist successfully decodes through her hallucinatory vision. While the real Sello and Dan are everyday men of the village in which Elizabeth lives, they assume a monstrous form only in Elizabeth's subjective perception. But her ability to distort and contest them enables her liberation.

Head's passionate letters do not convey her fiction's focused messages of resistance. Yet they have similar recuperative effects. Infused by the unconscious and painful encounters and emotions, her elaborate plots may have little to do with "the way

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things really are". But they offer her a measure of control over situations and relationships that might otherwise remain overwhelming and impenetrable. Explaining this control in a letter to Gordon, Head celebrated her rebellious subjective vision as "intuitive", and compared it with the "realism" of everyday and uncritical perception:

> What I would call abstraction is that whole body of intuitive responses we may live with but dare not acknowledge because of the confusion and hurt they are likely to cause. What I'd call realism is one's respectable face which helps one deceive, lie and survive by the scruff of one's neck. It is the intuitive side which undoes one but if one is alert to that world all its judgements are dead accurate... There's something hard inside you that isn't human...I can never get it right, that one goes through the act of always saying one thing with some "other kind" of knowledge, only in the end to make a clear firm statement of truth. (AKMM44BHP124:2)

These claims, strongly suggestive of Lessing's distinction between the "healthy bouncing beast" and the self that is not to be "tasted by anyone", shed light on a manoeuvre which Head adopted both in representing her own life and in writing fiction. Consciously or subconsciously exploiting paranoia as a strategy, she enlists "some 'other kind' of knowledge" to decode the surface calm of her worlds, her place in them and her relationships with others.

Although it takes a tortuously personal form, Head's "abstraction" indicates a concern, similar to Pynchon's, with the interpretive activity that can be claimed by the paranoid writer or subject. Unlike Pynchon's,[13] this activity is infused with a sense of visionary power. It is significant that Head often invested a spiritual force in positions of subordination. In a letter to Randolph Vigne, for example, she accounts for the dignity and independence of the victim not by invoking the retributive cycle of history, but by suggesting that only those who do not prey on the projected weakness of others are truly free:

> Some merciful fate put me on the receiving side of brutality and ignorance, but what if I were born to mete this out to others? I don't think any black man suffers as much as a white man - his torments and fears must be terrible and the man who is at the receiving end is actually strengthened, while he is weakened and weakened and weakened, day by day. This shout of rage of Stokely Carmichael is a shout from the depths of the deep, true exultant power he is receiving by being the man down there. (1991:55)

Dispersed throughout her letters, Head's autobiographical stories reveal extended tropes of persecution and suffering to extol the figure of the victim-seer. The recurrence of the figure discloses a paradoxically triumphant mythology of victimization, martyrdom and visionary insight.

[13] In Pynchon's texts, the endless proliferation of clues often underscores the paranoid's impotence and the tyranny of surrounding systems.

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It would be disingenuous to deny the relevance of Head's material circumstances to her suspicious responses to others. Her financial difficulties, tremendous isolation, and struggles to support herself through her writing clearly influenced her anxieties and suspicions about her publishers, editors and agents. Letters of appeal and complaint to the President of Botswana and the High Commissioner for Refugees reveal the urgent material problems she confronted shortly after her first breakdown. But these factors only partly account for her compulsive emphasis on her persecution. The theme of an almost inviolable victimization in her letters seems to acquire a self-generating momentum, with Head discovering evidence for an already established self-perception and for justifying her antagonism towards others. That victimization can become an empowering privilege leading to visionary truths is suggested in the following: "Most people live uncomplicated lives. They have work and quietly rear their children. There is an order and sanity about them that keeps the world going. There is an outer disorder and insanity about my life which makes me a victim...The second thing is my awareness of evil and a clear vision of direct interference in my life from an outside source. Put both problems together and they overwhelm me. It's always a big thing with me - if I am working something out, it's not only for myself, it's going to help others as well" (1991: 182).

For Head, the paranoid sensibility was more than a tormenting perception of personal vulnerability and victimization. It was often translated into a visionary gift that elevated the paranoid to a guru-like status of seer and teacher. Her lengthy correspondence with Mona Pehle about spirituality and philosophy emphatically describes messianic and guru figures as paranoid.[14] Eilersen surveys her ideas in the following way: "Bessie gave a fascinating insight into the reason for her admiration for Ramakrishna. He was an illiterate man, she said, 'but with an astonishing grasp of things spiritual'. He taught spiritual truths using 'vivid everyday detail of India to illustrate his thoughts...' In this way Ramakrishna and Jesus were very alike. They were also both paranoiac...Jesus was crucified for his paranoia" (1995:232). The connection established between paranoia and visionary perception frequently uncovers Head's recourse to Hinduism and eastern thought. Her philosophical views here emerge in her exploration of creativity or knowledge associated with socially persecuted figures like Mouse in *The Cardinals* or Margaret in *Maru*. But the fixation with visionary perception is also connected to Romantic notions of the artist as a kind of creator-God. This vision of creativity and the imagination is implied in

[14] A librarian who worked in Botswana, Pehle corresponded with Head on a range of philosophical and religious topics.

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many of Head's bafflingly enigmatic characters, whose social powerlessness belies their tremendous creative force. Many of the details in *The Cardinals* or *Maru* suggest that socially subjugated characters like Mouse and Margaret embody an obscure potential. Socially powerful characters like Johnny or Maru desperately yearn for (and often try to appropriate) the inner power that these unassuming characters are seen to possess.

Letter-writing offered Head opportunities to construct elaborate narratives of self. Although not part of a fictional form, her letters perform a fictionalizing function similar to the letters of epistolary fiction. They provide external readers with access to subjective stories in the deigis of her letters to internal readers. These subjective stories explore the limits and opportunities of communication. At times, Head's personae emphasize unqualified trust in or closeness to correspondents. These poses convey her position as a writer who was both impoverished and isolated, and who battled to find a receptive world of publishers and readers. Postures of intimacy also register a yearning for interchanges uncorrupted by suspicion or inequality. At other times, Head rejects masks of closeness to display a fierce defiance and disillusionment. Here she passionately acknowledges the tainted relationships and attitudes that inhibit ideal processes of communication. The angry poses within and subjects of Head's letter-writing are often emphatically "paranoid". Yet she frequently enlists anger and a sense of victimization in the service of independent and critical testimony. In this way, her letter-writing becomes a form of story-telling about a suffering self, but also about vocal, rebellious and triumphant selves.

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### Communicating Self-Narratives

> About the Carvlin man. He became too emotionally involved in my affairs. It frightened him and he pulled out of the correspondence but what a man he is! I never cared to bother him.. Friends come and go for strange reasons. (Head in a letter to Vigne, 1991:174)

Head's anxiety about the restrictive social assumptions and contexts of communication extended to a concern with the effects of her fiction on specific readers. By combining self-narration and direct address, her letter-writing opened up opportunities for her to perceive and to respond to the ways her published writing affected others. It could be argued that her letter-writing became an intense form of autobiographical narration. In addition to their strong "affect" function, letters were channels for describing deeply private experiences, thoughts and feelings, and for reaching out to a wide range of readers. Explaining the therapeutic implications here, she wrote to Nikki Giovanni, "Very seldom, I shuffle out of my house and go around visiting. More often I just stay home and spend

hours alone with myself—it's nothing for me to pursue a single line of thought for days and days. If life is like that, then every sort of contact with someone else is a real communication" (CKMM75BHP25). She went on to explain her distress about Giovanni's sporadic replies: "I only became anxious that I was losing track somewhere, that letters were going into a void and I wasn't sure how to communicate anymore" (CKMM75BHP25). Her tremendous concern with writing about herself at the same time that she maintained dialogue with others is especially evident in her correspondence with fans and other writers. I shall show that this dialogue led Head to affirm miscellaneous responses to her work, yet also established or assumed very particular frameworks for these responses.

One of Head's more enduring communications was with Betty Ulrich, an American writer with whom she corresponded at length about the process through which she produced her novels. Described the writing of *Maru* and *A Question of Power,* she offers her correspondent a privileged inside position for following her creative process: "It surprises me the way a novel really gets put together from all directions. The Margaret personality was what I felt like at a certain stage of inner perception or development, as though I might be on the threshold of my own inner peace" (CKMM1BHP5). Turning to *A Question of Power*, she wrote: "You ask if I have any more visions? I say that I never created them in the first instance. I was watching the performance of a lot of evil souls...There were apparently so many themes coming at me. One of them was the soul tie, underlying the theme of love. I threw it out and worked solidly on philosophies but with the wind and sun and everything and from the opening lines I try to get the atmosphere of the book" (CKMM1BHP5). Foregoing assumptions about authorial mastery and closed texts, she suggests that the reader can share the elusive imaginative process by which her fiction is produced.

Similar cooperative processes are celebrated elsewhere. In a letter to Mary Benson, the South African historian, writer and activist, Head described *A Question of Power* as a "big brain teaser for universities". She recounted her visit to a Nigerian university where she was questioned about this novel: "I told the students that any interpretation of *A Question of Power* would do. The author did not understand the experience either but it was intensely painful" (CKMM84BHP32). In these claims, she explicitly defines the act of reading as a dynamic one. The multivocal text is seen to allow the reader not simply to recognize a world created by the author, but to explore a range of meanings that her texts release. Responding to a paper on *A Question of Power*

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presented at the 1980 Conference of the Canadian Association of African Studies,[15] Head conveyed her pleasure in the scope that her novel offered for active interpretation:

> I hardly recognized my novel in your symbolic interpretation of it, but you are excused. *A Question of Power* is a novel readers take fierce possession of. The canvas on which the tale is drawn is BIG, the tale drawn on that canvas, small, sketchy and uncertain. There are wide spaces between each uncertain idea and sketch in which the narrator, Elizabeth, constantly says: I am not sure. I do not understand. But this, roughly, is the way things happened. I think I shall interpret the experience in this way. What do you think? This very attitude of uncertainty is an open invitation to the reader to move in and re-write and reinterpret the novel in his/her own way. So A QUESTION OF POWER is a book that is all things to all men and women. (NKMM342BHP5)

Many fans and admirers became Head's long-term correspondents. Writing simply to express interest in and admiration for her work, they received responses in which she shared extremely intimate reflections. In writing to them, she often defined herself as one who palpably illustrated the emotional and psychological crises described in her fiction. Entering into the spirit of living her fictional worlds, she transformed herself into a figure who could by turns move, astound and captivate her readers. Because of this, letters to individuals like Tom Carvlin, Beata Lipman and Tony Hall[16] communicate in a very heart-felt way her views about writing as an act prompted by abundant and irreducible impulses. In the following letter to Tony Hall, for example, the rapid pace, intense tone, and cryptic references dispel notions about the author's ownership and control over intended meanings: "You can see my method in AQP. I was struggling with total darkness and only glimpses of light. I had no control over the experiences I recorded and I said towards the book's end that I knew nothing but if I knew I would tell the simple truth. The experience frightened me enough to make me record it but I admit to the book being badly scrambled. I did not know the truth but a fearful hell was in front of me. My attitude at that time was let me get the hell out of hell. But I will work piecemeal like that. If I only see so much, I'll say so with humility" (KMM47BHP40). These comments reveal Head's belief that she could never claim full knowledge of her texts. At the same time, they suggest that the act of reading can constantly enlarge and extend her fiction's meaning.

Head did not, however, believe that the flexibility of the reading process should be limitless. She presumed that she shared with her readers certain codes for interpreting her work "satisfactorily". She therefore encourages a plural reading process only by presupposing a certain unity of outlook and belief between herself and her reader. This is

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[15] The paper was written by Romatela Francis, to whom Head wrote.

[16] It is interesting that all these corespondents came from backgrounds that were vastly different from Head's. She appeared to be fascinated by the possibilities of communicating with those with histories very different from hers, and with the borderless territory of her own "imagined community".

revealed in the way she earnestly encouraged discussion about her fiction, but withdrew from correspondents once she felt they could not share her vision or value her views. At these moments, Head implies that her readers are unable to accept a principle of unqualified equal interchange. A revealing indication of this is the history of her relations with Paddy Kitchen and Tom Carvlin. Carvlin was one of Head's most admiring fans, a news editor for the *Chicago Tribune* and an effusive supporter since 1969. Kitchen and Head began writing to each other regularly after Kitchen wrote an enthusiastic review of *When Rainclouds Gather* and requested an interview for the *Times Educational Supplement*.

Having established close communication with these correspondents on the basis of their interest in earlier work, Head wrote to them passionately about *A Question of Power.* Most of her letters to Carvlin deal with this text. They also communicate the acute psychological distress that eventually led to her hospitalization. Carvlin, although supportive, seemed overwhelmed by her confidences. After 1973 he and Head corresponded far less frequently than before. It is conceivable that he found only evidence of Head's mental torture in *A Question of Power*, a novel that he compared unfavourably with *Maru*. Conflict about her writing was never explicit in their interaction. But Head implied that the exchange had become too intense for him, that the depths and pain she described somehow eluded his understanding. This is evident in her effort to interpret a despairing essay she had sent him: "Tom, there were those goings on I put down in PATTERNS but it was really a lone solitary drama, sometimes so frightening that it was hard to believe that there were ordinary things like shopping etc...the violence and the fury of the sub-world just drew me into it" (GKMM32BHP22). It is revealed as well in her request to him to destroy her letters. While Head did not express a sense of betrayal to Carvlin, many of her letters suggest that the complex emotions and ideas with which she grappled could not be explored in the framework of their relationship. Suggesting this to Vigne, she wrote: "About the Carvlin man. He became too emotionally involved in my affairs. It frightened him and he pulled out of the correspondence but what a man he is! I never cared to bother him. Friends come and go for strange reasons" (1991:174).

Head's correspondence with Kitchen implies that a breakdown in communication occurred because of her correspondent's active betrayal of a communicative pact. After receiving a copy of *A Question of Power*, Kitchen transferred the responsibility of commenting on it her husband, Dulan Barber. He criticized what he saw as a problematic record of the author's own mental instability and made the following recommendations:

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"Your book is like food. At the moment the meat is raw. You have to cook it and serve it up on a nice clean china plate...The experience you have had is not one we have shared...in order for us to understand, you have to make it comprehensible to us" (CKMM74BHP63). Ironically, Head had previously complained to Kitchen about the condescending response of an agent, Hilary Rubinstein, to her novel: "Hilary's letter came first. It was the height to patronage and very annoying. Between the lines it said: 'Poor dear darling just came out of the loony bin and is not responsible for what she is saying'...He bloody well thinks that that wild and beautiful song can be made staid, conventional, petty" (CKMM74BHP60). When Head asked Kitchen to destroy her letters, it is likely that she felt both that Kitchen had betrayed her trust and that, like Carvlin, her correspondent could not fully understand her agonized writings.

Although Head herself described *A Question of Power* as a personal experience of breakdown and self-discovery, many readers felt that the novel confusedly chronicled her autobiographical experiences. But like many of her other writings, *A Question of Power* constantly allegorizes life experiences to explore social positions and cultural processes. I have suggested that this critical representation surfaces through a tormented paranoid recasting of events. Head attached paramount importance to what she termed "abstraction", so that the conventional boundaries between autobiography and invention became irrelevant to her critical and visionary forms of knowledge. The intense connections she established between her life and her fiction do not indicate that she sought to translate raw experience into language, but that she confronted her own life as a web of culturally-inscribed subject positions. For Head, fictionalizing life became a matter of inserting her own voice and narratives into a field of oppressive cultural stories of selfhood.

Head frequently responded strongly to "misreadings" of her work, her passionate response indicating the extent to which she expected her readers to share certain codes. Conveying this in a letter to Kitchen, she condemns the views of a student who had corresponded about her thesis study: "The student is a mad, wild feminist; she is femaleness in its ultimate form. In her thesis she scolds all women who do not take their femaleness and female responsibilities seriously. All the mad wild feminists of the world passionately love A Question of Power and Elizabeth but they make a mistake. Elizabeth is brutally assaulted but she remains in close intellectual communication with the two men...They make a mistake. Elizabeth is not women. The student, Jane Bryce, is WOMAN" (CKMM74BHP117). In a long letter to Charles Larson and his wife, Head

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attacked the well-known African literature critic's study of her work. Much of the letter provides a corrected reading of his interpretation of *A Question of Power*. It makes such pointed interventions as "Charles re-sets the setting of the book right back in South Africa which just makes everything that could be simple complicated. Obviously, he cannot face that black men could say: 'Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death...' So it must be South Africa that I am churning over" (CKMM96BHP8).

Exchanges like these reveal that Head's interest in the interactive role of the letter does not contradict an assertive autobiographical impulse. Rather, she invokes an "affect" function to guarantee transmission of an authoritative autobiographical message. The tremendous satisfaction she gained from confirming a communicative pact is evident in her response to an American reviewer of *Maru* and *A Question of Power*: "You knew I would love your papers! You were absolutely confident about that! I am a very solitary person but something strange happens to me again and again. I find my thoughts and preoccupations duplicated in other people. Other people are thinking the same thoughts and coming to the same conclusions quite independently. Your paper has that closeness to my own life. Your analysis of Maru and A Question of Power are SUPERB and ACCURATE" (CKMM375BHP2). While these views seem to contradict her other affirmations of reader's independent and flexible interpretations, they emerge from a single concern. Exploring both ideal forms of and problems with communication, she confronts historically specific and universal dilemmas. She emphasizes that messages are always shaped by the historical and personal experiences of speakers and listeners. Yet she also stresses that the inevitable difference among persons may lead to rich and liberating human interchanges.

In distinguishing between *discours* and *histoire*, Emile Benveniste (1971) identifies two modes of enunciation, one in which the utterance inscribes evidence of communication and one in which address is impersonal and atemporal. Letters, of course, clearly conform to the former, with the speaker overtly inscribing both "I" and "you" in her utterance. Through letter-writing, Head turns to enunciation as a straightforward means of communicating about an "I" to a receptive "you". At the same time, she raises questions about how her "I", situated in discourses of race, gender and colonialism as well as other locations that influence her perception, can unreservedly communicate with a "you" situated in quite different positions. Registering the possibility of this communication with an "imagined community", she sometimes wrote enthusiastically and passionately to fans like Carvlin, and Kitchen. At others, she registered disillusionment and despair about the

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possibility of this imagined community. This dual sense of hope and doubt emerges repeatedly in her fiction. In her last novel especially, tropes of group-formation and journeying trace not only breakdowns in communication, but also the possibilities for rewarding cultural exchanges and liberating interaction.

### Fiction-Writing as Bricolage

> I went through a period when books were like an addiction; if I had taken a book from the library and I'd read it, I had to go back and get another one immediately. But, in all this there are landmarks. There are writers whose lives make you pause; and - to express it more simply - I think you love what you are yourself. (Bessie Head in an interview, 1989b:7).

The sources of Head's abstruse subject-matter and writing strategies have long been the focus of critics' speculation. Given the idiosyncrasy of her vision, and her repudiation of the protest paradigms of other South African writers, the question of her literary influences becomes intriguing. Head was certainly familiar with the black diasporic women's writing which registers many of her own concerns with black women's subject positions. Although much of her correspondence with Morrison, Walker, Giovanni and Michelle Cliff began through their interest in her work, she also wrote about their writing. She expressed particular interest in Morrison's *Sula*, the poetry of Walker and Giovanni and Michell Cliff's *Abeng* and *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me To Despise*.

This communication sheds light on the implications and form of Head's status as an exile. In her book on Head, Huma Ibrahim explores the writer's exile in relation to a subversive consciousness that stems from multiple displacement. Drawing attention to Head's "talking back" to a range of culturally-dominant locations and assumptions, Ibrahim writes: "An exilic consciousness is usually manifested by individuals or groups of exiles who leave the country of their birth voluntarily or involuntarily. Being a woman and a South African, Head was engaged in two kinds of exile: one from patriarchal institutions and the other from the apartheid state...since Bessie Head's interests reside in the particular exploration of exile, gender and resistance emanating from usually silenced voices, she is the most appropriate writer for my analysis of subversive identities in exile" (1996:2-3). Developing this explanation, Rob Nixon emphasizes that Head's exile led her to a rural landscape far removed from the cultural centres inhabited by many South African writers: "Most of South Africa's specifically literary exiles headed for those venerable magnets for bohemian diasporas – London, Paris, New York, Chicago and Berlin" (1996:243).

The estrangement described by Ibrahim coupled with the isolation that Nixon identifies has led certain commentators to assume that Head was painfully alienated from

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schools of postcolonial, minority or black women's writing that flourished, paradoxically, in the metropolises.[17] Yet the long correspondence Head maintained with writers like Walker, Giovanni and Morrison, often about their writing and the literary worlds they inhabited, suggests a somewhat different story. However indirectly, Head was offered a place in diasporic literary domains that accommodated her exploration of the connected politics of gender, race and class. But she also covertly and occasionally insistently refused to identify with these writers and the traditions they represented. This is especially clear in her exchanges with Giovanni. After Giovanni's visit to Botswana, Head confessed to her unease with partisan affiliation: "You asked me a difficult question during that tape we did together in Gabarone, something about being black and injustice and how nothing was being solved and you could only rage...I got a mental block trying to answer that...The reason I panicked is because of my own torture. I hate my experience in South Africa but I also hate a camp - I can't identify with a cause"(CKMM75BHP21). The eight-page letter sent to Giovanni includes discussion of the sources of *Maru* and *Question of Power*, a recommendation of W H Auden's poetry, a comparison between Plato and Socrates and a discussion of Boris Pasternak (CKMMBHP75BHP9). Commenting on the American writer's poetry in a later letter, she wrote "You said to me: 'We share the same views.' It's not only that. We share the same approach to writing--that it is a piece of music, and a lot of the love poems are very beautiful music" (CKMM75BHP21). She therefore signals discomfort with Giovanni's offer of bonds of solidarity on the basis of race and gender. Head consistently shied away from partisan labels and emphatic political definitions of her work. She certainly shared many African-American women writers' concerns with gendered locations in the context of white racism. But her writing often indicates that any automatic or singular emphasis on categories like race, class or gender reduces complex human experiences and creates fictive impressions of unity. Believing also that consciousness cannot be reduced to clear-cut historical experiences, she focuses on the variety of inextricable social, biographical and spiritual influences that shape "being".

Her refusal to adopt labels or partisan positions is frequently identified in her rejection of "feminism". In many of her encounters with researchers, interviewers and correspondents, she strongly rejected definitions of herself and her writing as "feminist". Head's occasional expressions of hostility towards Doris Lessing seem to be rooted in her

[17] This theme is pronounced in many of the essays in Cecil Abrahams' *The Tragic Life* (1990), especially in the editor's opening chapter. The idea tends to suggest that the idiosyncracies of Head's texts stem from her isolation, rather than from deliberate writerly choice.

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aversion for what she saw as this writer's dogmatic politics. Thus she described Lessing as "excited beyond words by her involvement in world problems...She treats insanity like communism and men - they are her pets" (GKMM25BHP4). Justifying her refusal of political camps, she wrote: "My writing is not an anybody's bandwagon. It is on the sidelines where I can more or less think things out with a clear head. We may be at a turning point and need new names for human dignity, new codes of honour all nations can abide by" (KKMM243BHP3). Since Head did not explicitly turn to other literary traditions, especially to anchor her abiding concern with power relationships associated with colonialism, racism and patriarchy, how do we explore the evolution of her epistemology? I go on to show that she was fascinated by the symbolic and interpretive implications of writing. In her search for allusive strategies of representation, she produced narratives which Lessing has described in the following way: "For thousands upon thousands of years, we - humankind - have told ourselves tales and stories, and these were always analogies and metaphors, parables and allegories; they were elusive and equivocal; they hinted and alluded, they shadowed forth in glass darkly" (1994:28).

Creating fictions that could explore both specific and universal experiences, Head was influenced by writers as varied as Bertolt Brecht, D H Lawrence and Boris Pasternak. Here she was often fascinated by apparently random themes, images and stories and concentrated on how they could be interpreted and used from the perspective of her philosophy and political outlook. Levi-Strauss (1966) provides suggestive avenues for exploring this activity when he explores cultural symbolism as *bricolage*. He focuses on encoding processes, rather than on any notion of meanings intrinsic to texts or signifiers. *Bricolage* becomes a process in which the *bricoleur* claims texts or signifiers that may be thought to "belong" to certain cultural contexts and to be meaningful only or primarily in relation to them. By "appropriating" them, the *bricoleur* also situates them in relation to others and confers them with new meanings. Clearly, Head was not unfamiliar with the dominant codes of canonical and influential literary works. But she was interested in the ways that certain writings and philosophies could be interpreted analogically in relation to her own. She therefore turned inventively to historical texts, canonical and influential fictions she read in youth and adulthood and to Hinduism to anchor subjective concerns and forge "new" meanings from "old" signifiers.

Although Head's communication with South African fiction-writers was limited and her references to them infrequent and brief, she wrote many letters to South African historians. Her letters here are insightful about the sources for *Serowe*, *The Collector of*

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*Treasures* and *A Bewitched Crossroad.* Among the writers with whom she corresponded are Mary Benson, Neil Parsons, Naomi Mitchison, Brian Willan and Tim Couzens. Head first began communicating with Mary Benson through her research on Khama the Great for her work on *Serowe.* She also wrote to Neil Parsons for permission to use excerpts from his thesis on Khama III and the Bamangwato. She began an animated correspondence about historical writing with Brian Willan at a time when he started his study of Sol Plaatje. Because of Willan, Head wrote the foreword to the paperback edition of Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*. The historians and biographers whom Head consulted were at the forefront of the revisionist history[18] that sought to challenge Afrikaner nationalist and colonialist history of southern Africa. They stressed that indigenous actors and structures generated historical processes and actively resisted white domination. What attracted Head to their research was its countering of hegemonic narratives that denied the independence of subjects with histories of domination. These were themes to which she constantly returned in her own historical and ethnographic writing. Much of this would certainly not be considered path-breaking by any orthodox research standards. But Head's enthusiastic collaboration with these writers points to a common determination to subvert myths about the stasis, negativity or absence of black southern Africans and societies. Interestingly, she often saw her own historical research as accurate, shaped by the conventional researcher's assumptions about fidelity to the truth. Although this claim is discredited by her self-conscious reconstruction in works like *Serowe* and *A Bewitched Crossroad,* it is noteworthy that Head associated her visionary questing with the historian's dedication to verifying evidence.

While Head kept up a lively and collaborative correspondence with South African historians, she did not have regular or close contact with other writers in Africa. Clues to the reasons for this are offered in a short lecture entitled "The Role of the Writer in Africa" (KKMM181BHP11). Here she stressed that the political questions she raised differed significantly from those confronted by most African writers. Referring to a reviewer's lauding of the way African writers anticipated Africans' acquisition of power, she describes "recoiling in horror from that statement because it seemed a replica of the arrogance of the colonial oppressor who had strutted over Africa for so long". She went on to claim: "Its extreme opposite - a quiet shuffling, lost humility, has been characteristic of all the heroes and heroines of my novels. All my heroes and heroines are invested with an innate nobility

[18] The term "revisionist" in South African historiography is often applied to Marxist historians, but here refers to South

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and elegance but the background and environment provided for them has always been far removed from worlds of power and ambition" (KKMM181BHP11). Head vigorously rejected what she saw as a duplication of colonial models of power and self-definition in African nationalism. At the height of expressions of cultural nationalism among African writers, therefore, she was to identify a situation that many African writers pinpointed only later during a phase of neocolonial disillusionment.

If the author considered her ties with her African-American and African counterparts limited, to which writers within traditions of third-world or minority writing was she indebted? Simply posing this question partially ignores Head's interest in working without allegiance to camps and dogma. But it is significant here to mention her admiration for Gabriel Garcia Marquez. There is no clear record of her first encounter with this writer, although she had read his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by 1977, when she wrote to him. Writing to Head in the previous year, Betty Fradkin compared her with the South American writer and claimed "I had such a feeling of not wanting to leave the author's world because everyone there knew who they were, I want to call it innocence because the people didn't have to analyze and justify themselves. It is something that is in your work too, and he deals with what I would call magic as you do" (CKMM15BHP23). In a letter to Head eight years later, Tom Holzinger also claimed to find parallels between the writings of Marquez and Head: "I'm going to send you Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 'Cronica de una Nuerta Anunciada', 'Chronicle of a Death Foretold'. His technique in this story is not unlike your own, and he won a Nobel prize. His structure, his discipline, his language" (GKMM48BHP45). When Head wrote to Marquez in 1977, she effusively expressed appreciation for his reference to the "southern extremes of Africa [where] there were men so peaceful that their only pastime was to sit and think" (CKMM353BHP1). Head was to use this extract in an epigraph to *A Bewitched Crossroad*, her historical novel. Her selective interest in Marquez's fleeting reference to her own environment and his incidental allusion to myths which she developed about southern Africa reveal the eclectic method with which she "drew on" other writers. In Chapter Eight I suggest that Head's writing does bear strong affinities with that of Marquez, yet it is noteworthy that she chose to fixate only on an isolated and disconnected reference.

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African history that interrupted a settler-colonial legacy focusing on white agency.

Head's recourse to other writers duplicates the associative borrowing evident in her appreciation of Marquez. Writers to whom her letters frequently refer are D H Lawrence, Boris Pasternak and Bertolt Brecht. In a letter in 1979, she acknowledged:

> Influences in ones writing are of all sorts and kinds. I can say with assurance that I lived longest and most consistently with the writings of the British writer, DH Lawrence and the Russian writer, Boris Pasternak - my two great loves. But neither Lawrence nor Pasternak shaped the actual novels I produced. Bertolt Brecht, the German writer did. Strange to say, I have never lived with the writings of Bertolt Brecht. I have read a few of his plays and I saw his "Mother Courage" produced by a New York drama group. It is the memory of his biography, A Choice of Evils which I read twenty years ago and which I have lived with all this time. (FKMM187BHP4)

Head's correspondence reveals a particular interest in Lawrence, whom she describes as having been "very much part of my youth - I was first introduced to him at high school and for some time after that acquired as much of his work as I could" (KKMM457BHP44). Identifying figurative similarities between their visionary views of liberating worlds, achieved by dismantling spritually-oppressive ones, she wrote: "His method seemed to be two-fold, quietly laying out a hoary man, a horror and side by side slowly building up a new man, with new values, depending on what riches life was offering him as he lived" (KMM457BHP44: 2).

The profound influence of Lawrence, from her earliest writing,[19] is strongly evident in Head's origin legend and the romance narratives that repeatedly surface in her fiction. She uses stories of lovers from different social strata to convey both social tensions, and individuals' ability to defy social hierarchies. Echoes of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* are especially marked in metaphoric connotations that surface both in the plot and the style of sections of Head's first novel. Also suggestive of Lawrence is her Romantic conception of creativity and fictional impulses. Lawrence, as a twentieth-century writer who confronted his own "harsh environments...where all magic was dead or had not even begun to live" (Head, 1974:68) held considerable appeal to Head as she struggled with an environment reminiscent of the English writer's industrial midlands. His emphasis on psychic experiences, complex personal relationships and potent images of creativity also resound in Head's preoccupation with "the mystery and riddle of life" (1989:8) and the visionary import of artistic creation. Significantly, Head used an extract from a poem by Lawrence for her epigraph to *A Question of Power*. The citation to the poem is "D H Lawrence: From a poem: 'God'" (Head, 1974), although the first two lines, "Only man can

[19] Head claimed in an interview that Lawrence and Brecht were the greatest influences on her during her youth (1989b:8).

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fall from God/Only man" are from Lawrence's "Only Man".[20] The opening lines in Head's epigraph are exactly the same as Lawrence's, but the four lines that follow are her own: "That awful and sickening endless, sinking/ sinking through the slow, corruptive/levels of disintegrative knowledge.../the awful katabolism into the abyss" (1974). Head's inexact reference indicates how she willfully marks her own grappling with a spiritual fall and implied quest, the human experiences which Lawrence also frequently explores.

Describing her feelings about Boris Pasternak to Giovanni, Head stressed a concern with the enduring mystery of art: "What I love so much about Boris Pasternak is the stubborn continuity of his own inner life...his own life and responses remained simpler than that complicated mess of Stalinism through which he lived...DR ZHIVAGO was his last statement before he died. It's a one-sided preference one has, a preference for a stubborn continuity that is goodness" (CKMM75BHP9:5). She expressed similar views about the Russian writer to her one-time editor and agent, Giles Gordon: "Pasternak says ... that the written word is the highest form of human expression - very much as you say, 'superior art form. High art'... Pasternak has been my bible for Years and years and years" (BKMM44BHP84). Conveying her inventive engagement with Pasternak, she confessed that "I love [Pasternak] eternally and it has astonished me how long it has taken to build up mental contact with his writing. I read somewhere - 'Great music wakes in us...' It took me something like five years to adapt to what he had to say and how he said it. He is awfully aloof and intellectual. But once you get hold of his music, you settle down and let him teach. I trust a lot of his conclusions" (GKMM38BHP32).

Much of what Head "let Pasternak teach" was revealed in *Dr Zhivago,* a novel that she felt plumbed the "inner dungeons" (KMM457BHP44:3) also exposed by Lawrence. Like Lawrence's views, Pasternak's sense of the embattled individual, driven by visions of justice, passion and freedoms that transcend social prescriptions, offered a suggestive paradigm for her to define her own beliefs. In particular, *Doctor Zhivago* emphatically celebrated individual and creative, rather than impersonal, socially-regulated revolutions. The Russian writer's themes and philosophy here are likely to have led to Head's enthralled "mental contact with his writing" (GKMM38BHP32). Like Pasternak, Head seems less interested in national, large-scale or ideologically-driven political processes, than in the way small groups or innovative figures adapt to or create new environments. In the Russian novel, Zhivago moves from the turbulent context of Moscow in the middle of a

[20] Lawrence's poem "God" starts very differently: "Where sanity is/there God is". See Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren

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communist revolution to make a new life in Siberia with his family. In the same way that many of Head's characters do, Pasternak's migrate from a disintegrating world that offers little hope for their self-determination to make new lives in inhospitable worlds that they seem to build from scratch. Isolated Siberia during the Soviet Revolution suggests the arid and intractable Botswanan environments that many of Head's characters transform.

Pasternak's central character also displays the combination of everyday pragmatism and artistic vision that Head celebrates in her visionary heroes. Zhivago's diaries are especially interesting here. Once he and his family settle in a remote Soviet village, he writes a journal in which his pragmatic and resolute efforts to face day-to-day challenges define an individual philosophy that eludes creed and dogma:

> What happiness it is to work from dawn to dusk for your family and yourself, to build a roof over their heads, to till the soil to feed them, to create your own world, like Robinson Crusoe, in imitation of the Creator of the universe...I am not preaching a Tolstoyan doctrine of simplicity and "back to the land"; I am not trying to think out my own solution to the agrarian problem or to correct the socialist view of it...I am not building a system on our own case. It is too fortuitous and the economy is too mixed. (1958:252)

Zhivago consistently displays behaviour and convictions associated with the heroic figures in Head's novels. At the same time that he immerses himself in problems of everyday survival, he frequently validates art as "'a force...and a truth worked out'" (1958: 256). He therefore articulates the dual vision that preoccupied Head when he writes: "'I should like to be of use as a doctor or a farmer, and at the same time to be at work on something lasting, something fundamental; I should so very much like to be writing a work of art or science'" (1958:258). As a refugee with his family, then a prisoner of the partisans, later the passionate lover of Lara Fyodorvna and finally a lonely wanderer in Moscow, Zhivago resolutely faces the challenge, which fascinated Head, of making radically new beginnings.

Brecht's life and writing offered models for Head as she confronted myriad social injustices and struggled to envision environments that would guarantee comprehensive personal freedoms and political rights. She often claimed a direct indebtedness to Brecht for her detailed representation of the everyday. The German writer's emphasis on the agency and heroism of workers and peasants is reflected in her claim that Makhaya's statement, "'I shall choose a quiet backwater and work together with people'...is repeated again and again in my novels" (FKMM181BHP11). She also believed that Brecht's

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Roberts. Eds. *Complete Poems of Lawrence* (1964).

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pragmatism and social commitment gave her "the courage" to write books that could explore complex creative processes and human experiences through "facts and figures,, the basic outline of co-operatives and things like that" (1989:9). As Jim Sharpe points out, Brecht condemned the ascendancy of "top person's history" (quoted in Sharpe, 1994:25). In Chapter Seven, I indicate that his literary explorations of "history from below" are often suggested in her historical writings. Two of Head's fictional concerns surface in her admission that "The reason small co-operative projects appear in many of my books is due to the inspiration of the German playwright, Bertolt Brecht" (CKMM375BHP2). She acknowledges the importance of being a socially-conscious writer, "that the artist is a servant in a very real sense, that the artist concentrates on social problems" (1989.). She also refers to the artist's ability to transform realms that may seem only functional and ordinary into a vision of something imaginative and magical. In Chapters Four and Six, I show that this symbolism surfaces clearly in *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind,* texts that combine descriptions of village life with powerful images of imaginative creativity.

The independent vision implied by Pasternak's difficulties with Communism were mirrored in Brecht's troubled affiliation with the Communist Party. Head claimed that "one of the major shaping influences of my life" (CKMM375BHP2), was Martin Esslin's *Brecht: A Choice of Evils.* Significantly, this biography explores both Brecht's Communist commitment and the "deep fundamental contradiction between a creative personality...ultimately subject to the laws of its own inner being...and an apparatus of power constantly shifting its tactics and demands behind a façade of rigidly unchanging dogma" (Esslin, 1959:134). Head identified with the German writer's unease with restrictive political affiliations. Claiming that she "avoided political camps and ideologies because I feel that they falsify truth" (1990:63), she wrote: "I refused to make a commitment to Marxism and several times stated that I hated politics. I do not refuse a commitment to solving questions of poverty and human misery but I do not want to rule the world...I only took Brecht's dictum: We must help" (FKMM187BHP4). It is noteworthy that Esslin's study deals with a tension which, central to Brecht's oeuvre, is frequently embedded or explored in Head's writing: the conflict between the unconscious, irrational and emotional force of art, on one hand, and conscious discipline on the other. Esslin concentrates on the extent to which "a personality so deeply tormented by inner contradictions" engaged in a "constant battle between subconscious impulse and the desire to establish complete control" (1959:217;216).

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Head was fascinated by the intuitive and subconscious facets of creativity, and usually implies that they exceed the rational discipline of political commitment. This chapter has explained that she often valorizes the artist's intuitive vision in the face of consensual social reason, that "the intuitive side which undoes one" is what ultimately generates "a clear firm statement of truth" (AKMM44BHP124:2).

Brecht was the sort of writer who appealed strongly to Head's concern with "the everyday world and the things that people do with their hands" (1989b:8). But her identification of the three most important writers in her life clearly reveals that "There're two sorts of persons in me. There's a practical person...Then there's somebody attracted by the mystery and riddle of life" (1989b:8). Head was drawn to the complexities of the subconscious, to the ambiguities of personal relationships, and to the spiritual and imaginative implications of human perception, and especially artistic creation. These often eluded the register, relationships and experiences associated with a conventionally political outlook. Her frequently puzzling use of a metaphysical register and images is linked to her impatience with the way the language of political protest drowned out or inhibited "the mystery and riddle of life". The shaping influence of writers like Pasternak and especially Lawrence is important here. These writers shared with Head a horror for the socio-political tumult in which they were entangled and to which their texts complicatedly responded. Deploring the utilitarian logic of their worlds, they often sought visionary stories or images for condemning the social realities they confronted and invoking envisaged ideals. In a short essay titled "Notes on Lawrence" Head dwells on her fascination with the ways in which both Lawrence and Pasternak explored the "dungeons" of human experiences and behaviour (KMM457BHP44). Identifying the universal implications of Lawrence's exploration of characters and relationships, Head claimed that an "acquaintance with Lawrence is an acquaintance with real reality", and pinpointed the similarity and difference between her preoccupation with evil and Lawrence's "control of – a world of evil". While the essay focuses on her sense of the "inner dungeons" explored by Lawrence and the "real dungeons" represented by Pasternak, she also endorses Lawrence's claim "Art for my sake". She therefore writes: "there was that symbol he used, the phoenix rising from its own ashes. The key word is own, to find redemption on one's own power" (KMM457BHP44). Her focus on writers whom she believed explored metaphoric "dungeons" is clearly connected to her own concern with the depths of psychic suffering, spiritual desolation and moral evil. It suggests the intertextual ways in which she inflected these concerns. But the triumphant alignment with Lawrence's Romanticism and

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Pasternak's mysticism is also telling about her beliefs in the liberating powers of her imagination and art.

While these patterns suggest some of the general directions of Head's writing, methodically tracing affinities and connections is likely to prove counterproductive. Head was often drawn by random elements or isolated statements. Her description of current reading in a letter to Tom Carvlin is indicative of her eclecticism: "About reading, I have added Leo Tolstoy to my joys, the permanent bedside joys. A friend gave me volumes of him in exchange for a copy of MARU. Then I have the collected poems of Pasternak to add to Dr Zhivago. Then I gave Edgar Snow's great book, RED STAR OVER CHINA three months of my reading life and another favourite is Premchad's GIFT OF A COW. I'm mad about Tolstoy, although he is not always sane" (GKMM38BHP32). Meticulously tracing Head's indebtedness to other writers, then, can easily become a reductive pursuit for the singular, unified and definitive meanings that her work rarely offers. Her correspondence reveals a deft and alert *bricoleur*, exploiting the variety of techniques, narratives and ideas to which she was exposed, but never in a concerted or systematic way. Her claim to liking best Lawrence and Pasternak as writers she lived with "longest and most consistently" are suggestive of the reclamation process she often considered necessary to her creativity. She sought to redefine the worlds she confronted, selectively borrowing and reinterpreting them in order to make a home for herself through the worlds of others. Her recourse to an imagined community of writers, although superficially far removed from her own world, offered her tremendous scope to create culturally and psychologically resonant messages.

Levi-Strauss' definition of mythical thought suggestively defines the author's process here. He writes: "With myth, everything becomes possible. But...this apparent arbitrariness is belied by the astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions...If the content of a myth is contingent, how are we going to explain the fact that myths throughout the world are so similar" (1968:208). Here Levi-Strauss suggests Paul Ricoeur's conclusions about the "social imaginary" as the conglomerate of stories that, often unconsciously and indirectly, motivate human action and thought (1991:168-187). Both Levi-Strauss and Ricoeur provide formulations for considering how a range of similar circulating stories form a repertoire that shapes Head's modes of writing and the content of her works. The works of African-American women writers like Alice Walker, or anti-colonial writers like Chinua Achebe, or black South African women writers

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like Ellen Kuzwayo[21] might have directly confirmed many of Head's own views about colonialism, white racism and gender oppression. Moreover, the impassioned letter-writing which often replaced direct interaction, coupled with her travelling towards the end of her life offered her a measure of access to various diasporic and postcolonial literary domains. Yet these writings and arenas did not provide her with the sources for a myth-making that gestured towards the universal cadences of human experience. Her *bricolage* allows her to explore experiences beyond historically particular relationships and circumstances. At the same time, she invests the elements that have already served others' textual purposes with the power to speak from her vantage point and through a very particular history. She therefore establishes a path from historically-grounded stories, themes and images to patterns and structures that are trans-historical and trans-cultural. This passage from a distinctive social world to a vision broader than it surfaces repeatedly in her use of archetypal stories of migration and exile. Subsequent chapters will show that Head's tales of journeying and settlement evoke the cross-cultural interpretations of these universally represented acts. On one hand, they are linked to specific circumstances - like the political exile prompted by apartheid in South Africa in *When Rainclouds Gather*, or the colonialist currents of nineteenth-century southern African colonization in *A Bewitched Crossroad*. On the other, they powerfully configure recurrent and salient human dilemmas.

Like certain literary texts, eastern religion and philosophy allowed Head to anchor her concern with ubiquitous human experiences, especially to address questions about the unconscious and spiritual and creative growth. Inconsistent forays often characterize evidence of Hinduism in her writing. But Eilersen suggestively traces her interest in the following way. Head first encountered the Hindu sect founded by Ramakrishna in Durban. Ramakrishna, born a high-caste Brahmin in the nineteenth century, became a priest and embarked on an extended process of meditation. The Ramakrishna sect was crucially instrumental in making principles in Hindu philosophy available to the western world. Propounding a philosophy of tolerance, Ramakrishna drew both on Islam and Christianity and claimed that all religions were different paths to a divine presence (Noss, 1980:212-3). As Eilersen writes, the appeal to Head rested largely on Hinduism's being "a religion of the introvert", that could lead to "paths of spiritual progress, the search for liberation" (1995:33) at a time when she "found the South African situation so evil that it was impossible...to deal with in creative terms" (Head, 1990:67). Involvement with the

[21] Head's foreword to Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* concludes: "Books like these will be the Bible one day for the

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Ramakrishna sect also brought her into close contact with the teachings of Mahatma Ghandi, whose philosophy allowed her to explore the connections between political and spiritual struggles. For Head, the appeal of passive resistance was not that it was an appropriately liberal anti-apartheid strategy for the fifties and sixties; its attraction was that it entirely rejected the spiritually corrupting aggression of the oppressor.

Head's upbringing and education were conventional Christian and missionary ones. As the autobiographical elements of her fiction reveal, these were extremely oppressive and sinister to her: "There were things done, teaching put over to me that I viewed with horror. Whole areas of the world were blanked out on geography maps as heathendom, especially India. It was impossible for missionaries to convert India. They had a long tradition of enquiring into the things of the spirit...So you could say I moved straight from Christianity, which I found stifling to Hinduism which I found was very rich and deep in concepts" (Eilersen, 1995:34). She continued to explore Hinduism's "rich and deep concepts" by interacting with Cape Town members of the Hindu faith and by reading pamphlets.

Initially, Head was particularly fascinated by two areas within Hinduism, both of which profoundly affected the subjects and strategies of her writing: the relation of autobiography and lived experience to spiritual development; and a holistic framework for dealing with politics. Both areas point to the Hindu preoccupation with religion as a determinant of social behaviour, and its reluctance to separate the profane from the secular. Hinduism therefore offered a gestalt for Head's linking the everyday, the ordinary, the "profane" with universal experiences, politics and spirituality. This largely explains the distinctively metaphysical register of works seemingly concerned only with everyday or autobiographical experiences. Where much South African fiction uses an obviously quotidian language to deal with social experiences, Head often fuses the spiritual with the political and social. In this way, she connects spheres which, in much western, and certainly South African leftist thought, were strictly separated. A novel that conveys these concerns particularly clearly is *The Cardinals.* It deals emphatically with the political and emotional frustrations of black writers during the fifties, and the particular difficulties experienced by a young black woman writer. At the same time it probes the question of what, apart from social influences, shapes individual "being", and especially the visionary potential of the artist.

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younger generation" (1985:xv).

Eilersen notes a major shift in Head's thinking following her move to Botswana. Here she experienced the liberation of removal from a country where all human experiences seemed to be reduced to racial conflict and "people hardly exist beside the pain" (1990:67). Consolidating her release from "the throttling category of belonging to a particular race group" (KKMM457BHP26) she embraced Hinduism's avoidance of fixed categories and emphasis on the way human consciousness could transcend the social constructs that regulate perception. She was also to develop her fascination with the ordinary and everyday, and with the moral and spiritual import of what conventionally seemed only personal or small, silent and marginal. It is not coincidental that one of her greatest heroes was Ramakrishna, whom she defined as an "illiterate man" "with an astonishing grasp of things spiritual" (quoted in Eilersen, 1995:232).

Revealing about this stage in her development are her letters to Tom Carvlin. Here she referred constantly to individuals and places from her real life in terms of her dreams, and their manifesting forces of profound good, evil or power. Also evident in her letters to Carvlin was a mounting concern with connecting the patterns in her personal life story as elements in narratives of reincarnation. In extended letters to Jean Highland, presumably intended or submitted for publication she saw herself as the reincarnation of King David.[22] As these writings reveal, Head became increasingly preoccupied with allegorical details that both justified and generated her growing paranoia. Eilersen notes that Highland responded with alarm to this "obsessional thinking" (1995:232). Yet the storytelling about previous lives was often deftly managed. Rather than simply indicating delusion, it allegorized her circumstances in a similar way that Elizabeth's hallucinations interpret hers in *A Question of Power*.

Eilersen identifies a third phase in Head's encounters with Hinduism in the late seventies. She traces this through the writer's correspondence with Mona Pehle, a librarian who lived and worked in Botswana and had a broad interest in religious philosophy. Two major themes emerge in her exchanges here. One is her definition of intelligence and creativity that are personally generated and have little to do with formal education or existing knowledge. Linked to this is Head's preoccupation with her role as a saviour and guru-figure possessing the compassion and insight to point out the evils of

[22] See AKMM43BHP9. Also see Eilersen's account of Head's "Patterns, Pictures, Impressions" (1995:129).

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humankind. This accounts, as Eilersen notes, for a paranoid outlook which led Head during this period to behaviour that was often extremely unpleasant for others.[23]

Although she was profoundly affected by Hinduism, Head's recourse to it was neither systematic nor rigorous. Her correspondence with Tony Hall and Mona Pehle reveals that she was given to generalizations or "misinterpretations", responses that frequently led Pehle to challenge her.[24] It seems significant here, however to single out two abiding preoccupations in her writing. One is Hinduism's emphasis on the inseparability of the observer and the observed, the belief that the experiencing self cannot be separated from what is seen or thought about. This idea, at the root of pantheism, is often understood as meaning that god exists in everything and everyone. The notion offers a distinctive answer to existential questions, since individual "being" cannot be explained in terms of a bounded "I" that is separate from an encountered world. It also implies that individuals, except for those who have achieved supreme enlightenment, always manifest conflictual impulses like good and evil, and it refutes the Christian thought that categorizes moral states in more absolute terms. Head resolutely strove to dislodge binarisms, to stress the relativity of all experiences, and registered a profound fascination with these ideas. A second concern is Head's emphasis on the linked concepts of desire, creativity and intelligence. If Hinduism makes no separation between the observer and the observed, if phenonema exist only because of the perception of the observer, how does primary intelligence originate? Head was to turn to this awesome question as early as *The Cardinals*, although its exploration culminates, as I shall demonstrate, in *A Question of Power.*

The Hindu texts and pamphlets that Head encountered early in her life dealt with organized religion iconic gurus and formal rituals. Towards the end of her life, she was to turn increasingly to figures whom she saw as independent thinkers. In particular, she was attracted to thinkers who believed not so much in tutelage and obedience, as in encouraging their followers' spiritual development through independent introspection, observation and meditation. Disillusionment with Hinduism when it reflected the authoritarianism that she initially associated with Christianity is clearly evident in *A Question of Power.* It is indirectly reflected in her growing interest in idiosyncratic figures within Hinduism, and in the strains of the religion that suggested Buddhism and Sufism. A

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[23] These included her pasting of a poster in the Serowe post office, that Botswana's President had killed the Vice-president and committed incest with his daughter. See Eilersen's account (1995:135-138).
[24] See Eilersen's description (1995:232).

similar attraction towards the more nonconformist trends in eastern religions is manifested in Lessing's development. Lessing gravitated increasingly towards Sufism in a similar way that Head drifted towards Buddhism. Both became interested mainly in personally-directed forms of enlightenment. Thus, the injunction by the famous iconoclastic eastern philospher, Krishnamutri,[25] that the truest form of intelligence is that which stems from intensely private self-reflection,[26] is a principle which Head, like Lessing, was powerfully attracted to.

A suggestive explanation of the links between this self-reflection and creativity is Kishnamutri's definition of thought. Thought, he argues, contaminates, is corruption, although it is for all practical purposes necessary. In contrast to thought, is meditation:

> Meditation is one of the greatest arts in life - perhaps the greatest, and one cannot possibly learn it from anybody...It has no technique and therefore no authority. When you learn about yourself, watch yourself, watch the way you walk, how you eat, what you say, the gossip, the hate, the jealousy, if you are aware of all that in yourself, without any choice, that is part of meditation. So meditation can take place when you are sitting in a bus or walking in the woods full of light and shadows, or listening to the singing of bird" (quoted in Luytens, 1990:148).

In this definition, meditation departs from culturally-driven thought and the exercise of the egotistical will. True intelligence and enlightenment are seen to derive from an inner power that flourishes through meditation. Creativity is linked not to worldly thought, but to private meditation: "Surely creation can take place only when thought is silent...We are talking about holistic perception in which the ego, the "me", the personality does not enter at all. Then only is there this thing called creativity" (Krishnamutri quoted in Luytens, 1990: 181).

These ideas were developed mainly among gurus who argued that each individual possesses transcendent (although varying) forms of intelligence, and that such wisdom is likely to be destroyed, rather than nurtured, by socially imposed knowledge. Related ideas with immanent wisdom led to Head's fascination, evident especially in the characters of *Mouse* in *The Cardinals* and Margaret in *Maru,* with states of spiritual "tranquility" or "vacancy"[27] and their connection to creative power. When Mouse is first introduced in *The Cardinals*, she is vacant, unformed or uncontaminated in the sense defined by Krishnamutri. It is this vacancy that generates her subsequent (anticipated) creativity. Mouse learns others' knowledge, yet she is seen to possess the potential that allows her to deploy them independently and creatively. In *A Question of Power,* the engagement with Hinduism is far more complex, but again Head's main concern is to explore the

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[25] Although Krishnamutri's philosophy grew out of hinduism, it became increasingly iconoclastic.
[26] See Mary Luytens' biography, *The Life and Death of Krishnamutri* (1990).
[27] These terms have very distinct meanings in much eastern thought, and define advanced enlightenment.

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conditions for creativity in a spiritually "unpolluted" subject. While she therefore registers the cultural materialist spirit of many recent theories about subjectivity, she is also captivated by the idea that an innate conciousness can become the source of a powerful energy and rejuvenating art. By the time she wrote *A Bewitched Crossroad*, she was to turn concertedly to these notions of creativity. But in this novel she would emphasize the unity between the observer and observed. Jettisoning an earlier concern with the trials the observer experiences, she celebrates an observed world that unashamedly bears the meanings of subjective perception. With its enigmatic celebration of moments of tranquility and creativity, this novel in many ways marks a culminating point in Head's philosophical vision.

Hinduism identifies four aims in life, the first two involve the desire for power and pleasure, while the last two revolve around renunciation. Many of Head's fictional preoccupations point to Hinduism's paths of renunciation: Dharma and Moksha. Those who follow Dharma have a duty to others and discard selfish desire, personal pleasure and social success. To a large extent, this is suggested in the author's use of her autobiographical stories, and in her imagining of others' pain and persecution. Within Hinduism's stage of Moksha, the highest and only truly satisfying goal, the human mind is at rest. There is a release from rounds of rebirth and the miseries of human existence as egotistical consciousness is minimized to such an extent that it dissolves into what could be termed a universal spirit. For Head, this dissolution was celebrated in relation to the "bewitched crossroad" of her adopted homes, Serowe and Botswana. This seems to be one reason why Head found Gabriel Garcia Marquez's brief allusion to southern Africa, where "there were men so intelligent and peaceful that their only pastime was to sit and think" (1984:8) so compelling. Western thought has characteristically associated creative acts not with serenity, but with a hectic, obsessive desire. Creativity is believed to spring from an agitated yearning that is the effect of absence or incompleteness. This definition is partly traceable to dominant assumptions about the masculinist form of artistic creation, and to the conflation of creation with male sexual desire. It is also symptomatic of Romanticism in the west, of the valorizing of egotistical will and individualism. Head's writing often explores entirely different conceptions of intelligence and creativity.[28] In the same way that she tried to discover forms of knowledge that defy hegemonic beliefs and

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social prejudices, so did she see certain forms of knowledge offering paths to new spaces of psychic freedom. Although Head's fiction does not endorse one notion of creative processes, it may be in her profoundly unorthodox view of the serene impulses of creativity that the originality of her writing is most evident.

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[28] I show later how notions of "desire' for Head are also often connected to states of tranquillity, rather than the agitated being-in-relation-to-otherness that much western thought, including radical thought, assumes.

# CHAPTER THREE
# *THE CARDINALS* AND BESSIE HEAD'S ALLEGORIES OF SELF

> But there are moments, incidents, real memory I do trust. This is partly because I spent a good part of my childhood "fixing" moments in my mind. Clearly I had to fight to establish a reality of my own, against an insistence from the adults that I should accept theirs. Pressure had been put on me to admit that what I knew was true was not so. I am deducing this. Why else my preoccupation that went on for years: this is the truth, this is what happened, hold on to it, don't let them talk you out of it. (Doris Lessing, 1994)

Like Doris Lessing, Head, in her autobiographical writings, constantly revised memories of her past. It could be argued that similar patterns of self-education and distrust of institutionalized knowledge shaped their quests for personally liberating truths. Unlike Lessing, however, Head often secured memories which bore little or no relation to those of others. Many of her critics[1] have confronted this by evaluating the "truths" produced by Head in relation to those of empirical sources or testimonies offered by relatives, correspondents, friends or interviewers. The aim of my exploration of her accounts is to consider why she constructed them and the extent to which, despite an apparent inconsistency, they point to abiding creative and epistemological concerns. Commenting on Sylvia Plath's "collage", Jacqueline Rose writes that she "works across boundaries, psychic, political, cultural, but the contours of their opposing elements never completely lose their shape" (1992:10). Head, fusing autobiographical, fictional and philosophical concerns, produces a similar assemblage.

I am especially concerned with narratives of illicit unions between lovers in this assemblage. I show that these narratives, produced both in Head's fiction and autobiographical accounts, become ways of exploring social tensions and their repression. In particular, her accounts of her racial origins (as the child of a white mother and a black father) disclose a story distorted by apartheid. Defining a group of "mixed race" as "coloured", South Africa's Nationalist government conceived of a distinct category between black and white. During the early years of apartheid, this intermediate location was entrenched through official measures like the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, and the Immorality Act. From the perspective of apartheid discourse, "coloured" was linked to a fixation with maintaining racial boundaries, a fixation that Nikos Papastergiadis explains in the following way: "For as long as the concepts of purity and exclusivity have been central to a racialized theory of identity, hybridity has, in one way or another, served as a threat to the fullness of selfhood. The hybrid has often been

[1] See especially Susan Gardner (1986) and Craig Mackenzie (1990).

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positioned within or beside modern theories of human origin and social development, mostly appearing as the moral marker of contamination, failure or regression" (1997:257). In his comparative study of South African writers, Stephen Clingman considers how the official location of "racial hybridity" leads certain writers to explore "what it means...to struggle back from the netherworld of an unacknowledged identity" (1988:7). Many of Head's autobiographical concerns can be explored in relation to Clingman's model. She writes a story of origins in which affirmation and defiance contest the silence, shame or deviance that apartheid associates with "inter-racial" unions and the identity, "coloured".

*The Cardinals* conveys Head's ongoing protest through stories of socially-unlawful unions, even though it often displaces a focus on inter-racial relationships. Written in the early 1960s, it is therefore among the first of Head's fictionalized versions of her origins and contributes pivotally to the textualized figure of the author. Importantly, it participates in the labyrinths of her autobiographical storytelling at a time when she had not yet established her reputation. At this stage, living in South Africa, she worked in the masculinist milieu of black journalism and had not developed the eloborate mythologies of origins evident in later fiction. As is the case with her letters, then, *The Cardinals* invites a retrospective reading; it allows us to explore many of the codes that underpin Head's recurring stories, figures and symbols.

*The Cardinals* also confronts questions about creativity in similar ways to Head's autobiographical stories. In dealing with these questions, I am concerned particularly with her use of textualized father and mother figures. My exploration of their symbolic meanings draws broadly on psychoanalytic theories of the "family romance". For Sigmund Freud, the family romance is a narrative which allows the subject to interrogate origins and define a gendered subject position in relation to familial circumstances (Freud, vol.9, 1953:237-241). Using a Freudian framework, Marianne Hirsch (1989) identifies useful paths for approaching Head's textual exploration. Hirsch writes: "The family romance describes the experience of familial structures as discursive: the family romance is the story we tell ourselves about the social and psychological reality of the family in which we find ourselves and about the patterns of desire that motivate the interaction among its members. The family romance thus combines and reveals as indistinguishable the psychological subjective experience of family and the process of narrative" (1989:9). Drawing on this explanation, I examine the way in which Head critically explores her psycho-social landscape. I also consider the productive force of her writing. In particular, I consider how she battles with plots that unsettle culturally dominant stories of origins and

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personal development. Her family romances, I suggest, allow her to gesture towards languages, forms of consciousness and creativity that elude socially-dominant figures, plots and images.

In many of Head's autobiographical stories and *A Question of Power*, the child of a union between an upper-class white woman and a black stable hand is placed into foster care while her mother is incarcerated in a mental hospital. The mother commits suicide after spending several years there, while her family disowns the daughter, who goes on to bear the scars of being an outcast, an orphan, and is made to feel that she inherits her mother's "insanity". While the trauma of this story is anticipated in *The Cardinals*, Head's novel reinterprets a number of details. The central woman character of *The Cardinals,* however, has much in common with the orphaned and outcast female figures in Head's *A Question of Power* and her own life story. The child of a union between a woman of the upper strata and a poor fisherman, Mouse is given to a woman living in a Cape Town slum. Her real mother, devastated by the guilt of having spurned her fisherman lover and giving up her child, commits suicide on the day of her planned departure for another town, and Mouse's father never learns of her birth.

Mouse prefigures the autobiographically represented Head and *A Question of Power's* Elizabeth by being trapped in discursive and social forms of power. Not only is Mouse a politically disempowered, poor, black woman, she is also - as her successive re-naming explicitly illustrates - constantly spoken for or about in the novel. The meanings borne by her physical body sharply signal her position of being perpetually represented by others. Head turns repeatedly to Mouse's bodily signification to convey her domination or the limitations of her struggle against domination. On one level, Mouse's physical appearance is a constant source of other characters' judgement or the narrator's emphasis on her subordination. On another level, Mouse frequently responds to her victimization through the non-verbal gestures of her body. When one character attacks her with a stream of verbal abuse "Do you know what you are? You're just a screwball, oddball crank that the loony-bin overlooked", she displays a non-verbal bodily sign: "Her mouth quivered slightly and she could not control the look of mute, intense rage that darted out of her black eyes" (21).[2] While her response is not a vocal one, it does signal the character's attempt to communicate a "presence" in ways that somehow exceed the

[2] Page references are to *The Cardinals With Meditations and Stories,* Cape Town: David Philip, 1993.

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dominant languages described in the text. Denied a speaking position within these, Mouse prefigures women characters in Head's short stories as well as Margaret in *Maru.* All often inhabit linguistically silent domains where their non-verbal responses covertly contest others' authority to speak for or about them.

As the exploration of bodily signification suggests, *The Cardinals* lays bare processes of subjection in which master narratives inhibit or silence the voices of socially-subordinate subjects. Yet these master narratives are also sometimes presented as potentially empowering sites for those (especially Mouse) who appear doomed to silence or entrapment. In mapping these ambiguities, the novel discloses the intricate paths that Head herself pursued. Her fitful struggles both against and with available narratives, forms and discourses, were never straightforward ones. As an early fiction, *The Cardinals* encodes traces of her battle to construct enunciating positions that both gesture beyond but are also located within dominant fictions.

**Head's Fictions of Self**

Gillian Eilersen describes the death of Head's white mother, Bessie "Toby" Emery in the following way: "The Notice of Death gives as cause both 'lung abscess' and 'mental disorder' specified as 'dementia praecox', a now obsolete term for schizophrenia and characterised by a premature and marked decline from a former level of intellectual capacity, manifesting itself in apathy, depression or personality disintegration" (1995:9). Basing her account on records, letters and interviews, Eilersen writes that Toby, prior to her death, had given birth to an illegitimate daughter "of mixed blood" in a Pietermaritzburg mental hospital (1995:8). The "mixed blood" of Toby's daughter was made public after the white family who adopted her returned her "because she looked 'strange'" (Eilersen, 1995:8). This version echoes that of Stanley Birch, Toby's brother and Head's uncle, who writes: "When young Bessie was pronounced coloured by the first foster parents and rejected, the shock was even greater, and more bewildering...Mrs Birch placed an embargo on idle family talk and gossip, and nobody could argue with her that illegitimacy and adoption were items to be kept confidential and anonymous" (1995:11). It is difficult to gauge in what detail all this information was known to Head. What is important is what memories she retained, and the meanings she invested in them. Throughout, Head was to return to particular fantasies of pasts and origins. Choosing to ignore information offered to her, or to select strategically from offered stories, Head defended versions of origins that were marked by the fixation described by Lessing in

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relation to her own "re-memory": "this is the truth, this is what happened, hold on to it, don't let them talk you out of it" (1994:13).

In uncharacteristically specific allusions to her father, Head speculated that he was probably killed after the discovery that he was a white woman's lover (BKMM27BHP119). She also wrote to Randolph Vigne that "I feel more for [my mother] than for my father because she died a terrible death, in a loony bin while he is most probably still alive somewhere" (Head, 1991:65). This suppression of a father figure and elaborate claiming of a mother feature prominently in accounts she produced after her exile to Botswana. In these, most notably her letters and *A Question of Power*, Head forges a determined orientation towards a repressed but powerful mother figure: "I still say she belongs to me in a special way and that there is no world as yet for what she has done. She has left me to figure it out" (1991:65). In this way she reinvents a mother figure usually defined as the banished "other" in master narratives of apartheid, psychiatric reports and the racial prejudices of her white forebears. She therefore recovers the subjectivity and policed desires of her mother:

> My mother was a white woman. Her major tragedy was that her family were very upper class...My mother had been married and returned to the family home after a broken marriage. She then muddled and destroyed her life completely. She sought some warmth and love from a black man who tended the family race horses; and so she acquired me. In white South African terms the ultimate horror had been committed, that a white woman had had sex with a black man. When the family found out they succeeded in classifying my mother as insane, sped her down away from the family home...and locked her up in the Pietermaritzburg Mental hospital where she gave birth to me. I was then removed from her...She was never let out of the mental hospital and committed suicide when I was six years old. (BKMM27BHP119)

Head's narrative of a disrupted family configures a broader story of obsessive racial boundary-making under apartheid. Her interpretation of her birth as "the dark and fearful secret swept under the carpet" (1990:3) becomes a cultural story which Rose defines as "an intimate, sexual family secret, a trauma of begetting which speaks a whole history of racial division" (1994:409). In Head's narrative, the white family attempts to maintain its sense of purity by labelling the mother's act, "insane" and by expelling the taint of "mixed blood". As John Stotesbury observes in relation to Joy Packer's family romances, the South African "family flawed, broken and disrupted" (1994:69) represents the devastating effects of apartheid laws. A vision of apartheid's destructiveness also informs the way Head gives a previously denied authoritative meaning to her mother's actions. Creating for her a subject position, she stresses that her mother's search for a fulfilling relationship led

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her to defy race laws, that "my mother... in her soul, was a goddess" (1991:66). She also emphasizes the enormity of the official responses to her mother's actions: confinement to a mental institution and estrangement from her daughter. Against the current of forced separation from her mother, however, the daughter claims an origin story. Head acknowledges her mother as the provider of her identity and the resources for her entry into public life and the world of writing: "She asked that I be given her exact same name - Bessie Amelia Emery and that attention and care be paid to my education and that some of her money be set aside for my education" (BKMM27 BHP119).

By turning to the mother as point of origin, Head identifies her own cultural inscription and that of *A Question of Power's* central character, Elizabeth. Both mothers and daughters are victimized by official discourses that fix racial boundaries. These boundaries are challenged by the mother's act of "miscegenation" and by the daughter's bearing the "degeneracy" of "mixed blood". The principal of the mission school that Elizabeth attends as a child warns her of the dangers of this affiliation when she says: "We have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother" (1974:16). These instances of policing and verbal violence suggest that madness is projected onto and internalized by those victimized by an oppressive system. Head therefore stresses the fundamental deviance of the system that projects this madness. The feverish outrage at figures or acts that disrupt laws considered inviolable, the obsessive efforts to preserve racial categories and the brutality directed at transgressors become the definitively pathological forces both in her world and in her fictional character's.

Writing about *A Question of Power,* Clingman concludes that "Elizabeth's madness is inseparable from an entire social ethos and history of victimization... the rawness of her exposed inwardness is the internal incarnation of external realities" (1988:11). As an adult, Elizabeth does seem to become, like her mother, a victim of the "madness" of her external realities. She also spends periods in a mental hospital, an institution which represses her mother. But unlike her mother, Elizabeth triumphantly emerges from "insanity" with the strength to resist the pathology her society projects onto her. Head's autobiographical novel therefore testifies to her character's victory by redefining the mother's legacy of "madness". Significant too is her testimony of personal victory when she describes herself as the heir to her mother's struggle: "A birth such as I had links me to her in a very deep way and makes her belong to that unending wail of the human heart...She must have been as mad and impulsive as I" (1991:65).

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In her complex discussion of Head's autobiographical claiming of a mad mother figure, Maria Olaussen concentrates on Head's act of choice, and comments on her refusal to acknowledge the formative influence of her foster mother, Nelly Heathcote. Focusing on the autobiographical representations in *A Question of Power*, Olaussen concludes: "Elizabeth takes upon herself the burden of continuing her mother's suffering, a burden which becomes an identity through the fact that she is the one who caused this suffering in the first place, simply by being born" (1997:90). Olaussen develops this reading by concentrating on the "madhouse" as the locus for policing both Elizabeth's deviance and her mother's. Tracing Head's emphasis on her own birth in a madhouse in *A Question of Power*, Olaussen argues that the use of the madhouse as a trope represents the return to an origin from which she has been doubly displaced. She has been displaced first through apartheid legislation which separated her from her white mother and placed her with a "coloured" family, and secondly through her exile in Botswana (1997:92). Olaussen's argument hints at the way Clingman traces the sources of madness in South African fiction to various forms of alienation. Dealing with literary presentations of dispossession from shameful stories of "miscegenation", disinheritance within families, estrangement from a physical environment or alienation from others, he comprehensively reviews the way dominant ideology and social relations generate apartheid's pathologies. Head uses tormented autobiographical storytelling as a vehicle for uncovering these pathologies.

That certain critics have lambasted Head for "dishonesty" or invoked her "mental instability" to explain her deviation from the "truth" is a sign of their refusal to acknowledge her use of fictions to convey epistemological truths. One such critic is Susan Gardner, who uses a normative psychological perspective to diagnose Head's "illness". Uncovering evidence that dilutes Head's emphasis on her mother's agency, Gardner accuses Head of "professional misconduct" and suggests that she "might have been suffering, as her mother apparently was, from a 'progressive' brain disease" (1986:124).[3] In similar vein, Craig Mackenzie writes that Head's "origins...are ambiguous at best" and continues: "Around 1969 she suffered a lengthy and debilitating nervous breakdown. This may have been congenitally induced. Her mother appears to have suffered from a progressive

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[3] Teresa Dovey astutely shows that "Garner, too, incorporates fictions in ...her own...quest narrative" (1989:37).

psychosis, and Bessie was throughout her life acutely conscious of the fragility of her mental balance" (1990:ix,xi).

While Gardner's bluntness differs from Mackenzie's more speculative comments about "congenitally-induced psychosis", both critics define themselves as sleuths whose normative assessments of Head authorize their readings. The corrective thrust of their responses is reflected also in the views of Head's uncle, Kenneth Stanley Birch. In his monograph, he writes "Over the years I have re-studied the family records very carefully"(1995:6) and uses empirical accounts to evaluate the fantasies of his niece. It is significant that Birch's monograph, published in an influential South African literary journal, makes a particular kind of intervention into criticism of Head. His intervention signals the covert authority of a "non-fictional" norm of verifiability (the testimony of the relative, the empirically-grounded account, the biographical view) within a realm where fictions (or so it is frequently claimed) are generally valued for their fictionalizing function. This is exemplified in his conclusion: "I trust that this monograph dedicated to her mother, and to those who value fortitude, wisdom and humour, will bring further understanding of the complexities within my niece's nature, and those of her antecedents" (1995:18). Evident in the readings of many commentators, therefore, is a pattern of recuperating Head's voice within a domain of knowledge that is sharply at odds with it, a pattern of recuperation that disturbingly echoes the distortion she associated with her mother's story.

More intriguing than the corrective views of critics, however, is the inconsistency of Head herself. In perusing the different forms in which she textualized her origin story, it is evident that Head offered divergent memories of her origins. Among these is her correspondence with Veronica Samuel, the daughter of a woman who, together with Head, had been fostered by Nelly Heathcote. When Samuel wrote to Head after accidentally discovering a photograph which reminded her of her "Aunt Bessie", Head responded promptly, at length and frankly about a past largely congruent with those encoded in Eilersen's biography and the testimony of her uncle. Where fictions to others might have ignored Nellie Heathcote as Head's real foster mother, Head's letters to Samuel described this mother without reserve or anxiety: "At birth they first tried to place me out as white, but I looked very odd indeed. Eventually they gave me to Nellie Heathcote but when I was 13, the child welfare society removed me from Nellie Heathcote to the mission orphanage in Durban" (GKMM373BHP3). Although the exchange about origins was initiated by Samuel, the two subsequently become regular correspondents. Where certain critics have implied that the author inevitably misled those who inquired

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about her past and defended precarious fictions of selfhood, Head seemed eager to trace the stories of her stepmother with Samuel. Her exchanges with this corespondent are significant not because they are a measure of her moments of "sanity", an index of occasional lucidity when she "told the true story". Rather, they evidence her sense of the relevance of overtly fictive origin stories in certain contexts, and of the appropriateness of conventional "truths" in others.

Particularly important in Head's pattern of tactical self-narration is the strategic significance of her maternal orientation. Head did not faithfully pursue narratives of maternal reclamation or define maternity as an essentialized site of creativity or subversion. Instead, maternal narratives functioned as symbolic and provisional sources for configuring resistance and the possibilities for alternative creative expression. The maternal orientation in many of her letters is therefore a tactical figurative strategy that acknowledges culturally repressed and potentially subversive meanings. As Jane Bryce-Okunlola claims, then, "While motherhood is not an explicit theme, nor does it occupy a central place in Head's writing, it is part of the fabric of her fiction" (1991:213).

The writer's constant search for metaphors of resistance and creativity is especially clear in the way she turned both to strong mother figures, and to enabling father figures. While her autobiographical stories often signal the heroism of her mother, she also draws attention to the subversive authority of a father figure. Representing her father as the black stable hand of her mother's family, she indicates that he defied race laws by confronting a white woman as a lover and social equal. This story of his defiance is easily dismissed by empirical accounts. Birch (1995) testifies that Bessie Emery, Head's mother, did not come from a particularly wealthy family, that the family did not own horses and that Head's father could not have been the family's stable hand. Eilersen writes: "Who the father was is completely unknown, and speculation is a waste of time. The event must have taken place in Johannesburg when Toby was out on parole from the family home; a brief encounter; a misuse of her mental state? Was she waylaid? Was she enticed somewhere? We do not know" (1995:8).

Countering this biographical uncertainty about a father's presence, Head not only invents a fiction about a heroic yet socially subordinate father figure. She also connects the symbolism of her story to another text. The figure of the stable hand and the socially taboo relationship between a man and a woman, suggest that she has reworked a text by

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one of her favourite writers, D H Lawrence.[4] Like Lawrence in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Head turns to a story of illicit passion to convey the path-breaking implications of her parents' relationship. The defiant mother who forsakes her social heritage configures Lady Chatterley, while the absent and unknown black father is given textual substance, a life and desires of his own by gesturing to the socially inferior but powerful Mellors of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. This celebratory fictionalizing of a father figure is evidence that Head was alert to the metaphoric status of her father and mother figures. She embraced both as textual means for imagining social freedoms and liberating creativity.

Defiance as a means for understanding the complex domination of socially-victimized subjects and for re-writing these subjects' ascribed positions is an abiding preoccupation in Head's writing. By embracing the silenced figure of the mother both in *A Question of Power* and her self-narratives, Head establishes one direction for this defiance. Here she seeks to construct what she elsewhere refers to as the "no world as yet for what she has done" (1991:65). This world is disclosed when Head confronts the prejudices and obsessions that victimized her mother, and when she redeems her mother's act as rebellion, rather than insanity. It is also disclosed in the way she links notions of subordinate yet potentially subversive locations to gendered positions. Identifying the symbolic meanings of mother figures in her own "question of power", Julia Kristeva, the feminist psychoanalytic critic writes: "Territory of the mother. What I am saying to you is that if this heterogeneous body, this risky text provide meaning, identity and *jouissance*, they do so in a completely different way than a 'Name-of-the-father' (1980:16). Kristeva, as a critic concerned with non-paternal spaces for exploring subjectivity, describes ways of imagining stories and symbols that are freed from the dominance and authority associated with "paternal". In what follows, I suggest that Head's visions of defiance often suggest Kristeva's strategy of symbolizing maternal spaces.

A detour into psychoanalytic theories of the subject can help to explain Head's circuitous charting of gendered spaces in relation to liberating narrative acts. According to Lacanian theory, the entry into language involves a splitting within the subject at the mirror stage, when the child separates from the mother and becomes a distinct "I". This phase of individuation, entry into the Symbolic order, is defined for Jacques Lacan as the Law-of-the-Father (1977). Lacan identifies the way gendered formulations originate only within

[4] Head wrote that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was the only Lawrence novel that she "read with relief and without anxiety". Her sense of the optimism in this novel is evident in her claim that he 'subdues" his usual "hard, yappy voice" in this novel and focuses on "an isolation that includes only earth and a woman" (KKMM457BHP44:1).

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language, where the inscription of the Symbolic is also the entry into the social and the public, the dominant realm of patriarchy. As David Carroll observes: "For Lacan, the subject is never original and at the source of discourse, but a function or place within a symbolic-linguistic system. When Lacan asks who the subject is, he is asking where the subject is situated along the signifying chain and not what his 'real identity' is" (1982:31). Lacan's perception of a subject-within-signification has led certain critics to a concern with intertextuality and "repetition", processes by which subjects acquire fictions of self only in relation to surrounding fictions. Lacan shows how the endless repetition of others' fictions extends to the analyst or critic when he explores Freud's entanglement in the "repetition-as-compulsion" which he seems to explain (Lacan, 1977:122-43).[5] Although Lacan departs from Freud in applying repetition compulsion to the analyst, he does draw on Freud's own analysis of repetition-compulsion in relation to the gendering of subjectivity. Thus psychoanalysis has been centrally concerned with the extent to which intertextual "repetition" sets limits on creativity and marks the way that subjects inevitably inherit or speak within paternal narratives.

Kristeva uses Lacanian analysis of gendered subjects with the aim of unsettling the Symbolic as the Name-of-the-Father. Speculating about the possibilities for artistic creation drawing not only on circulating social meanings but also on worlds beyond them, she distinguishes between the Symbolic and the Semiotic. While the Symbolic, the realm of entrenched social meaning, is connoted as paternal, she "identifies the semiotic with the affects of the maternal body or *chora*, which resist the categorization of identity, unity and position, and consequently cannot be defined in any determinate language system" (Kearney, 1998:195). On one level, Head's rewriting of her mother's authority in relation to official stories that silence her is an effort to name apartheid's madness and to vindicate her mother's rebellion. On another level, it often signals a broader effort to imagine realms of creativity that lie beyond repetition compulsion and the Name-of-the Father. Like Kristeva's, these are often symbolized in terms of maternal figures and domains. As I indicate, this symbolizing process frequently surfaces in Head's novel. I also show, however, that this gendered imagining of new forms of creativity is not consistent. It is interrupted when Head signals the provisionality of certain subversive fictions and tantalizingly suggests others.

[5] Here Lacan argues that the analyst's reading is a displaced repetition of the structure it seeks to analyze.

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A view of the enabling roles of father figures in relation to struggling women characters is central to *The Cardinals* and points to patterns elsewhere in Head's work. The father figures in her letters have been noted. But it is significant that they appear in increasingly complex forms in later published fictions. Here they frequently feature as allies, supporters and facilitators of victimized or silenced women. Head seems to suggest that the entrenched social and discursive power associated with paternal authority cannot be wished away. It need not necessarily limit rebellion or new creativity, but can help to constitute these visions. This view is obliquely implied in her statement that "very often I have needed a masculine vehicle just because there was nothing else that would suit it. The cool stance means; you are up on a horizon, you have the biggest view possible" (1989:12-13).

I indicate that the myriad questions about liberating creativity that Head poses in *The Cardinals* have both cultural and spiritual underpinnings. *The Cardinals* often considers whether the individual can interact with the knowledge of a surrounding world without compromising an innate potential. A profoundly fissured text, the novel involves Head's exploration of awesome philosophical and political quandaries through a character that enters the world as a "shambles of unfocused atoms" (127). As the reference to cosmic energy suggests, *The Cardinals* seems to ask how Mouse, can develop a vital creativity despite her ascribed locations of social inferiority. It also raises problems about how she communicates in a world littered with oppressive fictions, and how her texts elude the quandary of either being silenced by these or becoming mere "noise". By raising numerous questions about the possibilities of "origins" and "sources", as well as for liberating forms of communication and creativity, *The Cardinals* seems to open up paths towards the fictions Head later produced in Botswana.

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***The Cardinals***

It is not surprising that the manuscript of *The Cardinals* was rejected by several publishers and retained for a long time by Patrick Cullinan.[6] Because few publishers, critics or readers of South African fiction in the sixties were interested in "open-ended meanings", "writerly texts" or the textual ambiguities associated with writers' multiple identities, the fact that Head's first novel was published posthumously is as revealing about transforming interests in South Africa fiction as it is about Head's recently elevated

[6] See Margaret Daymond's introduction to the text (1993: vii-xviii).

status in literary studies. The interpretive challenges of the novel result mainly from its dispersed and copious codes. Apart from the origin stories with their ambivalent gendered implications, the text is also fractured by different styles, an uncertain use of point of view and abrupt thematic shifts. These often reveal its conception in what Head considered the highly constricting environment of South Africa. In this early work, she provocatively attempts to unsettle many of the conventional South African codes through which political and artistic meanings are produced. The text is therefore ultimately about processes of signification, rather than about a movement towards closure and the fixing of meaning. This is cryptically conveyed in words spoken by a minor character to Johnny, one of the central characters:

> "I was thinking a while ago, Johnny, that half the trouble in the world is caused by the difficulty we have in communicating with each other. It's practically impossible to say what you mean and to be sure that the other person is understanding you. Word communication is dependent on reason and logic but there are many things in life that are not reasonable or logical. A jazz musician can say something to me in his music but it would be quite beyond me to translate into words what he is communicating through music. What he has to say touches the most vital part of my life but I can only acknowledge his message silently." (26)

Because the manuscript of *The Cardinals* was given to Cullinan when Head left South Africa, the history of its physical distribution is itself revealing about communicative processes. According to Margaret Daymond, who edited and introduced the published novel, the manuscript was sent to publishers in South Africa and abroad, although it was eventually given to Cullinan as a gift. It was published only after her death, and because of this was unread by many of Head's critics until 1993. Whether Head saw her first novel as an intensely personal form of communication is not clear. What is clear is that its thematic shifts, abrupt forms of address, and embedded meanings, present codes that mirror the deep preoccupation with communication in her letters.

Head informs us in her epigraph that the cardinals "in the astrological sense, are those who serve as the base or foundation of change". In this way she immediately alerts readers to optimistic meanings and intentions of her novel. The optimism in the epigraph is especially significant because the "change" she refers to is connected to the notion of a cosmic energy that somehow exceeds political protest. The two central characters seem united in a process of both political and spiritual liberation. Eilersen notes the impact of Hinduism on the writer as early as the late fifties, when she had just completed her formal education: "It was a year of intense intellectual growth for Bessie. She assimilated especially Hindusim's pantheistic concepts and the idea of the sanctity of the common man, and in the years to come gradually gave them her own touch. But the process had

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been far too rapid; it brought her to the brink of a breakdown" (1995:35). Thus it was before the writing of *The Cardinals,* a time when Head worked as a journalist, that she turned to Hinduism's "rich and deep concepts".

Colette Guldimann argues that when she wrote *The Cardinals*, Head subverted romance as the only genre available to her as a woman journalist in the fifties (1997:52-77). In her first novel, Head was to develop a dissident voice not only in relation to the romance form prescribed for women writers, but also in relation to other hegemonic fictions and political positions. Thus, she often destabilizes commonplace and apparently self-evident styles, registers and forms. At the end of the novel the two central characters enter a phase about which one character says: "Anything can happen. Life is a treacherous quicksand with no guarantee of safety anywhere. We can only try to grab what happiness we can before we are swept off into oblivion" (137). The ambiguities defined here permeate the entire text, and sharply evoke Head's own creative struggles.

The creative development of Head's central woman character, Mouse, is especially closely connected to her own. When introduced in the novel, Mouse is described briefly as the unwanted child of an indiscreet union. Handed over by a wealthy mother to an impoverished foster-mother, she grows up amid "the drunkenness and violence and the crude, animal, purposeless, crushing world of poverty "(10). She is generally thought a "dim-witted moron", and after many placements and migrations becomes "more and more silent", retreating to "a point where no living being could reach her" (11). Mouse's entrapment in others' perceptions is starkly reflected in her successive renaming as Miriam, Charlotte and Mouse. But while the "absence" of Mouse - established through descriptions that include the narrator's - underscores her powerlessness and invisibility, the text also cryptically hints at a powerful and independent core. This different "being" is acknowledged by Johnny, the only character who immediately recognizes that Mouse has "potential" when he describes her as a "mass of unfocused atoms", thereby suggesting her possession of an elusive though extremely potent power.

The idea of Mouse's having an innate energy is implied in her capacity to express emotion. Her feelings are not precisely described, and the implication seems to be that for the narrator to do so would mean codifying a presence that the text establishes as "unspeakable". Mouse, then, is seen to have an un-named and un-nameable intelligence.

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Johnny's remarks about her expressive eyes[7] cryptically suggest this unspeakable power: "Somehow it's all tied up with her eyes. On the surface they're just big and dark and unfathomable but they react on me in a terrible way. They horrify me; they fascinate me; they revolt me; but why? Why" (65). When Mouse becomes a journalist, she is obviously unable to "assert herself" through the language and codes used by the men in the office. Yet not long after Mouse joins the newspaper, she responds to Johnny's taunts with palpable even though inarticulate anger: "Her mouth quivered slightly and she could not control the look of mute, intense hatred that darted out of her black eyes" (21).

The independence and power that Mouse seems to possess is linked to her fascination, from childhood, with the beauty and force of words. It is implied that they have the latent capacity to convey subjective feelings and the yearnings she has within her. When Mouse first learns to read, she uses a rote-learning primer, *The Adventures of Fuzzy-Wuzzy Bear.* However vacuous or alien to her cultural experiences, the storybook evokes a magical world for her: "The adventures of the bear became real too and she spent many hours sharing his experiences with him. When he ate an ice-cream, it was as though the melting cream dripped over her fingers. When he swam in the sea, she felt the sea rising to swamp her" (8). Mouse's implied intelligence is at the basis of her "desire"[8] and creativity. It is implied that she has the capacity to progress in ways described in many eastern philosophies. In terms of these, the ego and will, as products of society's injunctions, impede creativity. It is when the ego is transcended and the mind is emptied of social doctrine that wisdom and creativity flourish. Mouse steadfastly displays an absence of socially-driven desire or authority, yet her extreme introspection suggests a profoundly independent creativity. In reflecting this pattern, Mouse obviously anticipates *Maru's* Margaret, a character who also appears to be trapped in others' fictions, yet becomes a triumphant creator of artworks.

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**Writing and Repeated Texts**

As "Charlotte", Mouse finds work with the tabloid, "African Beat", where she meets up with her father Johnny who is a cynical journalist. He develops a fixation for the timid aspirant writer, and eventually persuades her to share his home. The characters never

[7] Later chapters consider the recurrence of this image. Characters like Paulina in *Maru* or women in Head's stories are suggested to possess a spiritual power that somehow eludes language.

[8] The concept of "desire" has a range of very distinct meanings in relation to subjectivity. Here it is used primarily to indicate a form of spiritual responsiveness (linked to serenity) which many eastern philosophies and religions consider essential to spiritual enlightenment and creativity, which are connected.

discover that Johnny is really Mouse's father. But the coinciding details of the first chapter, where Mouse's background is described, and a subsequent flashback dealing with Johnny's past, reveal to the reader that Mouse is Johnny's daughter. By concluding at a moment when father and daughter are about to make love, the novel establishes a powerful connection between their sexual union and Mouse's liberation as a writer. In a striking anticipation of this connection, Mouse is seen to formulate a story based on notes that Johnny gives her. He responds with: "I think it's damn good. For me at least you've made it come alive. Omit one or two details and it's a pretty accurate picture of what I was like about twenty years ago. I just gave you the scrappiest ideas to work on and you figured everything out in a way that I never would be able to" (42). Here Mouse, as the recipient of Johnny's encouragement and autobiographical text, seems to become the competent author of her father's narrative.

What is also implied at this moment is that Mouse and Johnny are on the verge of repeating the transgression of Head's parents through incest, another illicit act of passion. Head affirms their yearning by connecting their anticipated violation of a social law to their writerly struggles. In their determined quests to become writers, both Mouse and Johnny battle against racism, material pressures and social disadvantages. Daymond focuses on the political symbolism conveyed through these characters by claiming that the unwittingly incestuous love in the novel "can be read as dramatising and defining Head's political anger" (1993:xiii). Developing this view, Annie Gagiano argues that the novel shows that "private passion is one of the strongest and most important forms of opposition to control" (1996: 49). The symbolism implied by the breaking of the incest taboo parallels that associated with the contravention of the Immorality Act. In the representation of both taboos, the idealism of pioneering figures leads them to break laws that are seen to limit human freedoms. The deviance of Head's fictional and autobiographical figures therefore offers a political symbolism suggestive of fiction by many other South African writers. Novels like William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* (1926) and Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953) deal with aborted personal relationships between white and black South Africans. Their treatment of inter-personal encounters draws on a liberal anti-apartheid tradition and leads them to expose their society's race laws. Two years after the repeal of infamous Act, the theme is revisited in Lewis Nkosi's *Mating Birds* (1987) and explores the enduring pathology of racism. The concern with laws that intrude on profoundly intimate relationships across racial boundaries, then, has a long legacy in South African literary protest against apartheid.

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Gagiano stresses the connection between the incest taboo and the Immorality Act in Head's fiction to the extent of claiming that "the Immorality Act...is the master narrative against which [Head] tells the constellation of stories that she calls *The Cardinals*" (1996:49). Gagiano's overarching preoccupation with apartheid ignores the ambivalence of Mouse's development. The text *does* symbolically establish her liberation when she is poised to break a taboo likened to apartheid's oppressive laws. At the same time, it uncovers the range of cultural and metaphysical paths that Mouse needs to negotiate as a writer. In particular it stresses that Mouse, as a black woman, needs to confront distinctly gendered patterns of silencing in addition to the apartheid. Head's multiple plots not only indict race laws and testify to the "dramatiz[ed] political anger" that Daymond identifies (1993:xiii). By emphatically charting a gendered landscape, Head also registers her frustration with patriarchal stories of development and procreation. As I show in Chapter Five, the revision of a male-centred plot recurs in relation to the romance genre in *Maru*. Closely connected to *Maru, The Cardinals* maps the cultural constraints of Head's literary heritage at the same time that it testifies to her determined efforts to envisage new creative territory.

On one level, the novel suggests that the central character's growing exposure to the written word will straightforwardly lead her to articulate a suppressed voice. Yet the text constantly unveils the intricacies of her exposure. As "Miriam", her first encounter with the written word comes at the age of ten, when an old man enters the slum as a letter-writer. Entranced by the man's activity, Miriam intuitively identifies the potential for a form of deliverance through writing. Her fascination leads the old man to say: '"In all my life I have never seen one as hungry for words as you"' (8). Significantly, the source of the old scribe's activity is not his "imagination" or any notion of independent subjectivity, but a manual entitled "The Art of Letter-Writing". His work is a reminder that writing is not necessarily the expression of individual creativity, but the repetition of learnt codes and transmitted texts. As Dorothy Driver remarks, Head's character "learns to read and write this borrowed, empty language" (1993:18). But Mouse, it is suggested, is vaguely alert to this legacy: "She pointed to the book and the writing pad with a question in her eyes. It sent the old man into a fit of laughter. When he could talk he said admiringly: 'You are a clever child. No one here questions why I should use the book to write a letter'" (5). The notion of writing as repetition persists in the description of how Mouse first learns to write: "He removed a sheet of paper and, with a shaky hand in bold print, wrote 'Miriam'. He showed her how to hold the pencil and guided her hand to trace over the letters...She was

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busy a long time and the old man had begun to doze when she suddenly burst on him with a triumphant, radiant face. 'Look, Uncle!' At the bottom of the page was an almost perfect reproduction of her name the way he had printed it" (6). Crucial to this passage is the idea of Mouse as a mimic who imbibes the skill of the old man. Her own name, ostensibly an immediate mark of her textual self-authorization, is "an almost perfect reproduction...the way he had written it". She therefore appears to repeat his writing which is itself the echo of a prior text.

When the old scribe dies, Mouse's contact with writing is severed. Interestingly, a new life-line is inadvertently prompted by her foster father, the husband of the woman to whom Mouse is first given by her mother. After he molests her one night, she runs away to the city. The brutality associated with this entry into the world unsettles the liberating connotations of a father-daughter relationship fictionalized later in the text. The "foster-father [who] thrust her out into a new way of life" (8), anticipates a later emphasis on Johnny's instrumental role. Yet the reference to a father's predatory sexuality and Mouse's violent initiation, is a writerly signal to the reader to reposition the idea of incest when it appears later. Re-named Charlotte, Mouse is placed in the care of a left-wing tailor and his family where she reads Darwin's texts. Here, the "precise and logical arguments and the quiet ecstatic beauty of the language never failed to awaken a delirious response in her" (11). In the context in which Mouse grows up, Darwin is a revolutionary iconoclast. In particular, he questions the stories of beginnings that are fixed by creed and uncritical belief. Darwin's texts seem to offer Mouse more than a political message. The allusions to her exalted response imply that she is able to confer impersonal scholarly texts with a subjective intensity. Although she depends on others' texts to discover a form of self-knowledge, it is suggested that she can transform these "repeated" texts. The description of her exposure to Communism suggests a different encounter with circulating fictions: "The home was wonderfully peaceful and filled with a quality she had not experienced before" but "Communism itself had no meaning for her"(11). Thus, Head describes a form of knowledge, conventionally celebrated as radical and liberating, as one that can impede, rather than enable, a socially subordinate character's personal freedoms.

As an adult, Mouse's major encounter with the world of writing is her entry into the office of the tabloid where she eventually finds work and, because of her timidity, comes to be known as Mouse. As a socially disadvantaged yet determined idealist, she discovers a potential space for creating her own narratives. Mouse's experiences as a journalist suggest Head's work as a journalist for the *Golden City Post,* the weekly tabloid she

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worked for in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Like Head, Mouse enters a domain that supported the literary development of black writers at a time when there were no other cultural outlets for them to publish their writing.[9] Shortly after Mouse starts working at the office, Johnny becomes aware of her reading and writing interests and seeks to encourage her. In similar ways to Mouse, he experiences profound alienation from a world of dogma. Thus it is both Johnny and Mouse who resist the debilitating education associated with Mouse's childhood: "Work hard. Do not answer back no matter what we do to you. Be satisfied with the scraps we give you" (10). Johnny likens her to "The scientist in his laboratory [who] is the recluse and mystic of this age. He can be a true benefactor to mankind without risk because he has created an aura of awe and respect to protect him" (107). That he appears to recognize her creative potential and her need for its independent expression is evident in the following: "Now you listen carefully to what I have to say. Whoever distributed creative gifts did not intend you to use them doing work like this...I can help you faster than you might be able to help yourself. I can help you to be the kind of writer you want to be (71).

Although it appears to promise Mouse scope for literary growth, the masculine office of "African Beat" often seems to inhibit her. She is invited to work for the newspaper after sending in a letter of complaint at its "emptiness and bold vulgarity" (12). Yet when she eventually starts working, she submits to its policies and dutifully carries out the assignments she is commissioned to do. Mouse is a target of frequent harassment and scorn, and Head insistently draws attention to her character's victimization as a woman. Her fellow reporters, James and Johnny constantly mock her lack of feminine appeal. At one stage James openly harasses her: "I know your type. They're real hot mammas in bed" and "The trouble with you is that you're morbid. You just need a good rape" (94). The extreme sexism of Mouse's writing environment therefore helps to perpetuate the legacy of silencing that she experiences in childhood. The gap between the cultural environment she is exposed to and the self-knowledge that she yearns to create is stressed shortly after her abrupt entry into a male-centred journalistic milieu. Here she responds to the aggressive existential questions posed to her ("who are you/"where do you come from?" Who are you?) with "a dumb animal fright" (10). The oppressive effects of the office are often echoed in Johnny's tutelage. Head's insistent references to his domineering and condescending attitude cast doubt on Gagiano's claim that "The author nowhere

[9] Well-known writers like Ezekiel Mphahlele and Lewis Nkosi began their literary careers in the fifties as journalists

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invalidates the indicators of Johnny's role as, to some extent, that of a saviour of the psychologically-damaged Mouse" (54). Most importantly, he emphatically attaches conditions to his prospective role as her teacher. When Mouse inquires what the conditions for their relationship are, he says: "That you give me complete control to guide and direct you the way I think you should go" (72).

While Johnny assumes that his desires are congruent with his pupil's, the text often hints at a conflict. What frequently fascinates Johnny about Mouse, is what he interprets as her drive and will: "Because she has guts and has achieved on her own what others can only achieve with the best education a university or college can give. It just happens that I feel strongly about this because I had to educate myself too, and I can't allow the enterprise she has shown to go to waste in a loony-bin" (29). This statement is revealing not so much about Mouse's quest as it is about Johnny's own. He interprets her desires as his own striving to achieve success in a public domain. The unnamed male character who helps Mouse find a wheelchair for a woman about whom she needs to write a story embodies a corresponding drive. Self-assured and resolute, he delivers monologues on the virtues of determination and his own purposefulness. Mouse's absence of will or conscious desire alienates her from a realm in which individuals act because they are driven to do so. For Mouse, then, desire and yearning are distinguished from will, and seem constantly to resist existing worlds of power. As she later does with Margaret in *Maru*, therefore, Head hints at the wealth of her character's creative energy. Yet she also stresses the radical difference of this creativity from the voices and knowledge of the world surrounding her.

Johnny offers his interpretation and control of Mouse's desire as the greatest gift that can be bestowed on Mouse as a silent recluse. He is anxious that what he defines as her commendable potential should not be repressed by her banishment to a "loony-bin" (29). His gift is therefore also a threat. The shadow of the institutionalized mother figure in Head's other narratives intrudes here, her fate being an ominous warning of the consequences of her independent yearning. Johnny's offer, therefore, is both a gift and a caution. Mouse's failure or refusal to relinquish herself to his narrative will result in her perpetual exclusion and silencing. She can discover a voice as a writer largely by speaking his word and constructing herself in his image. Disturbingly, then, Johnny's tutelage often suggests the oppressive mentoring of Margaret Cadmore senior in *Maru*.

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for *Drum* magazine, affiliated to the *Golden City Post*.

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Like Johnny, Cadmore subjects her pupil to a process that Head, in her third novel, appraises with clear irony: "From that eventful evening to a day seventeen years later some wonder had indeed been created. Margaret Cadmore had produced a brilliant student, whose name, identical to hers, was always at the top of the list of passes...There was still one term left before her "experiment" passed out as a fully trained teacher" (1972:19). The progress of Mouse's venture into the world of writing therefore often reinforces, rather than qualifies or elaborates the story of writing as the repetition and acquisition of already written and often oppressive texts. As the novel progresses, it would seem that Mouse learns to write at the same time that she is progressively defined as a blank page that is written on.

Mouse's induction into the masculine domain over which Johnny presides occurs in the context of strongly connoted gendered meanings in the novel. On one hand, a masculine world is defined as visionary, purposive and authoritative. The world marked as "feminine" is on the other hand shallow and inferior. These gendered binaries permeate the narrative in ways that not only convey their insidious dominance for Mouse. They also define the discursive boundaries of Head's efforts to create a plot and fictional characters. The text repeatedly describes stereotypical femininity through its women characters. For example, Mouse's grandmother, preoccupied only with appearances, is cruelly insensitive to her daughter, Mouse's mother. Stereotypes are portrayed to the extent of caricature in two of the women with whom Johnny has relationships. Mona Ross' selfishness and exhibitionism are associated with both her gender and her class privileges as a white woman, while Liz is a former girlfriend interested only in controlling Johnny sexually.

Ruby, the mother of Mouse, appears to exhibit an idealism that distinguishes her from many other women characters in the novel. After she first sees Johnny, she pursues a passionate relationship with him by defying social taboos. But Ruby treacherously capitulates when she pretends not to know Johnny in public. Confessing her weakness to her father, she says: "I am a moral coward. I rejected a man I love simply because in the eyes of the others he would appear poor and lowly" (56). In an ultimate betrayal, Ruby agrees to marry the socially acceptable Paddy and to give up her baby daughter. Johnny, then, is made to discover the "essential woman" in Ruby: "I knew he knew I was ashamed of him because he was not dressed in a suit like Paddy and carried fish in his hand. I couldn't help seeing the look of contempt in his eyes as he passed close by. It showed me how hollow and superficial I really am" (56). In rewriting an autobiographical legend in *The Cardinals,* then, Head has the mother choose to reject her lover and child. Ruby's choices

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are not really exonerated by her eventual grief and suicide. Her guilt is established at the start of the novel when an omniscient narrator denies the reader access to her subjectivity: "She wrinkled her nose in distaste as the stench of the refuse dump and the slum assaulted it; then, holding her breath at intervals, she picked her way carefully through the sand, night-soil and stagnant water" (1). Relinquishing her baby together with five shillings, Ruby leaves the slum with guilty haste. Condemned by the narrator in the opening pages, she bears the vices of moral weakness and materialism that the text frequently connects to women characters.

While female characters are repeatedly condemned, masculinity and the actions of male characters are constantly exalted. Both minor and central male characters in *The Cardinals* foreshadow the models of masculine authority that Head frequently presents in her writing. The main exemplar of a commendable masculinity is Johnny. His idealism leads him to forsake life as a gangster and on a visionary search for social and artistic freedom. Condemning the sensationalism of the newspaper he works for, Johnny speaks and writes frequently, persuasively and at great length in this novel. The authority of his views is strongly established in the text, and it is he, rather than the shadowy third-person narrator, who functions as the novel's moral referent. Much of the authority of Johnny's voice derives from his situation at the margins of white society. As a black man, he constantly resists the overt and covert racism of his world. While he defends his male power base, he commands a compellingly rebellious position at the margins of a racist society. He therefore anticipates the masterful and visionary male heroes in many of Head's later fictions.

Johnny's authority is mirrored in the nameless man who helps Mouse find a wheelchair for the subject of a story she writes. The story is commissioned by the editor and, despite its role in boosting the tabloid's image, promises to be a story independently constructed and told by Mouse. When she resolutely sets out to create and write this narrative, the nameless hero intervenes. In an appropriating process echoing Johnny's control over her writing, this character ultimately authors her story by assuming a pivotal role in shaping it. He offers her his grandmother's wheelchair, and eventually takes her to visit his family where her quest gives way to his self-aggrandizing narrative. His gendered ascendancy in the wheelchair quest is underlined when he says: "I'm sorry to have brought you right into the middle of a family quarrel but I was concerned about the wheelchair... I like to pride myself on being a reasonable man. This fetish of mine also

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determines whom I accept as my friends so, as this world has a pitiful lack of responsible people, I also have a pitiful lack of friends. I just wish you were a man " (36).

Another commended male figure in Head's novel is the old scribe whom Mouse meets as a child. Like Johnny, he is a mentoring father. Unlike Johnny, he is a gentle and benevolent father figure, "a jolly old man with a twinkle in his eye" (4). Importantly, the old man, despite his mechanical occupation, is also seen as a pioneer whose eccentricity sets him apart from other members of the community: "When drunk, he had an annoying habit of singing for hours on end in a high-pitched voice but the people of the slum merely laughed indulgently...Usually such a display of individualism would have been violently repressed but the valuable service he performed set him apart and protected him" (4). In many ways, then, he anticipates the Christ-like father figures and heroic dreamers that Head applauded in later writing. This model of a compassionate father is suggested also in Mouse's grandfather and Ruby's father: "He was a quiet aloof man, absent-minded and detached from reality; shy and awkward and undemonstrative...In the evenings he could always be found in a quiet corner of the house painting delicately beautiful water-colours of landscapes or flowers" (56).

Ruby's father departs from the model of aggressive authority associated with Johnny and the man who helps Mouse find a wheelchair. Like these masterful heroes suggesting Old Testament patriarchs, however, he is an idealist who challenges the moral weaknesses of women. In contrast to his daughter's hypocrisy and betrayal, Ruby's father condones her love affair: "It's not too late to put matters right. Go to him and say you are sorry. He loves you too and will forgive you" (57). His principled tolerance here is echoed in the views of the male doctor who attends Ruby during her pregnancy. Diverging from a mother who is ruthlessly insensitive to her daughter's baby, the doctor compassionately says: "That happens to lots of girls too. Love is always difficult for the very young. It is hard at your age to foresee the consequences and it is the one thing that always brings consequences. We have to think of the child now " (55).

In her study of the social and literary ethos in which Head worked in the late fifties, Dorothy Driver writes: "Not only was *Drum's* so-called vibrancy constructed at women's expense, but the magazine's shift from rural 'past' to urban 'present' was negotiated largely by means of belittling and damaging representations of women" (1996:232). The gendered stereotypes and literary formulae of Head's ethos are sharply registered in her first novel. They surface both as models constraining women's creativity and as entrenched models for storytelling and imagining subjectivity. The masculine codes

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represented in *The Cardinals* not only inhibit the voices and texts that are available to Mouse. They also identify the "repeated " texts with and through which Head writes. It is especially significant that the father figures she developed in her first novel are expanded in later fiction. The autocratic yet visionary hero figure is developed in the character of Maru, while gentler examples of masculine wisdom anticipate Sebina in *A Bewitched Crossroad.* I go on to show, however, that the novel also develops an intricately gendered symbolism that unsettles a socially entrenched masculinity. By symbolically suggesting possibilities for Mouse's creative development beyond paternal narratives and repeated texts, Head identifies independent creative paths for her woman character and for herself. I therefore consider how the gendered symbolism in Head's novel constantly intersects with her autobiographical storytelling.

**Discovered Stories**

At the same time that *The Cardinals* draws attention to Mouse's entrapment in gender hierarchies, the presentation of this character's mother intermittently affirms an "untold" maternal narrative. The novel's opening view of Ruby situates her in a coterie of disparaged women. But the text goes on to embed a very different view. Here Head considers the limitations of Johnny's role as Mouse's teacher, although this is done in a circuitous way. Avoiding the codification of Mouse' desire, thoughts, or creativity, Head connects her central character's yearning to the figure of Ruby and her narrative of illicit desire. She consequently traces a form of creativity that, like Kristeva's, is freed from prior fictions and is connoted as "maternal". It is significant that Chapter Five, although it starts off as Johnny's memory, ends up with Ruby as focalizer. Elsewhere Johnny is able to dominate and re-write Mouse's thoughts. The fifth chapter describes a contrasting process between Johnny's developing silence and Ruby's unfolded presence: the male character is gradually consigned to the margins as the female character becomes a central force.

Much of the style of *The Cardinals* is marked by the robust and colloquial register of the journalists' speech. This style, realistically representing the novel's corrupt, urban and racialist context, is one at which Head became adept in the course of her work for *Golden City Post.*[10] It is a style that also evokes the vigorous and masculine ethos of black journalism during the fifties. In Chapter Five, Johnny's recollection, which slips into Ruby's point of view, shifts away from the aggressive atmosphere of the rest of the chapters. As

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Dorothy Driver (1996) notes, it is set apart stylistically from the rest of the text, and this contributes to the suggestion that it emanates from a different voice-consciousness. The tone of this chapter is romantic, and its register marked by frequent descriptive sections, references to verbs of perception, descriptions of character's physical responses and behaviour, and a formality suggesting deliberate myth-making rather than "mimetic" social realism. An example of this stilted representation is the description of Ruby's discovery that she is pregnant:

> Devastated and broken, she lay for days half-conscious while her family wondered in shocked silence at her sudden collapse. Eventually her mother called a doctor as she could not make her answer questions. The doctor misunderstood the cause of distress but what he told her rallied her fast-ebbing strength for a while. "You must pull yourself together," he said. "Lots of young girls get babies before they are married."
> "I am to have a baby?" she asked, a flicker of interest creeping into her eyes. (54)

The stilted style here is strongly reminiscent of formulaic romance writing. The frequency of adjectives, the formula of a young girl in distress, the conventional language used to describe this distress all suggest the blueprint of romance genres. This blueprint is one which Head routinely used as a writer for *Golden City Post,* and especially its supplement *Home Post*, for which she worked in Johannesburg.[11] While the style is therefore as formulaic and constrained by journalistic codes as the male journalists' realistic model, it seems to identify a different psychic landscape.

The distinctiveness of this section is sustained by its setting. In contrast to the worlds of the slum, the newspaper office and city life, the sea setting of Chapter Five creates an idyllic mood. The tranquil setting seems to affect the characters, who are habitually either silent (like the fishermen) or independent and passionate (like Ruby). Significantly, Johnny - as Ruby realizes - does not like the sea, which he believes "kills us" (51). Ruby, who seems to be mysteriously nourished by the sea, responds: "You mean...it's killing you. Those men love the sea. They are here because they want to be. You are here for other reasons. You have run away from something and are hiding here" (51). Interestingly, Mouse, in an impulsive action after arguing with Johnny about her failure to love, says "I just want to be left alone" (89) and plunges into the sea. She is rescued by a bewildered and mocking Johnny. In this abrupt incident, Mouse's yearning is cryptically linked to a source associated with her mother. The metaphoric meanings of "the swirling, tumultuous waves" (89) are not explicit. Yet the sea, connected both to the quiet

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[10] Head experiments with this style in "Sorrow Food" (1989). Written when she lived in South Africa, the story uses a first-person narrator strongly reminiscent of the anti-heroes in many black South African stories of the period.
[11] See Eilersen (1995:38-42) and Colette Guldimann, (1997:10-51).

reflection of the fishermen as well as to Ruby's passionate idealism, appears to offer an imaginative geography for Mouse that is far removed from Johnny's universe. In particular, her desire here is linked to notions of fluidity and what cannot be contained, and the novel fleetingly discloses a vision that combines serenity with desire. This psychic landscape conjures up Head's apprehension, throughout her fiction, of liberating worlds that elude socially-conditioned perception. Mouse therefore appears to veer intuitively away from a father figure and towards the unfettered desire associated with a mother figure and maternal narrative. On one hand, then, the style and setting of this chapter are reminiscent of the romantic prose that Head routinely produced and often subverted as a journalist. On the other, they evoke the serenity and vision that Head associates elsewhere with Mouse's unworldly introspection and unique creativity.

Head also names her character's "desire" by displacing it metaphorically as the sexual desire of her mother. This displacement is evident in Mouse's recreation of her father's story of his relationship with Ruby. Once Mouse is installed in Johnny's home, he gives her an outline in which she has to use " brief ideas as clues to their form and individuality" (37). The first half of her story describes Johnny as he forsakes his life as a gangster to earn a living as a fisherman. It is in the second half that the story focuses mainly on Ruby. Significant here is the affirmation of her independence and sensuality: "She was barefoot and her long black hair hung loosely behind her. She was tall and very thin and walked in a direct and purposeful way with long swift strides" (49). It is Ruby who plays an instrumental role by acting on her attraction towards Johnny. She says "How beautiful", when she follows him, and initiates their first conversation. In the relationship recounted here by Mouse, Johnny plays an increasingly passive role, while Ruby, described as gazing at Johnny "directly with large demanding eyes" (49-50), is positioned as an intense and yearning subject.

Particularly important in Mouse's story are the codes conveying Ruby's passion. At a point when she is about to make love with Johnny, there is the following description: "'Love me! Love me! Love me!' She cried and it seemed as though his love was as fierce as the savage, battering beat of a high sea; or like a storm beating down on the dry, hard earth of her body and she absorbed its pounding drive, lost and lost in an elemental ecstasy; and then, like the sweet shuddering sigh of the satiated earth, their limbs enclosed about each other in a close and relaxed embrace" (52). Importantly, romantic relationships are elsewhere sanitized and purged of any sexual meaning. At these points, Head appears to draw mainly on the specifications for chaste romance which *Golden City*

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*Post* prescribed for its short pieces and especially for its "women's supplement". Explicit sexual desire in the novel is glimpsed briefly and only in relation to Ruby. Here Head appears to enlist her reading of Lawrence to convey an elemental sexuality that is both creative and spiritually regenerative. Mouse's representation of Ruby often suggests Head's autobiographical stories of her mother. In particular, Ruby's intensity and rebelliousness reflect the illicit passion and independent desire of Head's "mad" mother. They suggest a plenitude and active consciousness that contest notions of lack and inferiority. The representation of Ruby's eventual fate also repeats the story of Head's own mother. On one level, her suicide can be read as a sign of her triumph. It seems to signal her refusal - like that of Head's own mother - to capitulate to the social rules that police tremendous personal desires. But her suicide also raises an impasse that Head expresses about the legacy her own mother bequeaths her. Embedding a theme in her letters, therefore, Head suggests that the daughter inherits the enigmatic story of the mother's union and leaves "her to figure it out" (1991:65).

The creation of this story not only involves recognizing a mother's desires and rebelliousness. It also entails the daughter's attempt to interpret the repressive Immorality Act. Mouse, in ways suggestive of the author, is situated in a quest narrative: she attempts to interrogate the race laws that inhibit the independent desire of Head's mother. Significantly, Mouse's turning to the Immorality Act is revealing primarily about the author's legacy. As Driver observes, it is by no means clear or even likely that Ruby in *The Cardinals* is white (1993:17). The Immorality Act is therefore *not* linked to the relationship between Mouse's parents. In a circuitous connection of autobiographical and fictional stories, however, Head writes her own autobiographical truths through her fictional character. The taboo against inter-racial sexual relations constantly erupts in the narrative, often in relation to Mouse's point of view and perception. On one occasion, she is assigned to cover a story on Immorality Act cases and witnesses the trial of a young Norwegian sailor. The narrative relays the event not through Mouse's interpretation, but through an omniscient narrator. The narrator appears to convey Mouse's thoughts and notes, but this is by no means clear-cut, and her feelings about the trial are largely suppressed. Muffling Mouse's voice further, Johnny interrupts her when she tries to write the story and offers her a sensationalist summary suited to the tone of the tabloid: "A cop peeped through a key-hole and a young man and woman found themselves in the Magistrate's Court charged with contravening the Immorality Act. 'I was only looking for a

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bit of fun,' the man said. He was a sailor from a foreign port and said he did not know about the country's race laws" (70-1).

In this section of the novel, the juxtaposition of points of view and the abrupt curtailing of analysis of the Immorality Act reveal the tension between speaking and silenced subjects. We therefore need to speculate about the juncture of meanings which Head both directly and indirectly conveys. On one level, the section describes Mouse's attempt to puzzle out a way of interpreting the Immorality Act. She reflects on the conviction of the charged man and woman, both of whom are young, innocent and victimized. Significantly, Mouse's perspective is obscured by omniscient narration. This indicates the extent to which the text - even when it appears to capture Mouse's point of view - hints at its muting. On another level, Mouse's story is also explicitly interrupted. Johnny recasts a story which the narrator (and indirectly Mouse) represents as tragedy so that it becomes a "dirty lead for a dirty paper" (70). Mouse's difficult struggle towards the independent writing of her own interpretation is censored by the dismissive but authoritative voice of Johnny. We can speculate here that Head registers Mouse's tentative affiliation with an elusive narrative discovered by interpreting the Immorality Act, but yields to Johnny's paternal voice by suppressing the Act and establishing the mother's silence, the father's authority. What is more clearly conveyed, however, is the tension between Mouse's acquisition of a voice from the authoritative fiction of a father and her interrupted scrutiny of a law which in many of Head's other narratives, aims to suppress a rebellious mother's story.

The second reference to the law against interracial sex in the text is Mouse's exploration, conveyed in her notes, of why there are so many Immorality Act cases. Her reflections in this case are dispassionate:

> I have noticed an interesting and recurring pattern in the Immorality Act prosecutions that appear before court each day. The men are invariably the business-type of man; those who own warehouses, offices and so on. The women, on the other hand, are real tramps in the sense that they have an unwashed look and give off an overpowering odour of urine and woodsmoke. There are two strong deterrents which should prevent the men from cohabiting with the women.
> 1. The women are non-White; the men are White. It is against the laws of the country for White and non-White to cohabit.
> 2. The odour and unwashed state of the women. (110)

This lifeless response (which Mouse develops once she has begun living with Johnny) contrasts diametrically with an earlier one hinting at her emotional engagement. The difference is a striking indication of her growing blindness to a maternal narrative accessed by critically reading and writing about the Immorality Act. The lengthiness and

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apparent directionless of Mouse's "scientific" investigation seems to be a target of some irony here. But whether or not the narrative registers doubts about Mouse's development at this point, what is clear is that Mouse, having imbibed the lessons of her father, here abandons an emotional entanglement with her subject and aspires to his "rational" paternal narrative.

At the end of the novel, Mouse prepares to leave the culturally silenced life that constrains a hopeful writer who is both black and a woman. She therefore seems to be on the verge of communicating her creativity. But the text constantly suggests that her freedom could be compromised by her adoption of culturally hegemonic stories. These quandaries interrupt the text in intermittent and oblique ways. At the same time that the novel celebrates her anticipated literary growth, its multivocal plots imply that her creative progress is embroiled in cultural texts that will inhibit her communication of an independent desire. Johnny turns their transformation at the end into the cosmic mystery: "Life is a treacherous quicksand with no guarantee of safety anywhere" (137). The universalized uncertainty that he prophesies also conveys the doubts surrounding Mouse as she confronts a confining world of "repeated" texts.

*The Cardinals* anticipates the ambivalence of Head's later representation of oppressive social locations and celebration of creativity. The gendering of textual spaces, and their role in defining subjective identity and creative vision are subjects to which the author repeatedly returns. But it has often puzzled critics why Head, given her preoccupation with exposing socially-entrenched authority, turned time and again to the pre-eminence of great men and their heroic stories. She has in fact acknowledged that Johnny in *The Cardinals* provided a prototype of the "mythical man" she exalted in so much of her writing: "He gets better and better with each story" (quoted in Daymond, 1993:xvii). *The Cardinals* offers revealing clues to this preoccupation by identifying an ingrained gender hierarchy and the models of subjectivity that it sets in place. That Head works at times with this hierarchy is not because she did not acknowledge the way it privileged certain voices and excluded others. With its unconscious pointers and unsettling clues, her novel reveals that she critically confronts the way hegemonic cultural codes delimit the narratives and characters she was able to create. It is therefore noteworthy that Head, at the same time that she paid tribute to Johnny as her progressively amplifying prototype, acknowledged that her mythical man was a fiction: "but how can one write about a non-existent person? I can't understand this phenomenon...I'm just worried that I won't be able to understand a real man or else I'll get caught out one day...One day it's

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going to backfire. I know it. Imagination is something I distrust profoundly and the way I have created this man out of air, shocks me in a terrible way, in my reasonable moments" (quoted in Daymond, 1993:xvii). These comments intricately convey the place of Head's father figures in the unconscious of her writing.

On another level, the novel signals the extent to which Head both repeats and subverts culturally-dominant fictions, often struggling with a vision that available codes are not always able to sustain. "Resistance" in South African writing during the fifties and sixties tended to limit definitions of social and creative freedoms. In particular, it meant fixating on racial struggles, neglecting the gendered implications of being black, and yoking the role of writing only to pressing political concerns. Head consistently challenges this. That *The Cardinals* is mainly about the operation of writing codes is therefore both understandable and revealing. Head's search for protean stories and images of social and imaginative freedom expands in later work. While this search often leads to the tentative endorsement of a maternal narrative in *The Cardinals*, this narrative is one direction in an imaginative process that her move to Botswana allowed her to amplify.

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# CHAPTER FOUR
# *WHEN RAIN CLOUDS GATHER*: MIGRATIONS AND NEW BEGINNINGS

> My work was always tentative because it was so completely new: it created new worlds out of nothing; it battled with problems of food production in a tough semi-desert land; it brought all kinds of people, both literate and semi-literate together, and it did not qualify who was who - everyone had a place in my world. But nothing can take away the fact that I never had a country; not in South Africa or in Botswana where I now live as a stateless person. (Head, 1990:28)

In the early years of her exile, Head wrote a number of book reviews, sketches and short stories. Many of these appeared in the London-based *New African*, although her first contact with the journal followed its South African launch in 1964. Head wrote her novel after "The Woman from America", first published in *The New Statesman,* was read by an editor for Simon and Schuster. Impressed by this short piece, he asked her for longer stories. Head had already started working on a novel based on Botswanan experimental agriculture. From the start of 1967, therefore, she concentrated on the completion of *When Rain Clouds Gather,* which was eventually published in 1968. Despite this evidence of literary productivity in Botswana, the period immediately after her arrival in 1964 was precarious. Shortly after arriving, she was describing the emotional and material pressures of her refugee status and made a number of attempts to leave the country. By 1965, she referred to the "insanity business" that would continually affect her in later years, claiming that her teaching post in Serowe was threatened by the authorities, that a "school committee asked me to undergo a medical examination to test my insanity", and that "If I'd gone to the doctor they'd have certified me insane and deported me back to a mental asylum in S. Africa" (1991:12,14). Following Botswana's independence in 1966, she spent two years with a refugee community, a period she described as a "fearfully demoralising way of life, of unemployment and hand-outs from the World Council of Churches" (1990: 67). Although she made frequent applications for citizenship, she became a Botswanan citizen only in 1979. It was therefore during a period of instability, disillusionment and psychological torment that she wrote the first of her published novels.

Many critics have argued that Head's perception of her own rootlessness shaped her urge to claim a country as her "place of rest". Dwelling on her orphan status, enforced exile and insecure situation as a refugee, they have shown how she fixed on the image of a hospitable homeland.[1] Considering her critical views about Botswana, we need to consider how her fictionalized adoption of this country stemmed not so much from her

[1] See, for example, Cecil Abrahams (1990), Linda Beard (1991), Nobantu Rasebotsa (1993) and Rob Nixon (1996).

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sense of literal security there as from a perception of its potential to offer rejuvenating symbolic and psychological meanings. A former protectorate of Britain, the country seemed to have escaped the oppressive legacy of apartheid and Afrikaner Nationalism. With its villages and small rural communities, Botswana appeared to be an environment where the priorities of day-to-day subsistence took prior place over national struggles and party-political battles for monopolized resources. Linda Beard has commented on Head's response to Botswana in the following way:

> In the face of her own poignant experience of dispossession in South Africa, collecting the treasures of Botswanan village life in story and chronicle also enabled Head to graft herself (and her reader) to an experience of rootedness, made possible by the idiosyncrasies of English colonial policy in Botswana during its tenure as the British Bechuanaland Protectorate... Thank God, she suggested, in our 1982 interview, for "a vista of [desert] land that was dry and unproductive", a vista that emerges often in her descriptions of village experience. Bessie needed transplantation in order to discover her own organic voice. (1991: 584)

Head's cynicism about political and artistic protest that seemed to echo the politics of the status quo surfaced in writings produced when she was still in South Africa.[2] But relocation in Botswana offered a store of images of alternative notions of liberation, for example, metaphors based on rural and small-scale agriculture or stories describing supportive relationships. Significant too, however, is that the fictionalizing of a new home did not simply celebrate a pastoral world. This idea is sometimes suggested by Head's critics. Huma Ibrahim, for example, claims that "*When Rain Clouds Gather* ...emphasized traditions and customs without problematizing them" (1996:24). I show that Head celebrates newfound regenerative metaphors at the same time that she continues to probe forms of personal and social injustice. *When Rain Clouds Gather* therefore launches abiding concerns with the primarily symbolic meanings of exile and geographical relocation. In later writings, Head develops these themes in an increasingly diffuse metaphorical strategy. The connection between psychological preoccupations on one hand and ethnographic or historical concerns on the other are thus continued in later works.

In contrast to *The Cardinals*, *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a "coherent" and readerly novel. Its chronological structure, cohesive plot, pastoral form, and fairly consistent use of point of view make it the kind of novel which met the market for realistic and "issues-oriented" fiction from Africa in the sixties. Its readerliness accounts largely for

[2] See especially "Let me tell a story now..." in *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989a).

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the praise of its accessibility.[3] Although *When Rain Clouds Gather* has been celebrated for its simplicity and optimism, some critics have criticized the flatness of Head's characters. Ibrahim argues that the lack of depth in the novel results from the author's desire to "package her characters as extremely good, uncomplicated people" (1996:69). In critically appraising these views, I show that *When Rain Clouds Gather,* despite its use of stylized romance and pastoral conventions, intricately allegorizes Head's search for a liberating creativity and psychological and social freedom. This allegorical thrust is revealed in what appears to be the three-part structure of the novel. While this structure is not explicitly marked in the text, Head pursues three connected concerns. The first of these revolve on visionary male characters who offer paradigms of social leadership. The middle section focuses on women agriculturalists and their gendered world-view and locations. In themes that surface mainly at the end, the text traces the relationship between the stark environment of the village and its transformation by those who inhabit it.

Foremost among the narrative elements in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is the exile of Makhaya, the central character whose experiences are strongly reminiscent of the author's. Through the story of his flight from South Africa, Head invokes a range of subjectively resonant tropes of exile, renewal and liberation. The figure of the migrant and the pattern of displacement are central here. Often conveying the dissolution of given boundaries, both configure a search for spaces that have not been mapped by dominant fictions. In her discussion of Head's construction of subjectivity through metaphor, Maria Olaussen (1997) extensively explores the figure of the migrant by drawing on Rosi Braidotti (1994). For Braidotti, the metaphor of the wandering nomad suggests a constant placelessness, a liberating refusal of fixed "homes" and the constricting social identification that stems from belonging. In view of Head's recurring narratives of migration and refugee or exile figures, Braidotti's views are suggestive. But Olaussen usefully identifies their limitations to Head's oeuvre, where "belonging" and "home" are often liberating. In what follows, I draw both on Braidotti's affirmation of constantly shifting locations, and on Olaussen's reassessment.

In similar ways to *The Cardinals, When Rain Clouds Gather* focuses on the visionary consciousness and acts of male characters. The protagonist, Makhaya and his ally, Gilbert lead others in quests for freedom that refuse loyalties of tribe, nationality and race. Head also raises questions about these characters' authority by scrutinizing their

[3] Reviews of the novel when it was first published especially stressed this. See for example Kuper (1969) and Kitchen

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relationships with women. Although the wives of Makhaya and Gilbert seem to realize an ultimate fulfilment through marriage, the novel considers how their independence may be constrained by intimate relationships with demanding men. The focus on embedded power relationships is linked to an exploration of everyday creativity. Head turns to the figures of illiterate peasants, women agriculturalists or children to validate the creative resources of apparently ordinary worlds. It is mainly in her writing of place that she draws together her ideas about social, artistic and spiritual transformation. Here she develops a symbolist strategy which both refers to transformed social worlds beyond her text, and points to the regenerative worlds immanent in her writing.

*When Rain Clouds Gather* appears to be straightforwardly pastoral. Both its subject-matter and style celebrate a rural "premodern" community and life-style antithetical to the conventions and structure of urban and mainstream society. Yet Head creates a compelling fiction that is often only tenuously connected to an implied world beyond it. Acknowledging this specifically textual significance in her work, she described the origins of *When Rain Clouds Gather* in the following way: "The whole thing is set at a development project, where I actually lived for five months but I want to go beyond what was going on there which was NOTHING" (1991:46). The novel seems to register a powerful autobiographical instant, then, when it describes Makhaya, at the moment of his entry into Botswana, confronting the shocking spectacle of an impoverished old woman prepared to sell the sexuality of her granddaughter. The portentous references to the abuse of young children in *The Cardinals*, and also later in *Maru* and *A Question of Power* disturbingly define this moment. It is implied that Makhaya's first encounter with Botswana is - like Head's - a traumatic one.

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**"A symbolic type of refugee"**

*When Rain Clouds Gather* explicitly recasts many of the author's experiences as an exile. Head left South Africa to take up a teaching position in pre-independence Botswana Bechuanaland), but was refused a passport and had to leave on an "exit permit", that is, a permit that prohibited her return.[4] The novel's central character, Makhaya, is a black South African journalist who flees his country after serving a jail sentence. On his arrival in the Botswanan village of Golema Mmidi, Makhaya thinks increasingly less in the mould of a

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(1969).

[4] Ironically, her formal political affiliations were tenuous. See Eilersen (1995: 50-62).

black South African activist. Rather than defining freedom in specifically political, national or legislative terms, he yearns for a spiritually healing and personal salvation. Head based her fictional village on her own sojourn at a developmental village started by the country's paramount leader (see Head, 1991:46). Describing the origins of her novel, she wrote: "In 1967 I was officially registered as a South African refugee and for two years I lived with the refugee community in Northern Botswana. My first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, grew out of this experience...I created a symbolic type of refugee personality...I made him briefly face the implications of black power and then turned him away from the madding crowd to spend a lifetime in a small rural village, battling with food production" (1990: 67-8).

Head suggests that the co-operative labour of rural Botswana can usher in a new ethos of human compassion, dedication, collaboration and harmony. At a stage when Makhaya has immersed himself in the farming projects of the village, his outlook is described in the following way: "Makhaya found his own transformation in this enchanting world. It wasn't a new freedom that he silently worked towards but a putting together of the scattered fragments of his life into a coherent and disciplined whole" (122).[5] Thus his flight and refuge in Botswana illustrate Head's explanation of her own: "I have lived all my life in shattered little bits. Somehow here, the shattered little bits began to come together. (1990: 22). Like Head, Makhaya seems determined to discover a sense of self unburdened by previous experiences. On his first day in Botswana, he articulates his renunciation of a past by announcing: "Well-educated men often come to the crossroads of life...One road might lead to fame and importance, and another might lead to peace of mind. It's the road of peace of mind that I'm seeking" (20). Independently pursuing paths in opposition to worldly action and public success, Makhaya and all the other main characters are committed to what is "new and strange and beginning from scratch" (188).

The emphasis on new beginnings is powerfully associated with Makhaya's idealism and social withdrawal: "There was something in this inner friction that had propelled him, all by himself, along a lonely road, and he could not help noticing its loneliness because everything he desired and needed seemed to be needed by no one else in his own environment, among his own people or clan" (124). Head has commented on the influence of a young Zimbabwean refugee in shaping her central character: "A young refugee from Zimbabwe quietly detached himself from the group and held long dialogues with me. He

[5] All page references for this text are to *When Rain Clouds Gather*, London: Heinemann, 1987.

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wanted an alternative to war and power. He had no faith in the future black leadership of Zimbabwe. There was no one articulating the hopes of the people" (1990: 68). Makhaya's quest is for a space that will allow him to shed his suffocating designation as, among other fixed identities, "Zulu", "black" and "South African". The start of the novel explains his eagerness to disengage from a country where "On the one hand you felt yourself the persecuted man, and on the other, you so easily fell prey to all the hate-making ideologies, which seemed to be the order of the day ...[and which]...gave rise to a whole new set of retrogressive ideas and retrogressive pride" (80).

Makhaya also scorns traditional group affiliations and codes of conduct. Discussing the notion of "the tribe" with an old man, he says: "I have a list of grievances against it... Makhaya...That tribal name is the wrong one for me. It is for one who stays home, yet they gave it to me and I haven't known a day's peace and contentment in my life" (9). In a reference to his South African past, he is described as refusing an autocratic position of patriarch after his father's death: "As soon as his father died he made many changes in the home, foremost of which was that his sisters should address him by his first name and associate with him as equals and friends" (15). Makhaya steadily unburdens himself of a history of having to submit to social labels. He perceives the irony of his name, meaning "the one who stays at home" and tries to find a life that is not dictated by imposed identification.

As the novel progresses, his existential search is presented in increasingly emphatic spiritual, rather than political terms. He is therefore seen to "turn inward to his own life and his own need to attach a meaning to it. It was because his inner life had been such a battleground of strife and conflict that made him attach such importance to its meaning " (124). This does not preclude his concern with political emancipation and struggle. Makhaya speaks frequently about politics, and it is clear that his flight from South Africa is motivated by a profound opposition to social injustice and sense of social responsibility. Rather than following political orthodoxy, however, Makhaya tries to anchor a political philosophy in his lived experiences of interacting with others and creating a society that will guarantee both his and others' well-being.

Makhaya's idealism and restlessness are mirrored in the character of Gilbert Balfour, the British agriculturalist who settles in the village. In a comic reference to his past, the narrator describes him as a large and ungainly child whose "stupid neurotic mother had sent him to dancing school, and the dancing teacher had sent him home in tears because he had given her a belly punch" (102). Gilbert rejects a country where he

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"had not felt free" because "you could not tell friend from foe behind the polite brittle smiles" (102). In similar ways to Makhaya, therefore, he resists the stifling effects of dominant social codes. Also in similar ways to Makhaya, he believes that subordinate and peripheral worlds will offer him greater scope for personal freedom and self-expression. After a brief visit to Botswana, Gilbert completes an agricultural course in Britain with the aim of applying his knowledge in Botswana. In the village, he initiates various projects for improving livestock farming and crop production. He confesses to Makhaya that "I like it here...I'm running away from England. You know what England's like? It's a place of nice, orderly queues, and everybody lines up in those queues for a place and position in the world. I let all that go and hopped out" (32). In Gilbert's case, the metaphoric meanings of migrancy are also associated with his physical being. Large and clumsy, he often seems to reach out towards spaces beyond what his body circumscribes. Makhaya and Gilbert collaborate when they assume joint responsibility for the collective farm in Golema Mmidi. As Gilbert's assistant, Makhaya enthusiastically takes on the responsibility of teaching agricultural methods to the women cultivators in the village.

Head validates the visionary rebelliousness of Gilbert and Makhaya through the metaphor of their departure from restrictive homes. It is in their discovery and construction of Golema Midi that she celebrates their creativity. The therapeutic and redemptive meanings of the village are suggested in Chapter Two. The history of its origins in particular explain Head's philosophy about residency in relation to migrancy: "Necessity, even in some cases, rejection and dispossession in previous circumstances, had forced them to make the land the central part of their existence. Unlike the migratory villagers who set up crude, ramshackle buildings on the edge of their lands, they built the large, wide, neatly thatched huts of permanent residence" (22). On one hand, this passage affirms the stability of creating homes. The "ramshackle buildings" of the migratory villages suggest the excruciating rootlessness that haunted the author's own life. On another level, the sustaining "home" that Head identifies has little in common with the exclusive spaces of nation, state, tribe or race. It is "not a village in the usual meaning of being composed of large tribal or family groupings. Golema Mmidi consisted of individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life" (22). Refusing the boundaries that usually define social groups, the village accommodates the dispossessed and persecuted exiles of restrictive "homes". It consequently reflects Botswana's historical status as a place of refuge for dispossessed groups in nineteenth-century southern Africa. Emerging during a period of military upheaval, ethnic conflict and mass migration, Botswana progressively

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absorbed many of the groups that fled the invasions of the Ndebele. In its representation of Golema Mmidi, the novel therefore exploits the theme of the discovery of a refuge for those who have been socially persecuted.

Although Gilbert and Makhaya share a repudiation of natal countries and a search for freedom in their adopted homelands, Gilbert is a pragmatist whose actions are "a complete contrast to this wavering and ambiguous world in which Makhaya lived" (81). Makhaya is described mainly as a visionary artist whose strengths rest mainly on his words and thoughts. His solitary meditations seem to indicate that he is the character that most powerfully illustrates a meditative and independent vision. Yet it is through Gilbert that Head often explores processes of creation. She therefore configures Pasternak's twofold vision of pragmatism and creativity to convey art as a pressing "force ...and a truth worked out" (Pasternak, 1958:256). The narrative frequently adopts Gilbert's scientific language in detailed accounts of irrigation projects, tobacco farming, livestock improvement and other agricultural activity. In the following extract, for example, Gilbert's animated and instructive speech to Makhaya gives way to the narrator's voice:

> He sat down on the chair and for almost an hour talked eagerly...to a keenly attentive listener. He felt that he had stumbled on to one of the major blockages to agricultural progress in the country... The women were the backbone of agriculture while the men on the whole were cattle drovers. But when it came to programmes for improved techniques in agriculture, soil conservation, the use of pesticides and fertilizers, and the production of cash crops, the lecture rooms were open to men only. Why give training to a section of the population who may never use it but continue to leave it to their wives to erode the soil by unsound agricultural practices? (34)

Together, then, Makhaya and Gilbert constitute the composite visionary hero that Head repeatedly celebrated in her fictions. Like one of her favourite fictional characters, Dr Zhivago, her visionary hero is both philosopher-artist and practical pioneer. Scorning bureaucratic impositions, he develops an independent vision of social freedom and immerses himself in the practical tasks of creating a sustaining community.

Although Gilbert and Makhaya dominate the narrative as visionary leaders, Head also grants a crucial place to the two women who marry the male characters. Like the men, they are willful, independent and, in the case of Paulina, dispossessed exiles. In linking these four characters, Head represents another form of "imagined community". This community is based not on exclusion, chauvinism or uncritical solidarity, but on interpersonal trust, equality and reciprocity. While romantic relationships between men and women are subjected to critical scrutiny, they also define mutually sustaining human relationships. When he marries Paulina, Makhaya rejects the model of a suitable wife

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recommended by a conservative old man he meets on his arrival in Botswana. Because she has two children and has been married previously, Paulina does not measure up to the standard defined by the old man and suggesting broader conventions. Despite the couple's incompatibility according to social orthodoxy, they develop a relationship based on mutual attraction and empathy. Raising her children alone, Paulina seeks sexual and emotional relationships with men, but is often frustrated by the prospect of exploitation. With Makhaya she seems destined for a relationship of trust and understanding. Similarly, the relationship between Gilbert, a middle-class Englishman and Maria, a Botswanan peasant woman, defies class, national and racial boundaries. It too is based not on social laws, but on personal desires and fulfilment.

The political symbolism implied by these stories of romance mirrors patterns in Head's short story, "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration". In this fiction based on an origin myth of the Botaloate tribe, Head turns to romantic love not so much as an ideal relationship in itself, but as a trope for celebrating individual choices and the societies that defend them. In Head's story, two lovers defy the social law that gives a chief the right to marry the young woman who loves his son. The love between Sebembele the chief's son, and Rankwana leads to their flight and also motivates the migration of those who support the lovers. By migrating, they establish a new settlement that - it is implied - will accommodate the affirmation of individual freedoms that prompted the migration. Romantic love is therefore yoked to the idealistic figure of the exile and his or her search for personal freedom. While Sebembele's role in initiating a new society is not spelt out, the implications are clear: Rankwana and especially Sembembele are the pioneering figures of a new society and sense of home. This is "home" defined not according to conventional group loyalties or crippling ties of obligation, but through realizing individual freedoms and desires. In a stirring celebration of this "new beginning", Sebembele's defiance is described:

> The next morning the people of the whole town saw an amazing sight that stirred their hearts. They saw their ruler walk slowly and unaccompanied through the town. They saw him pause at the yard of Rankwana's father. They saw Sebembele and Rankwana's father walk to the home of her new husband where she had been secreted. They saw Rankwana and Sebembele walk together through the town. Sebembele held the child Makobi in his arms. (1977:5)

*When Rain Clouds Gather* connects romantic relationships to social freedoms and sustaining communities in similar ways to Head's short story. Both of the romances in the novel are seen to either symbolize or to prompt social changes and freedoms. This is especially clear in the relationship between Paulina and Makhaya. The end of the novel

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suggests a political, rather than romantic consummation for their union, a sense of united suffering and questing leading to a concerted commitment to new beginnings. Paulina's son dies of turberculosis at a distant cattle post and Makhaya accompanies her to recover the remains. Here he takes on the responsibility of burning them, collecting the carvings made by the boy and conveying his ashes to his mother. On one hand, a powerful sense of solidarity among those who share similar trials emerges here. As dispossessed exiles, Paulina and Makhaya support each other in ways that suggest the co-operative efforts in Head's other commended communities. On the other hand, because Paulina loses the traditionally valued cattle that are ultimately responsible for her son's death, she also loses the burdensome trappings of a previous life. Like Makhaya, she therefore acquires a freedom to embark on new beginnings. While Paulina is from the start a character who forges independent and original paths, she seems at this point to be wholly aligned with Makhaya. Both, having jettisoned previous values and obligations, confront a radically new future. The marriage of Gilbert and Maria mirrors the relationship between Paulina and Makhaya, since they too embrace futures untainted by inherited values, and seem destined to pursue paths that will be wholly self-generated.

Both personal fulfilment and an implied vision of social harmony are also presented in the relationship between Dinerogo, Maria's father, and Mma-Millipede. The history of their relationship directly echoes the short story, "The Deep River". In their youth, Dinerogo and Mma-Millipede fall in love and plan to marry. A chief is attracted to Mma-Millepede and coerces her family and Dinerogo to let him marry her. Eventually losing interest in her, the chief drives his son to an obsession with killing his mother's tormentor and Mma Millepede to emotional turmoil. Dinerogo invites Mma-Millipede to live with him and his wife in Golema-Mmidi, so that their relationship continues after the death of Dinerogo's wife. The enduring relationship between Dinoergo and Mma Millipede offers standards to which the four younger characters seem poised to aspire. Archetypal pastoral figures, Dinerogo and Mma-Millepede illustrate a fundamental supportiveness and tenderness that become central principles for humane relationships. When Makhaya arrives in Botswana without any plans for his future, it is Dinerogo who provides the basis for his new life by inviting him to Golema Mmidi and introducing him to Gilbert. At a stage when Makhaya recalls his past suffering, Mma Millepede's supportive philosophy offers him solace and leaves him with "all [her] treasures in his pocket" (132). Head therefore develops a social vision in which the apparently "simple" principles and acts of two peasants become the foundations for an ideal world. Her imagined community

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demonstrates that social transformation revolves on everyday forms of respect, co-operation, mutual exchange and compassion, rather than on the rhetoric she associated with "political lumberjacks who are busy making capital on human lives" (1990: 8).

Although Makhaya, Gilbert, Maria and Paulina are the main figures in Head's imagined community, she refers also to other commended characters. Two of the most important of these are Chief Sekoto, the paramount chief whose obsessively autocratic brother oversees Golema Midi, and George Appelby-Smith, the senior police officer in the village. Although a figure of colonial authority, George Appleby-Smith is tolerant and humane, and ultimately, an ally of Makhaya and Gilbert when they set out to transform the village. Similarly, Chief Sekoto shows compassion in his relationships with those who are socially-victimized. In the compelling story about his sympathy towards an old woman unjustly accused of witchcraft, the chief punishes his superstitious subjects who unfairly persecute her and installs her in his own home. An inherent sense of justice and sensitivity therefore leads him to side with the underdog and to alienate the powerful.

The regenerative principles of Head's ideal community emerge in triumphant contrast to characters associated with ethical and social evils. Chief Sekoto differs totally from his malevolent brother, Matenge who brutally rules the village and tries to undermine the co-operative programmes initiated by Gilbert. Matenge. His power is associated "not with guns and blows, but...the cruelty and cunning of his own mind" (67), so that he anticipates facets of Dan and Sello in *A Question of Power*. When confronted by the rebellion of the villagers, he commits suicide. The power-drives that lead to his downfall therefore become both psychologically destructive and oppressive for others. Joas Tsepe, Matenge's assistant, is the target of Head's ridicule of the party politician. She sharply indicts the abuses of "progressive politics" when she writes: "To many, Pan-Africanism is an almost sacred dream, but like all dreams it also has its nightmare side, and the little men like Joas Tsepe and their strange doings are the nightmare. If they have any power at all it is the power to plunge the African continent into an era of chaos and bloody murder" (62). The validation of individuals who display ethical virtues in opposition to those who are driven by an inner malevolence are often the basis of Head's vision of a rehabilited society. As Llyod Brown comments, "inner power...is the absolute prerequisite, in its humane form...for the achievement of public harmony based on social justice" (1981:168). Head's vision of transforming worlds thus draws constantly on a very specific view of the individual psyche, or of personal relationships. It is implied that any efforts at social transformation without a holistic scrutiny of human attitudes and relationships

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cannot be substantively liberating. This view of liberating relationships and attitudes in *When Rain Clouds Gather* often leads Head to avoid the conventionally "political" languages of social liberation. She establishes the cornerstones of a humane world by affirming the spiritual and attitudinal ideals of her imagined community. In this way she imbues her represented community with a tremendous moral force.

Discussing the way certain narratives powerfully encode moral sources, Charles Taylor (1996) deals with the centrality of the biblical story of the Exodus in a variety of religious and secular articulations. He stresses the extent to which the story has become part of what Paul Ricoeur defines as the "social imaginary" (1991) since it has "inspired movements of reform and liberation throughout the centuries, even those which claimed to reject the theological outlook which the original story proclaims" (1996:96). The inspirational force of the story of Exodus echoes in Head's narrative and vision, even though she was frequent dismissive of Christianity. The passion of her reconfiguration indicates a communication that Taylor identifies in certain articulations of "the good", where "the speaker, the formulation, and the act of delivering the message all line up together to reveal the good, as the immense and continuing force of the gospel illustrates". As Taylor claims about such articulations where "words have power", Head's "brings the source close...makes it plain and evident, in all its inherent force, its capacity to inspire our love, respect, or allegiance" (1996:96). The moral potency that Head's narrative releases becomes particularly clear when we consider how she uniquely translates the fictionalizing process of what Benedict Anderson refers to as "imagined community" (1983). Anderson has been concerned with the wealth of myths and texts that buttress constructions of nationalism. Marshalling her own range of myths and fictions, Head develops a personal and visionary fiction of community.

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**Women's Domains**

The novel's women characters prefigure the socially peripheral positions of women that are developed mainly in *Maru*, *A Question of Power*, and *The Collector of Treasures.* By the middle of the narrative, there are often references to tensions in relationships between women and men and to their distinct encounters with their worlds. Explicit references to the sexism of Botswanan society occur in Chapter Three, and suggest the focused feminist themes in *The Collector of Treasure*. When the complexities of Paulina's life are described, for example, there is the following description: "It wasn't the women and their intriguing she feared, but the untrustworthiness of men with no strength or moral

values. It was as though a whole society had connived at producing a race of degenerate men by stressing their superiority in the law and overlooking how it affected them as individuals" (93). The distinctiveness of women's perceptions is revealed in their positions in romantic relationships that often seem to signal only the culmination of personal and political quests. Head therefore turns to these both as metaphors for imagining ideal forms of human interaction and as interpersonal complexes that embed and naturalize inequalities. Women's subordinate situations in these complexes become vantage points for interrogating insidious inequalities that are not experienced by or visible to the male characters. Although Head does not unsettle romantic relationships in the way she does in *Maru*, *When Rain Clouds Gather* often discloses the sexual and psychological domination of women even in apparently ideal and harmonious relationships.

The particularity of women's perceptions is reinforced by the fact that they are often portrayed in very different ways from the male characters. Even when they are briefly described, the narrator often turns to shifts in point of view, or to narrated and interior monologue to explore what appear to be the unexpressed or multiple desires that coexist with surface behaviour and public personae. An example of this emerges in an exchange between Paulina and other village women about the inscrutability of Maria. When the women cynically remark that "She's too clever", we learn that Paulina "also shared this envy of Maria's strange, unfathomable personality and was guilty about it, and therefore turned on the speakers wrathfully, 'I don't like people to discuss a person who is not there'" (95). In these cameos of the way everyday encounters inscribe interpersonal relationships, interiority and public behaviour, the text probes women in different ways from the relatively sweeping descriptions associated with men. The most intriguing and complicatedly textualized characters in the text, then, are not Gilbert or Makhaya, but Paulina and Maria. Although less extensively delineated, both are more enigmatic than the categorically-described men.

Paulina's history is rooted in suffering, dispossession and exile. She moves to Golema Mmidi when her first husband commits suicide and she is left destitute. Like the commended male characters of the story, Paulina is independent and solitary. She is wary of the masculinist norms of her society and chooses to live without a man rather than risk the humiliation of neglect or abuse. Paulina is also passionate and visionary. Her sexual desires lead her to pursue Makhaya, and she leads the women in Gilbert's agricultural plans for the village. She foreshadows many of Head's other socially peripheral yet potentially rebellious women figures. Like many women in Head's short stories, Paulina is

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alienated from authoritative domains of speech and masterful behaviour. Her hinted interiority or signifiers like her bodily expression or flambouyant dress become alternative markers of strength and independence. Paradoxically, Paulina seems to submit to her society's conditioning when she accepts that there are domestic duties for women which men should not perform. Yet these responses are placed in the broader framework of her powerful character and its circuitous expression. It is implied that what Paulina publicly says and performs does not convey all her desires and potential. Thus the notion of the public mask, which Head exploits in her own entrapment in stifling personal relationships, is important to this character's complexity in the novel.

Maria is a more shadowy character than Paulina, and the reader is given fewer insights into her thoughts and feelings. She does not play an important role in the agricultural transformation in which Paulina participates; nor does she share the other characters' histories of suffering and exile. Yet she does exhibit their disposition towards solitariness and free thought, and obviously has "a life of her own" (32). When pressured by those in authority, she refuses to forsake this independence, and often strategically complies. Throughout, however, it is suggested that Maria remains steadfast to personal convictions and will not yield to any other characters' demands. More than Paulina, Maria is a figure of independence and resolution. Rarely sharing her views with others, she carries an air of enigmatic self-possession. Her relationship with Gilbert is far more explicit about the disjunctions in man/woman relationships than Paulina's and Makhaya's. In one of the few insights into Maria's rebelliousness, she vacillates when Gilbert proposes to her. Gilbert, although initially attracted by her self-assurance, is alarmed by the "two women in her - one was soft and meditative and the other was full of ruthless common sense" (101). When he announces that they might one day need to live in England, Maria calmly replies that she will not. Later, Gilbert's manliness surfaces: "'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" (103). Maria expediently responds with "I did not say I won't obey you, Gilbert. I only wanted to find out what was on your mind" (103). Interestingly, it is another woman who acknowledges Maria's resolute autonomy: "Paulina looked across at Maria, who stood opposite her, and Maria stared back. The girl had never been a part of them. She had just always lived her own life in which no-one shared and it was full of quiet shocks. It wouldn't surprise anyone, except perhaps Gilbert, if she declared herself unmarried within a few days, as she had been known to say grass was green on one day and then flatly announce that it was yellow on

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the next" (116). With both Maria and Paulina, then, Head demonstrates the extent to which women, by adopting public personae, may negotiate troubling relationships without forsaking their private convictions and autonomy.

Head not only charts women's self-possession in gender relationships. She also traces their pivotal role as producers and agents of new worlds. The story of women's involvement in the agricultural project follows the account of the male characters who oversee it. Yet this captures the women's socially marginal location, rather than their role in the productive activity celebrated in the novel. Revolving on the initiatives and energy of village women, the communal cooperatives symbolize a socially marginalized creative world to which Head turns in all her fictions. In *When Rain Clouds Gather* , a women's world emerges as a form of subculture. It is subordinated by a dominant patriarchal culture and is inextricably connected to it, yet it is simultaneously unique and antithetical to a socially-superior domain. In Chapter Seven, Head describes the preparations of the women for a wedding, when they "create the most ear-splitting din" (91). The description goes on to explore a unique world of communication: "This whole process is sometimes known as talking, but it has been said that it is only Basotho women who outmatch Batswana women at this art; that is, you stand about a foot away from your companion, heave up your chest, puff up the side veins of the neck and then let all you have inside you come out, full blast. Somehow you laugh at the same time...as though all the glass in the world were being hurled into a deep pit and shrieking in agony. This noise attracted all the goats...They added to the din by fighting, pushing and bleating (91).

In this account, the narrator seems to relegate women's activities to a stereotypical domain of emotion, nature and noise. In the context of the chapter as a whole, the description signals Head's effort to convey the vibrancy of a subculture, separate from the mainstream public spaces of men, in which important supportive relationships are forged and life is celebrated. In her conclusive affirmation of this realm, Head writes: "They were capable of pitching themselves into the hardest, most sustained labour with perhaps the same joy that society women in other parts of the world experience when they organize fetes or tea parties" (104). Thus, a "woman's domain" is celebrated not for any essentialized difference from that of the men. Sociologically, Head explores the energy, intimacy, spontaneity and productivity which, in male-centred frameworks, are often misrepresented or dismissed. Newly arrived in Botswana, she was struck by the burdens placed on women as primary food producers and emphasized their enormous enterprise

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in her first novel. It is the women who constitute the core of the productive domain celebrated in the novel even though they are led by two powerful men.

Makhaya and Gilbert consequently migrate not only to a rural Botswana that is peripheral to the countries from which they flee. They also take up positions in women's marginal "domestic" worlds. Working with the women peasants of Golema Mmidi, they are resituated both as white, black, English or middle-class, and also as men. Makhaya especially is "ungendered" when the women start perceiving him as a co-worker: "They were unaccustomed to a man speaking to them as an equal. They stood back awhile, with uneasy expressions, but once it struck them that he paid no attention to them as women, they also forgot he was a man and became absorbed in following his explanations" (106). It is striking that the only men with whom Makhaya and Gilbert seem to be in intimate contact - apart from the unconventional Dinorego - are functionaries with whom they have to interact. The village men at the cattle-posts engage in manly duties in which Gilbert and Makhaya never take part. The novel therefore traces a paradigm of women's peripheries and male centres. It identifies a community of women - in concert with men like Makhaya, Gilbert and Dinorego – reversing the customary subordination of a women's world to develop a productive and creative centre. In this redefinition of gender domains, the remote manly world of livestock accumulation becomes an unproductive one. The tragic story of Paulina's son, who herds his mother's diseased cattle and dies of tuberculosis, graphically conveys the destructive and acquisitive masculine world in Golema Mmidi.

The peripheral woman's domain celebrated in the novel deviates from nationalist representations of cultural spaces in much African fiction during the fifties and sixties. Rob Nixon draws attention to these representations by commending Head's preference for a "regional rural transnationalism" (1996). *When Rain Clouds Gather* anticipates later novels not only by using tropes of flight and agricultural production to symbolize locations and freedoms for those who have endured social or psychological oppression. It also repudiates colonial and nationalist narratives about southern African spaces. The novel often suggests that there is a symbiotic relationship between nurturing the environment and being sustained by it. Where conquest, ownership and the abstraction of "land rights" feature prominently in both colonial and ostensibly oppositional African nationalist fictions, Head's emphasis on small-scale projects, co-operation and agricultural production suggests radically different encounters with the land. The novel consequently undercuts the accent on an appropriative self-realization in both colonial and African nationalist narratives. Head's overturning of stories of mastery of the land have particular import in

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southern Africa, where processes of appropriation have been especially intense. As she shows in *A Bewitched Crossroad*, these stories of control are crucially bound up with colonizing acts.

In similar ways to Head, Lessing (1994) describes a pattern of transcending colonial, nationalist or other essentialist fictions of landscape. She retrospectively explores her encounters with surrounding space in contrast to the aggressiveness of her brother, the greed of the Rhodesian settler community, and her dislocated parents' anxious yearnings for the metropolis. Confronting the Zimbabwean landscape as "home", she often flees from the domestic home and, in the bush, exults in what is implied to be a reciprocal encounter with southern African space. When Lessing describes her hunting or walks in the bush, she represents a tremendously liberating response of yielding to her environment. Lessing seeks to establish an encounter with the environment in which the subject is neither dominated by nor dominates her surroundings, but is somehow freed by a responsiveness to it. For Head, the representation of agricultural activity is important not simply as a celebration of peasant women. She *does* sometimes associate power, injustice and petty conflicts with her women agriculturalists. While she links the culturally silenced productivity of Botswanan peasant women to her own subjective fascination with creativity, she does not present an idyllic women's world that somehow transcends all injustice. In the final section of this chapter I show that the vision of women agriculturalists' prolific energy intersects with another, auto-referential textual realm.

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**"New Worlds out of Nothing"**

Critics rarely approach Head's fiction by exploring the possibility of their auto-telic features. In fact, she has been pigeonholed in ways that Henry Louis Gates considers typical for writers of "black literature", where the "curious valorization of the social and polemical functions" displaces "the sorts of theories concerned with the discrete uses of figurative language" (1984:5-6). Yet Head is fascinated by the powers of language to transform and inspire. Focusing critically on the way that certain stories and images may be used to limit consciousness and entrench human suffering, she also embraces their symbolizing power to produce undiscovered freedoms. I shall show that her use of a symbolizing "poetic function" is distinct from the allegorical role of language. Formally, allegory is a type of narrative in which symbols are clearly connected to referential meaning. In contrast, symbolism does not gesture to a world of meaning beyond itself. Where Head's symbolic details frequently gesture towards extra-textual moral,

autobiographical or cultural worlds, her textured uses of language also indicate meanings that are made palpable within the text.

The novel's allegorical symbolizing is evident in the way it traces a liberating and creative process through the story of Makhaya's exile to Botswana. It is around his flight and within glimpses of agricultural activity, environmental reconstruction or pioneering productivity that Head explores the subjective import of "creativity", socially-marginal spaces" and "home". When Makhaya has just left South Africa and arrives at the Botswanan border, he meets a woman who tries to prostitute a young child. He arrives in winter and at night, a setting which seems to convey the dissolution of a past life at the same time that it connotes the troubled future he approaches. As Ifeyinwa Achufusi writes, "On the whole...the opening chapter establishes that Makhaya's flight is a kind of descent into hell or the underworld in the mythological archetype of the rite of passage" (1987:55). His introduction to a new home, then, is far from promising. As the story progresses, it returns remorselessly to the harshness of his new environment. Towards the end, the tragic death of Paulina's young son and a ravaging drought underscore a theme that Head initiates at the start. *When Rain Clouds Gather* consequently draws to a conclusion with the grim stories of barrenness, death and burial.

Makhaya often broods about the intractability of his environment. He is especially demoralized by a brief visit to the masculine sphere of the cattle-post, where he discovers the body of Paulina's child: "There was only a heap of clean white bones lying on the floor. They lay in a curled cramped position with the bones of the hands curved inward. The white ants and maggots had vied with each other to clear all the flesh off the little boy. And Makhaya stood there so silent and still, absorbing this terrible sight, confused and angry that there was only this dead, unanswering silence in his heart" (162). Following the liberation suggested by his flight and exile, then, Makhaya has to confront "nothingness". As the chapter proceeds, the novel intensifies its images of desolation and silence. The relentless progress of the narrative towards these images blatantly inverts the optimism of pastoral. The rural village does not become an idyllic alternative to urban spiritual decay. On the contrary, its emergence is linked to the history that produced the South African world that Makhaya tries to escape. Makhaya realizes that Golema Mmidi is inextricably connected to and tainted by a past world at a stage when he seems to be wholly immersed in a new one: "He could run and run away from it, but now the time had come when he could run and hide no longer and would have to turn around and face all that he had run away from" (163). The devastation of the village by a drought underscores the

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protagonist's realization. The end of the novel therefore turns to stark images of a sterile and destructive world, evident for example in the vultures that prey on the dead and dying:

> These horrible creatures guzzled and guzzled, seeming to have bottomless appetites. The wind swept huge columns of sand up into the sky, which carried the odour of death with it and brought more vultures, in thick black patrols. They swooped down with their big wings outstretched like supersonic jets. Some of the fully gorged birds made way for the newcomers, flying up into the thorn trees and adorning the bare branches in monstrous, silent carved postures (165).

Head insists that her characters' surroundings do not provide the straightforward romantic salvation which pastoral usually implies. Drawing attention to the creative processes initiated by enterprising individuals, she concentrates on the way in which new worlds of hope are actively produced.

Significantly, the most important symbol of hope in the novel is not presented as an event, but as the product of imagining. The title, *When Rain Clouds Gather* clearly anticipates the renewal that will follow devastation. This renewal also reinforces the different freedoms suggested in the text. In the only reference to rain, however, tropes of rebirth and progress are couched in the form of individual thought and desire. When Makhaya asks Maria "Does everything die like this", she replies: "You may see no rivers on the ground but we keep the rivers inside us. That is why all good things and all good people are called rain. Sometimes we see the rain clouds gather even though no cloud appears in the sky. It's all in out heart" (168). Maria's cryptic reference to "the rivers inside us" identifies a source of creativity in individual perception. This impression of inventive recreation within and through the "nothingness" of death is also suggested at the moment when Makhaya discovers, together with the bones of the son of Paulina, the carvings of the dead child:

> He opened the bundle and in it was a collection of wood carvings, done by the small boy to occupy himself during the lonely hours of cattle herding. Among the assortment he picked up a thick porridge spoon, one and a half feet in length. A great deal of effort had been put into the production of the spoon. The small boy had decorated the long handle with the twisting pattern of a snake's scaly body, and almost every detail, right up to the venomous eyes, had been reproduced. The design was bold and vivid and he had burned it into the wood with a red-hot piece of iron. (163)

The symbolism of the rain clouds that gather "in our heart" is punctuated in other ways. Makhaya's absorption with the small village that Paulina's child builds is particularly evocative:

> In a secluded corner of the yard he stumbled across a gigantic operation. It was the work of the little girl. She was in the process of building a model village all carved out of mud. There were mud goats, mud cattle, mud huts and mud people, and grooved little footpaths for them all to walk on. He stood staring at it for some time, a look of pure delight on his face. Then he turned and chose a site as far as possible from this sanctuary of genius. (107)

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Makhaya, involved in one of Gilbert's scientific operations, is distracted by the absorbed creativity of the child. He helps her to build her miniature village and contributes to a recreation of the village as a "sanctuary of genius".

The novel's allegorical representation of artistic creation constantly exploits metaphors of transplantation, growth and reconstruction. It is important that Golema Mmidi which, as Dinerogo informs Makhaya, means "to grow crops" (25) is unusual not only because it has become the home of the dispossessed, but also because it is a place of cultivation. Where crop growing in areas that surround Golema Mmidi occurs beyond the village, cultivation, at the centre of village life in Golema Mmidi, suggests its potential for spiritual growth and imaginative regeneration. In her characteristic fusing of fictional and actual worlds, Head named her first house in Serowe - purchased after the publication of her first novel - "Rain Clouds".[6] This act is revealing when we consider Head's faith in the subjectively redemptive resources of language and her deep preoccupation with discovering homes. In her first published novel she discovers a way of writing her story of psychic and artistic recovery. Her characters' prolific and inventive productivity in relation to the limited resources of the village suggests Head's perception of the opportunities offered by Botswana: "I forcefully created for myself, under extremely hostile conditions, my ideal life. I took an obscure and almost unknown village in the Southern African bush and made it my own hallowed ground. Here, in the steadiness and peace of my own world, I could dream dreams a little ahead of the somewhat vicious clamour of revolution and the horrible stench of evil social systems" (1990:28).

Symbolizing in *When Rain Clouds Gather* also points to another form of creation. In his discussion of the evolving role of the symbol from Romanticism to modern epiphanic art associated with poets like W B Yeats and Wallace Stevens, Taylor describes the distinctively Romantic conception of the symbol. Taylor explains that the Romantic symbol assumes a notion of epiphany that is made manifest within the text and is not yoked to "some independently available object or referent" (1996:420). Focusing on these ideas about a textual locus of revelation, he quotes Mallarmé as a poet who invests the work of art with ultimate significance. "Mallarmé", he writes, "liked to speak ...of 'nothingness': "After I found nothingness I found beauty'" (1996:420). Mallarmé articulates a contemporary sense of the symbol's immanent value in the face of modern industrial disintegration and in opposition to the "models of emancipation of the modern world"

[6] See Eilersen (1995:106).

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(Driver, 1993:164) that Head rejected. His fascination with the symbol is therefore suggestive about Head's, particularly because she also defines a provoking "nothingness" to which her creativity responds. This creativity becomes clear when we consider that, as important as the referential allegorical meaning of the narrative is the way meanings are embedded within aspects of its use of language: its style, register and imagery.

The pushing of surface messages beyond referentiality is evident - paradoxically – in the text's apparently transparent and functional register. Although the style is not explicitly poetic or symbolist, it often vacillates curiously, accommodating both realisim and symbolism in juxtapositions which are unexpected or unexplained. One example of this is when the narrative starts to echo Gilbert's pragmatic activity. As the novel proceeds, sections dealing with the mundane and ordinary processes of food production and livestock acquire an incantatory lyricism, despite the emphasis on concrete nouns, a documentary mode and imperative mood. The following is an example:

> Millet was really a stranger to southern Africa where sorghum and maize are eaten as a daily staple. Yet fifteen thousand varieties of millet had been tested in the country, and the authorities had finally bred a type that could produce a crop in only three inches of rain, with a few most needed advantages. Witchweed, which is a parasite that is determined by and lives on the roots of maize and sorghum plants, stunting their growth, was germinated by this type of millet as well, yet the plant remained unaffected by it. Also, the red-billed weaver bird that lives off sorghum seed and caused heavy damage to crops each year, bypassed the millet because the ear produced a lot of spiky hairs that irritated the throat of the bird. (41)

That Makhaya, the philosopher-artist, is profoundly stirred by this sort of language is evident in his response to Gilbert: "The workings of his mind often confused and fascinated Makhaya. It was like one gigantic storage house of facts and figures and plans and intuitive judgements and impressions. The wheels kept on turning at such a fast pace that Makhaya never ceased to be amazed at the way Gilbert always spoke in a calm, almost soft tone, while the loud humming of these wheels was almost audible" (81). Here Head's hero responds not so much to the referential sense of Gilbert's language as to a resonance within the language itself. This resonance is often ascendant in the detailed description of agricultural and development processes in *When Ranclouds Gather.*

It is useful here to consider Roman Jakobson's interpretation of the poetic function of language. Distinguishing different factors of communication, Jakobson shows how the "poetic function" emphasizes the message for its own sake. The poetic function elevates "the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects" (1960:356). *Maru's* amplification of the message at the expense of referentiality is revealed when the texture of descriptions of technical activity take prior place over the mechanical or symbolically creative acts that they refer to. In many of the novel's

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search for narratives, images and philosophies that can both convey and produce the ethical principles she considers vital to personal and collective well-being. The image of a home beyond an inherited, authoritative and masculinized domain is crucial to the domain that Head triumphantly creates in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. In later works, she continues to claim and re-write aspects of Botswanan society and history, using ethnographic and historical resources and techniques as part of her ongoing concern with processes of subject-constitution and quests for political and creative freedoms. In *When Rain Clouds Gather* and the fictions that followed it, Head shows an acute interest in revisioning Botswana, exploiting some of its mythical, historical and conventional meanings, but also subordinating or ignoring much of its inherited and referential meaning to construct what she has referred to as "new worlds out of nothing" (1990: 28).

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# CHAPTER FIVE
# "SLIPPING INTO THE SKIN OF A MOSARWA PERSON": *MARU*

> *Maru* has been bought for filming by an independent film producer in New York...but I can't imagine what Maru would look like as a film. So much is uttered softly. I don't know how the man will put over my cock-eyed version of love, with dazzling rainbow bloody lights in the eyes and glowing forms. It's murder. (Head in a letter to Randolph Vigne, 1991:155-6).

In *Maru,* Head turns explicitly to discourses of race, gender and caste and explores processes of social entrapment through carefully individuated subjects. To a greater extent than *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* deals with character formation, interiority, and other areas associated with contemporary literary explorations of interpersonal relationships and psychology. The favourable reception of this novel, both when it was published and today,[1] results largely from the fact that it represents psychic and emotional experiences often considered central to much twentieth-century fiction and criticism. Set in post-independent Botswana, the novel concentrates on gender and colour-caste hierarchies among black southern Africans. This allows Head to address a legacy of resistance which she identified in *When Rain Clouds Gather* as "all the hate-making ideologies [giving] rise to a whole new set of retrogressive ideas and retrogressive pride" (1987:80). Appraising the scope of Head's vision of racism, Cecil Abrahams has referred to the author's perception "that racism has a deep, psychic depth which goes beyond the more noticeable, visible occurrences of hatefulness" (1990: 6). Head herself has described a developing understanding of racism while writing the novel: "The research I did among Botswana people for *Maru* gave me the greatest insights and advantages to work right at the roots of racial hatred...And so my novel was built up in blinding flashes of insight into an evil that hung like the sickness of death over all black people in South Africa" (1990:69).

The novel dissects the psychopathology of racism mainly through its main female character, Margaret Cadmore. Drawing on her own autobiographical story in representing Margaret's locations and experiences, Head describes a character raised as an orphan and belonging to the slave caste of "Masarwa", "a term of contempt which means, obliquely, a low filthy nation" (12).[2] Shunned by the Batswana when her mother dies shortly after her birth, Margaret is situated in a context where "the worst things are said and done to the Bushmen" (11). She grows up as a withdrawn child, and is apparently

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[1] See early responses such as Paddy Kitchen's review, (1971) or Naomi Mitchison's notes sent to Head (CKMM331BHP5). The close textual scrutiny that the novel clearly lends itself to is evident in studies by Alan Severac (1991) and Horace Goddard (1990).

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silenced by a distinctively southern African racial violence. When Margaret starts teaching in the village of Dilepe, she becomes a target of the parochial community's brutal prejudices, encapsulated in the words of one of her pupils, "'Since when is a Bushy a teacher'" (45). Yet Margaret appears to defy the social laws that oppress her when she becomes an artist and realizes a creativity which the text often defines as "an unexplored gift" (87).

In terms of the overt logic of the narrative, however, the central character in the novel is Maru, a male character who has considerable power in the village. Heir to the chieftancy in Dilepe, Maru is a superior subject in hierarchies that privilege his racial and gender identifications. Thus, he often represents the authority that defines Margaret's compounded "otherness". But Maru champions new values. A "king of the soul" (67), who lives by the "standards of the soul" (126), Head's hero appears to reject divisions of race and status, treating "everyone as a single separate entity... measur[ing] the length and breadth and height of their inner kingdoms with one, alert glance" (64). He demonstrates these beliefs when - in the face of his community's violent prejudice against the Masarwa - he marries Margaret and leaves the village. This plot and its triumphant symbolism therefore repeat the patterns of Head's story, "The Deep River: A story of Ancient Tribal Migration". The implication is often that Margaret and Maru "become initiates in the ritual for survival in their far removed dreamland where they will repeat the cycle of exilic living...linked ostensibly to the forces of good" (Goddard: 1990:106).

Because of his centrality and the frequency of his political and philosophical reflections, Maru becomes an emblematic figure in the novel and sustains its powerful protest against racism. This protest reaches a climax when the hero's personal crusade is translated into historical prophecy: "People like the Botswana, who did not know that the wind of freedom had also reached people of the Masarwa tribe, were in for an unpleasant surprise because it would be no longer possible to treat Masarwa people in an inhuman way without getting killed yourself" (127). The symbolic role and transformative potential of Head's dynamic heroes has been appraised by many critics. Cherry Clayton, referring to dominant themes in *Maru, Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* and *A Bewitched Crossroad*, refers to Head's belief in "the idea of benevolent leadership" (1988:60). Commenting on similar trends from a more critical perspective, Susan Gardner cites a "consistent pattern' in Head's work as the "intervention of a god-like man" (1989:231). The prominence in

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[2] Page references for this novel are to *Maru*, London: Heinemann, 1987.

Head's oeuvre of male characters whose "great gestures have an oceanic effect on society [and] ...flood a whole town" (1985: xiv) has led most critics to conclude that the fundamental thrust in *Maru* is straightforwardly regenerative. Head is believed to depict "love as a magical force from a fairy tale that overcomes insurmountable obstacles and unites people of different cultures and classes" (Gover, 1990:113). *Maru* becomes "the story of racial prejudice conquered by idealistic love functioning as a socially progressive force that advances mankind in the direction of racial equality" (Gover, 1990,113). For many critics, therefore, Margaret's political and psychological dilemmas are subsumed by an over-arching focus on racism and the hero's role in her deliverance.

Interpretations like these ignore Margaret's gendered victimization and recovery. I shall show, however, that Head's novel is sharply alert to the subjection of her woman character within an apparently harmonious romantic relationship. *Maru* extends an exploration in *The Cardinals* and *When Rain Clouds Gather* of the subordination of women in relation both to individual men and to a broader patriarchal culture. In this way, the novel's apparently schematic message - that racialism can be surmounted through inter-personal bonding and romantic love - becomes one current in a very diffuse text. Head's sensitivity to Margaret's gendered position leads to a composite unravelling of plots in *Maru*. It is this untangling that accounts for the text's narrative complexity and open-endedness. Despite the diffuseness of Head's project, critics have been fairly selectively in their readings of *Maru*. Certain criticisms of the novel deal mainly with Head's protest against racism and the moral meanings associated with the male hero's vision and leadership.[3] Feminist critics like Zoe Wicomb (1990), Dorothy Driver (1993) and Colette Guldimann (1997) stress Margaret's negotiated independence in relation to the male hero. Wicomb's extremely perceptive reading highlights the text's covert representation of her subjectivity. Drawing on Wicomb, Guldimann stresses that a romance formula is subverted so that Margaret's independent creativity assumes a central role. While I am indebted to these recent readings, this chapter tries to confront the irreducibly composite nature of the novel. I show that Head engages with different social hierarchies and fictions in ways that are not conclusive, but multiple and often provisional.

Characters' complexity in *Maru* stems partly from Head's concern with intersecting social positions. But it is also influenced by Hindu conceptions of consciousness and perception. Gillian Eilersen refers to Head's intense engagement with Hinduism, mounting

[3] See especially Gover (1990) and Abahams (1990).

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sense of paranoia, and conviction about her spiritual enlightenment at the time she wrote *Maru*. She draws special attention to Head's concern with monistic views that reconciled dualities like good and evil and with the cycles of rebirth that are etched in individual consciousness. This perception of psychic depth is registered in her letter to Jean Highland, where she wrote: "The lovers and helpers of mankind are not born in a day. It has taken me thirty-one years to know who I am. It has taken my God 47 years. The two of us finally knew each other in these past four or five weeks, though when he was born in Botswana a number of prophecies were made about him. I was included in them because the two of us have always been a team together. That is, when he was Jesus, I was Paul. When he was Ramakrishna, I was Vivekananda" (quoted in Eilerson, 1995:103).[4] Head's recourse to Hinduism frequently leads her to discover conspiratorial connections in her own life and fictionalized worlds. *Maru* often details elaborate intrigues in which key characters and their sinister acolytes conspire against each other. While the servants and spies of Maru and Moleka engage in intricate machinations, the village elite uses underhand methods to expel Margaret from the school at which she teaches. Head's conspiratorial perceptions are clues to understanding her scrutiny of power, as well as the personal torments revealed in her autobiographical representations: the overwhelming belief that: "There are powerful people in the background fixing things. It's going to be God's own miracle if I get out of here alive" (Head, 1991:14).

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**Revisioning Marginality: *Maru***

In *Maru*, Margaret's subordination is comprehensively traced in relation to the racist behaviour and ideology of the society fictionalized in the text. But also crucial to Head's exploration of a single character's subjection are social hierarchies and fictions beyond the society that the novel represents. "Basarwa" is a derogatory term used in Botswana, where the people that it defines were often the slaves of the Batswana. The San people that the term disparages, however, have a long history of domination in a regional political and discursive context. While critics of *Maru* have dwelt on the brutal racism that it represents, few have considered the relevance of Margaret's specifically "Masarwa" status.[5] Through Margaret, Head invokes a long and repressed legacy of southern African

[4] Eilersen speculates about the "he" referred to here, but does not offer an explanation of the subject Head did not mention in her letter.

[5] As articles by Abrahams (1990) and Gover (1990) indicate, the tendency to see Margaret's "Masarwa" status as allegorical or incidental leads them to neglect Head's alertness to the particular history of the San. Nobantu Rasebotsa's

violence and "lays bare the forms of psychic investment which lie, barely concealed, behind the processes through which a culture ...evaluates and perpetuates itself" (Rose, 1992:1). It is significant that Head's historical novel, *A Bewitched Crossroad*, immediately singles out the situation of the San in nineteenth-century history. At the start of its exploration of nineteenth-century southern African politics, the novel highlights the plight of the San both as slaves to white settlers and as the persecuted victims of many indigenous groups.

In her exploration of Sylvia Plath, Jacqueline Rose offers ideas for considering the way Head situates herself in relation to historical processes. Dealing especially with poems like "Daddy" and "Little Fugue", Rose explores Plath's metaphoric treatment of the Holocaust and identification with the figure of the Jew. She challenges the way critics have judged the incommensurability of Plath's autobiographical experiences with the historical events she represents, and writes: "In all these criticisms, the key concept appears to be metaphor - either Plath trivializes the Holocaust through that essentially personal (it is argued) reference, or she aggrandizes her experience by stealing the historical event" (1992:206). Rose shows how a collective memory functions as a "fragment of the cultural unconscious that will not go away" (1992:8) and identifies the imprint of cultural memory on individual consciousness. In this way she explores the "historical engendering of personal time and the psychic engendering of history" (1992:222). This nexus of history and psyche helps to explain Head's allusions to culturally-resonant myths in *Maru.* In ways that are suggestive of Plath's resurrection of the Holocaust, she evokes the collective memory of a southern African genocide.

Importantly, Head turns to the victimization of a San character at a time when this group's extreme subjugation was repressed by a nationalist or anti-apartheid fixation with racial conflicts between white and black. She therefore represents a group whose unique story of victimization is drowned out by an influential politics of resistance. This story is urgently summarized at the start of her novel. Identifying the roots of racial hatred in hierarchical perceptions of difference, she writes: "And if the white man thought that Asians were a low filthy nation, Africans in Southern Africa could still smile - at least, they were not Bushmen...Bushmen are not supposed to mind, because there is no one they can still turn round to and say, 'At least I am not a —' Of all things that are said and done

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(1993) focus on the plight of the San in Botswana partly corrects this, although she focuses on a Bostwanan legacy that, I suggest, Head places in a wider context.

to oppressed people, the worst things are said and done to Bushmen. Ask the scientists" (11). The documentary preamble in the first few pages of the novel insistently invokes stories beyond the text. Striking here is Head's impassioned address to the reader: "if you only knew the horror of what could pour out of the human heart" (10). This declamation abruptly interrupts the narrative at the start of the text and urgently links a fictional story to the social stories beyond it: "They spat on you. They pinched you. They danced a wild jiggle, with the tin cans rattling: "Bushman! Low Breed! Bastard" (10-11). Head uses a sharply enunciative language to summon the reader to acknowledge a repressed collective memory. This opening commentary also situates racism in systems of surveillance and binaristic projection. The narrator shows how dominant subjects fix subordinate others, with the San's position at the bottom of this hierarchy denying their authority ever to say "'At least I am not a -'" (11). Unmasking the language of race in the region, then, Head invokes a legacy of persecution and oppressive myth-making.

Haunting the present, this legacy reaches back to previous centuries. The San, small-scale groups first subjugated by African pastoralists, were subjected to colonial oppression as early as the seventeenth century.[6] Before this period, the "indigenous people had lived as hunters and gatherers, as medicine men or women, as painters or engravers, as storytellers; exploring an intellectual world that no doubt penetrated many complex levels of consciousness" (Skotness, 1996:2). Their land was steadily inhabited from the 1700s, so that their self-sufficient economies and social organization were gradually eroded. By the early 1900s, numerous San people were killed or captured as slaves or servants. During the nineteenth century, the San were invaded both by white settlers and by rapidly transforming indigenous groups. Unlike the hunter-gathering and nomadic San, groups like the Ndebele or Tswana underwent massive processes of centralization and militarization. Persecuted, hunted and enslaved by these groups, the San were forced into beleaguered enclaves by the end of the twentieth century. During this time, therefore, they were threatened both by colonizing African groups and by white settler domination.

The victimization of the San in southern African is also inscribed in cultural representations. Stereotyped by both white and black, the San have been projected as primitive types. It is in fictions of white and settler-colonial superiority that this group has systematically signified cultural and moral degeneracy. In the late nineteenth century, their

[6] See William Lye and Colin Murray (1980:25).

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objectification led to slaughter and mutilation, with live San exhibits, as well as corpses, skulls and fetishized body parts appearing in metropolitan anthropometric exhibitions. In his influential study of representations of black sexuality, Sander Gilman shows that Victorian racial discourses did not focus simply on notions of "black" inferiority, but drew specifically on stereotypes about the "Hottentot" and "Bushmen". As Gilman observes, the anthropometric obsession was epitomized in the display of Khoi-San[7] women, especially the woman generally known as Sarah Baartman. Rationalized as scientific inquiry, the display was part of a wider impulse to objectify and displace a sexuality that the western subject defined as pathological. Gilman writes: "The antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is the black, and the essential black, the lowest exemplum of being, is the Hottentot. It is indeed in the physical appearance of the Hottentot that the central icon for sexual difference between the European and the lack was found, a deep physiological difference urged so plausibly on the basis of physical difference (1985:83). As Gilman also observes, myth-making about the San, both in the metropolis and in South Africa, led to the burgeoning of scientific and popular representations. Pippa Skotness describes the enduring inflexibility of these images in the following way: "The image conjured up by the term 'Bushman' is generally not one which is contextualized by a specific history, or by heroic acts, by literature, or by political power struggles. The image is one of physical type or specimen, defined under the rubric of science and of physical anthropology, and then rendered immutable through photograph, museum exhibits, popular films, advertisements, novels and popular histories" (1996:9).

With the surfacing of debates about difference and identity politics in post-apartheid South Africa, the San have become increasingly pivotal subjects for historical and cultural revisioning. This refocused interest is evidenced in Pippa Skotness' exhibition, *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the San*, at the National Gallery in Cape Town in 1996, various revisionist textual interpretations,[8] as well as the formation of political parties and movements under the aegis of San or Khoi-San identities.[9] Jointly, these trends reveal the eruption of a long-suppressed southern African story, as well as the fixation with the San in the South African cultural imagination. In particular, they expose this group's signifying

[7] Khoi-San is the accepted term for describing the two groups derogatively known as "Hottentot"(Khoi) and "Bushmen" (San).

[8] See for example Yvette Abrahams' paper "The Great Long National Insult" (1997) and Zola Masego, Dir. *Life and Times of Sara Baartman* (1998).

[9] Between 1997 and 1998, these movements became particularly active in the context of the Land Claims Courts, addressing dispossession during the apartheid period, and the role of the Truth and Reconcilation Commission in exposing apartheid's human rights violations.

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status in unconsciously autobiographical enterprises. Representations of the San in the late twentieth century have been underpinned by broadly anti-colonial and anti-racist politics but have had different effects. One, associated with Skotness' 1996 exhibition, lays bare colonial myths and acts of violence. Juxtaposing written, visual, photographic and film texts, the exhibition aimed to provoke a new recognition of southern African genocide. It tried to disclose the particular human slaughter that is often obscured by the story of black resistance to white domination. But certain critics have raised questions about the politics of the exhibition. In a review of the exhibition catalogue, Colin Richards argues "What is at stake here? [Skotness] speaks of 'attempts to present a bushman or San voice', but we hear little of her voice (or voice-over) save its wishfully innocent presence"(1996:2). As Richards indicates, Skotness appears to reassess a painful legacy in South African representational practices, yet does not systematically consider the politics of her own.

The controversies provoked by the exhibition in South Africa indicate a wider late twentieth-century impulse to situate past fictions in relation to present locations. Other forms of collective memory are raised by activists and writers who claim to speak for or in the name of the San. These interventions draw connections between overtly violent representations and the apparent revisionism associated with scholars like Gilman or artists like Skotness. They claim to speak from the perspective of the authority of their experiences and to reinscribe authentic voices. In this act of reclamation in relation to the figure of Baartman, Yvette Abrahams writes: "I am a descendant of the Khoisan writing about Sara Bartman. That makes me unique...for the moment I am the only academic from Sara Bartman's people who is writing about her life. My relation to her is different from any of the other academics who have written about her" (1997:19). The variety of responses in recent years to the mass slaughter and misrepresentation of the San implicitly raises the question of how the past is located in relation to the present, of how the subject who looks back at others' history of persecution is situated. Fundamentally, these representations are all deeply autobiographical.

Although her novel was published two decades before the revisioning of San history during the nineties, Head allows us to revisit a silenced southern African story of genocide and misrepresentation. *Maru* therefore makes a profound cultural intervention into contemporary cultural politics. It filters into a regional "social imaginary" in which each representation is linked to a group acutely concerned with "giving itself an image of itself" (Ricoeur, 1991:182). Head's intervention also confronts the difficulties of autobiographical

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representation and personal location. In describing her work towards the novel, she writes: "evil is dependent on a lack of communication between the oppressor and the people he oppresses" (1990:69). From this she leaps to an autobiographical association: "Nothing prevented me from slipping into the skin of a Masarwa person" (1990:69). At face value, she appears to assume the same expressive rights of those who claim to articulate their forebears' voices. Yet she remains acutely aware of a positioned self-narrating impulse. Shortly before writing *Maru*, she wrote to Vigne: "Here I am Bessie Head, the Bushman dog...Where can I go because there is no home for me anywhere and I have become blind and deaf to any such thing as human kindness or affection, as though I reached a precipice and just jumped over and nothing reached me anymore" (1991:86). Striking about Head's "slipping into the skin of a Masarwa person", then, is her alertness to a metaphor of subordination. Margaret, the Masarwa woman, is socially situated in similar ways to the projected non-being that Head likens to her own compound oppression. She consequently avoids defining San "identity" in any absolute or essentialist ways. Her positioning allows her to uncover binary social laws about marginal subjectivies and their construction. It is with these laws and their manifold social, discursive and psychological effects that Head is primarily concerned.

The subjection of the San in Head's text is connected to naturalized surveillance. In the documentary prelude that precedes Margaret's story, Head writes: "In Botswana they say: Zebras, Lions, Buffalo and Bushmen live in the Kalahari Desert. If you can catch a Zebra, you can walk up to it, forcefully open its mouth and examine its teeth...Scientists do the same to Bushmen...Haven't they yet written a treatise on how Bushmen are an oddity of the human race, who are half the head of a man and half the body of a donkey "(11). With the shift to narrative, the status of fictionalized San characters is explicitly linked to the opening commentary: "True enough, the woman who gave birth to a child on the outskirts of a remote village had the same thin, Masarwa stick legs and wore the same Masarwa ankle-length, loose shift dress which smelt strongly of urine and the smoke of outdoor fires" (12). Margaret's mother is trapped in the anthropometric objectification of San people's bodies. As Skotness observes, knowledge of the San has been powerfully encoded in the visual, so that this knowledge has required "very careful forms of scrutiny (1996:9). Margaret is immediately recognized only as a physical specimen, and, like her mother, is trapped in others' scrutiny.

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Generally maligned by the Batswana, she is also the object of philanthropic overtures on the part of four prominent characters: her surrogate mother, Maru, his sister Dikeledi and Moleka. Their overtures often indicate the insidious ways in which socially-dominant figures prey on the projected inferiority of others. Margaret Cadmore senior, the white Englishwoman who fosters an unwanted Masarwa child, illustrates the ambiguous motivations traced throughout the text. A missionary in Botswana, Cadmore defies the prejudices both of the Batswana and a settler-colonial world when she adopts Margaret. She also displays a passion and independence which is linked to her artistic activity and ability to take "revenge with a sketch pad and pencil" (13). When Cadmore and her husband attend to a dying Masarwa woman and her child, she draws an ennobling portrait of the dead woman and uses the caption: "She looks like a Goddess". Head's use of the name of her own former teacher at the mission school she attended suggests that she drew on memories of her own childhood. Eilersen suggests that Head was "paying official tribute to the most important influence of her girlhood" (1995:117).

If the praise of Margaret Cadmore encodes positive memories, the ambiguity of the fictional character underscores the oppressive relationship between a domineering white mentor and the orphaned black child who bears her name. Cadmore challenges the oppressive teachings of racism at the same time that her behaviour remains obliquely shaped by them. The narrator gradually unsettles the image of a person of benign goodwill, and uncovers a socially-dominant figure who often demonstrates little interest in her prodigy beyond her role as a projection. Living with the Englishwoman, Margaret becomes aware that she is a "semi-servant" (17) in the house and that her mentor constantly defines a special purpose for her. Margaret painfully realizes that part of the missionary's interest in her foster-child is an existential need to create a fiction of her own righteousness. For Cadmore, Margaret often remains a clinical experiment, a specimen in a world she seeks to organize according to abstract principles. When she decides to end her "experiment", the relationship with Margaret is terminated abruptly: "The old white lady was retiring to England. There was still one term before her "experiment" passed out as a fully trained primary school teacher. She came in a car with pretty floral dresses and a pair of white shoes and practical last minute advice...The old plump lady pretended to cry, dabbing at dry eyes with a dry handkerchief" (19).

In Margaret Cadmore senior, then, Head, develops a piece-meal disclosure of character and avoids schematically social realist or moralistic frames of reference. Through her fictional character's self-absorption, she also exposes the dubious effects of

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a liberal missionary posture and conveys her own ambiguous experiences in a South African mission school. Margaret Cadmore is disturbingly reminiscent of the anthropologists whose study of the San leads them to deny the humanity of their subjects. In the same way that the San become objects of researchers' interpretations, so does Margaret become the object of her teacher's dogmatic wisdom. From this perspective, her "progressive" scientific dictum, "'environment everything, heredity nothing'"(15) also indicates her denial of Margaret's autonomy. When Cadmore applies this principle, she can perceive Margaret entirely as her own creation.

Considerably less equivocal in her motivations is Dikeledi, the sister of Maru. A powerful figure by virtue of her royalty, she defends Margaret against the racist educational authorities who try to obstruct her teaching career. Dikeledi's horror of racialism and social myths is similar to that of her brother, Maru: "There was something Dikeledi called sham. It made people believe they were more important than the normal image of human kind. She had grown up surrounded by sham" (25). Combining boldness with self-conscious reserve, Dikeledi is initially described in the following way: "She was quiet, no gongs sounded, but she was a drastic revolutionary. She was the daughter of a paramount chief and the first to put a good education to useful purpose...Dikeledi had no need of employment but unlike others who made wealth synonymous with idleness, wealth gave her the freedom to specialize in what interested her most" (25). Thus she is an introspective character whose reflection leads to an ethical vision that rejects her society's prejudices. When Margaret informs Dikeledi that she is "Masarwa", Dikeledi responds with "an instinctive, protective gesture" (25).

Although characterization in *Maru* is complex, Head often identifies a moral universe in this novel as explicitly as she does in *When Rain Clouds Gather.* Characters like Margaret Cadmore and Dikeledi are often clearly contrasted with figures that seem unequivocally reprehensible and evil. One of Margaret's most painful experiences is her persecution by the principal of the school, who, with the school supervisor, tries to engineer her expulsion. Members of the traditional aristocracy and new elite fervently defend an order that defines the "Basarwa" as slaves, and refuse to acknowledge Magaret's status as a teacher. Characters like the principal, the supervisor and the son of a paramount chief are seen to inhabit a spiritually impoverished world of material ambition and intolerance. When they mysteriously flee from the village, Head develops a prophetic view of power. As is the case with Chief Mathenge in Head's previous novel, the three villainous characters in *Maru* seem to be consumed by their own prejudice and brutality.

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Dikeledi, structurally a member of the aristocracy, defies this spiritually impoverished world by protecting Margaret. Like her brother Maru, she appears to have the potential to help others overcome injustice. Prompted by Dikeledi, members of the community eventually give up their prejudices and acknowledge Margaret's humanity. Dikeledi and Margaret establish a rapport of equality, with Dikeledi at one stage acknowledging, "It's funny how we agree in feeling" (47). As the relationship develops, their intimacy becomes a paradigm in the text. Their mutual sense of trust and respect defies social barriers and typifies the relationships that Head celebrates in her different fictions.

While Dekeledi is one of the lauded characters Head uses to affirm an ethical and just world, she also explores this character's vulnerability to entrenched social myths. As she does with Margaret Cadmore senior, Head often suggests a conflict between Dikeledi's conscious beliefs and unconscious prejudices. As the relationship between the two women develops, the text exposes this character's inextricable location within an ideology. Dikeledi's repressed prejudices emerge once she discovers Margaret's creative powers. When she first becomes aware of Margaret's talent as an artist, she responds by "snatch[ing] up the paper" and announcing: "'I'm keeping this'" (87). Later, after the intensive bout of painting that Margaret does during a school holiday, Dikeledi immediately appropriates the paintings. Her behaviour here is not very different from that of her brother, who claims Margaret's paintings from his sister and egoistically interprets them as expressions of his dreams. In an explicit comment on Dikeledi's ambivalence, the narrator reveals her unspoken thoughts when she sees Margaret's drawing: "She wanted to say something like: 'But your people are naturally gifted this way. There are all those rock paintings'"(88). In a similar reference, Dikeledi "had to jerk her mind away" (66) from objecting to her brother's decision to marry Margaret because she is "Masarwa".

These allusions to Dikeledi's repressed assumptions sustain an impression of the character's unwitting entrapment in racial ideology. They also explain Dikeledi's frequently intrusive intervention in Margaret's life. Through Margaret, Dikeledi seems to quest nervously for a means towards her own spiritual and emotional fulfillment. Dikeledi's ambiguity, then, allows Head to reflect on a process in which subjects compulsively stereotype others for their own self-definition. Margaret is occasionally the stereotyped and shadowy signifier of "Masarwa-ness" through whom Dikeledi, a superior social subject, defines her "self". Like Maru, Dikeledi preys psychologically on Margaret when she appropriates and commissions her painting: "A gold mine was a gold mine. Its production ought not to stop with one dig" (98). There is, therefore, an implied "lack" (114)

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within Dikeledi, an absence fed by Margaret's contrasting wealth of being, or, in Head's language, Margaret's "kingdom". There are provocative similarities between Dikeledi's preoccupation and the fixation with ancient "Bushmen" rock paintings studied by modern archeologists and anthropologists. Head explores a process of subject-formation without moralizing about political bigotry. Instead, she shows that Dikeledi, although she tries to resist all injustice, is unavoidably situated within the languages and subject positions of her social world. Maru and Moleka, also located in this world, manifest ambiguities similar to Dikeledi. Both are part of the text's community of enlightened characters, yet both also internalize oppressive social fictions.

Through Margaret's relationships with the powerful male figures of Moleka and Maru, Head focuses specifically on Margaret's gendered location. Before her arrival in Dilepe, Maru and Moleka are close friends. Both are members of the village's traditional aristocracy, yet both seem impelled by aspirations that have little to do with inherited powers. Stressing her characters' moral and spiritual superiority within the ethical framework of her fictional world, Head emphasizes their "enlightenment". But she also contrasts their powers and characters: "They were kings of opposing kingdoms. It was Moleka's kingdom that was unfathomable, as though shut behind a heavy door" (34). Introduced as someone who has "his mind fixed on his own life" (29), Moleka intimidates the villagers with his arrogance and insensitivity to inferiors. Contrastively reflective and sensitive, Maru is often engrossed in philosophical and romantic musings and is reluctant to exercise his power over others. At the start of the novel, therefore, the difference between the two is traced to the worldly arrogance of Moleka and the spiritual intensity of Maru: "At the end of a love affair, Moleka would smile in the way he smiled when he made people and goats jump out of his path...Moleka and women were like a volcanic explosion in a tunnel. Moleka was the only one to emerge, on each occasion, unhurt, smiling. It was different with Maru. At the end of a love affair, a deep sorrow would fill his eyes. He often took to his bed with some indefinable ailment...Maru always fell in love with his women" (35).

Both men are attracted to Margaret's "kingdom" and seem to recognize a latent power concealed by her reserve and by the racial prejudices that misrepresent her. As the story of their battle for her progresses, their differences become increasingly blurred, with Maru displaying much of Moleka's typical ruthlessness. He demands the return of the bed that Moleka lends her and eventually manipulates others in ways usually associated with Head's villainous characters. Maru deviously uses Dikeledi, Moleka and

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Margaret in his plan to marry the latter and "steal the gold" (84). Exploiting his sister's feelings for his rival, he engineers her marriage to Moleka. In the confusion created by Dikeledi's marriage to Moleka, Maru, attended by his acolytes, descends on Margaret's home and abducts her. Underscoring Maru's ambivalence, the narrative conveys the simultaneity of his sensitivity and his ruthlessness: "In the end, nothing was personal to him. In the end, the subjection of his whole life to his inner gods was an intellectual process. Very little feeling was involved. His methods were cold, calculating and ruthless" (73.)

Moleka ultimately displays much of his friend's sensitivity, becoming increasingly withdrawn, abstaining from his affairs with women and realizing that "'I am not myself" (77). The similarities between the two men are further implied when they fight for Margaret and the appropriative motivations of their "love" surface. Although Moleka's initial interest in Margaret suggests the desire for a reciprocal form of love, it is suggested that he preys on Margaret in a similar way to Maru. Shortly after offering her a home and lending her a bed, he grandiosely displays a newfound tolerance towards the Masarwa. This self-conscious display of tolerance is captured by the reports of one of Maru's spies: "there was good food in [Moleka's] house on Sunday. When Seth arrived he found all the Masarwas in the yard of Moleka also seated at the table. Moleka took up his fork and placed a mouthful of food in the mouth of a Masarwa, then with the same fork fed himself" (53). Moleka therefore exploits Margaret in ways that suggest Maru's eventual ruthlessness. Head is therefore less concerned with teasing out character differences or with the neat moral opposition between the two men, than with the manifold make-up and behaviour of a single character complex. References to their rule and sovereignty thus convey both their status as "enlightened" characters, and their entanglement in relationships of power. Both are driven to manipulate others in their selfish quests for gratification or authority. It is this dynamic to which Head seems to allude when she comments on her male characters' behaviour as "something I saw at the time and was trapped between a battle of good and evil. Goodness becomes much clearer later" (1991:156).

Head's compound views about characters lead to dense and often confusing themes. The novel does not follow a linear development that culminates in a resolution of personal conflicts. At the same time that she implies the similarities between Maru and Moleka, then, she continues to hint at their difference, with this emphasized contrast

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reinstating Maru's role as the hero of her text. A reminder of this role is Maru's reflections about his own and Moleka's power:

> Moleka was a sun around which spun a billion satellites...Maru had no equivalent of it in his own kingdom. He had no sun like that, only an eternal and gentle interplay of shadows and light and peace. ..Creative imagination he had in over-abundance. Moleka had none of that ferment, only an over-abundance of power. It was as though Moleka were split in two - he had the energy but someone had the equivalent gifts of Maru's kingdom: creative imagination...Maru preferred to be the moon. (58)

The distinction between the sun, a powerful force that radiates outwards, and the moon, with its impliedly serene energy, punctuates the difference between Maru and Moleka throughout the novel. Ultimately, then, Maru's isolation and vision make him the elevated hero who, according to a romantic formula, earns the heroine and defeats his rival. This description of Maru is prefaced by the rhetorical questions: "Who else was a born leader of men, yet at the same time acted out his own strange inner perceptions, independent of the praise or blame of men" (6)? This laudatory introduction is partly ironic subterfuge, since Head hints at the silenced figure of Margaret, whose dormant powers are overshadowed by her husband. But the rhetorical celebration also unequivocally celebrates Maru as a saviour figure. Towards the end, this praise is sustained when Maru's acts powerfully suggest the hero of Head's moving short story, "The Deep River: A story of Ancient Tribal Migration". Defying social convention and inherited privileges, Maru leaves his village with Margaret in the same way that Sebembele forsakes his tribe. Importantly, *Maru's* ending also anchors the tropes of migrancy and new homes in liberating connections between place, subjectivity and individual freedom: "They were heading straight for a home, a thousand miles away where the sun rose, new and new and new each day" (125).

The compelling description of Maru's messianic role at the start of the text does not therefore, consistently function ironically. Head shows that his desire for Margaret is often prompted by a visionary rejection of oppressive social laws and yearning for a society beyond prejudices. Through Maru, she expands the idealistic pioneer figure of her other fictions. Her faith in the role of personal acts draws not only on the idealistic intervention of a messianic leader. She also turns constantly to the ethical principles and personal acts that are elevated in *When Rain Clouds Gather.* As Grace Achufusi notes, the novel identifies pivotal "incidents which constitute crossroads and landmarks in social evolution" (1987:254). These include the opposition of Margaret Cadmore senior to the Batswana's persecution of the Masarwa, the defeat of those who conspire against Margaret, Dikeledi's

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impassioned support for Margaret and the Dilepe residents' eventual acceptance of their Masarwa teacher. These incidents lead up to the climax of Maru's marriage to a Masarwa woman and founding of a new community. Yet the novel's moments of optimism are not as sustained as the vision of an ethical world in Head's previous novel. Her emphasis on a legacy of entrenched and internalized oppression constantly seems to exceed a vision of new worlds. In fact, Head often explicitly unsettles the romance story that, both in *Maru* and in other works, triumphantly conveys social and personal freedom.

**Re-visioning Romance**

Feminist theories of romance writing and reading draw attention to women's subordination in relation to male desires, and help to explore the shifting connotations of *Maru*'s central romance narrative. Early studies of romance fiction tended towards instrumentalist arguments. Showing that romance fiction naturalized gender hierarchies, they argued that the production and reading of popular romance simply reinforced patriarchal authority. Changing views about the ambiguities of literary forms and readers' multiple locations have led other critics to focus on the ambivalence or subversive potential of romance fiction. The result has been an upsurge of criticism which demonstrates that: "The reading of romantic fiction can express dissatisfaction as much as submission, can offer the woman reader a sense of power, or resolution, or achievement, can find her a place in a community of readers" (Eagleton,1989: 92). Appraising these trends in the early eighties, Mary Eagleton writes:

> Firstly, the emergence of a literary criticism that questions the division between `Literature' and 'writing', 'high' and 'popular' culture, the 'classic' and the 'mass market', has permitted a less pejorative and patronizing reading of texts; it is no longer possible to say confidently that *Wuthering Heights* is suitable undergraduate material but Barbara Cartland is not. Secondly, the development of a feminist psychoanalytical theory which gives primacy of place to questions of female desire has encouraged a consideration of romantic writing and its compulsive and pleasurable qualities. (1989:92)

Recent studies of popular romance have straddled a range of theoretical paradigms. As Eagleton observes, however, "much interest has centred on the 'formula'" and the questions it raises: "How are feminists to understand this formula, its politics and values? What does it tell us about the construction of femininity and heterosexuality in our culture? What specifically, does it tell us about female sexuality? How do women read the formula and how can we account for its appeal" (1989:91-2). Eagleton's assessment raises immediate problems with applying the recent theories to different cultural contexts. On one hand, feminist critiques may unsettle norms of political correctness and literary

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excellence. On the other hand, this critique may itself assume the idea of universality. This assumption is evident in Eagleton's "feminists", "our culture", "women" and "we". Feminist readings that universalize romance formulae can therefore ignore the extent to which readers, authors and fictional characters are positioned in gender discourses affected by other subject positions. In the case of *Maru,* a romance formula not only inscribes Maru's mastery, but also symbolizes his political defiance. An exploration of the power relationships presented through the romance story therefore needs to take into account the diverse subject positions and social relations that the author confronts.

I therefore draw on feminist theories of romance formulae only in general ways, but deal with the complexities of Head's romance story by referring to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston engaged with multiple social relationships and literary formulae in ways that are strikingly similar to Head's. First, like Head, Hurston wrote at a time when prescribed political commitment was strongly urged for black writing, and often defended her independence. Henry Louis Gates, describing her place in a black American literary tradition, writes that "complexity ... refuses to lend itself to the glib categories of 'radical' or 'conservative', 'black' or 'Negro', 'revolutionary' or 'Uncle Tom'...It is this complexity that...has made Hurston's place in black literary history an ambiguous one at best" (1990:186). Hurston's independence is reflected in Head's claim that "I knew some time ago that I am a useless kind of person in any liberation movement or revolution: I can't stand them, or the people who organise them" (1989:230). For both writers, disavowing prescribed political protest often meant challenging its masculine orientation and focused on black women's distinct locations in oppressive relationships.

A second reason for my comparison is that Hurston and Head struggled to transform culturally-dominant genres and literary forms. Hurston's history as an anthropologist, situated not only in masculine, but also western-centric traditions of discursive inquiry[10] has been explored by writers like Alice Walker (1983) and bell hooks (1995). These critics stress her embattled efforts to create independent fictions despite her reliance on forms and traditions that privileged socially-dominant voices. Head initially encountered a writing domain as constrained by dominant codes and forms as that which confronted Hurston. Working for *Golden City Post*, she was encouraged to produce the conventional formulae favoured by the popular publication. Her early journalistic writing

[10] Especially important here is her anthropological training under Franz Boas.

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often reproduced popular romance models in letters, reviews and serialized stories.[11] *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Maru* illustrate a similar diffuseness in the way they undo entrenched forms and grapple with characters' complexities and ambivalence. Head's use of romance was more central to the development of her writing than was Hurston's. Yet it is useful to speculate about the extent to which Hurston's career led her to the romance genre for exploring women's emotional and psychological experiences. Hurston wrote at a time of great interest in and productivity among black American writers,[12] but also at a stage when much black writing was written by and about men. She also preceded the upsurge of African- American women's writing in the second half of the century, an upsurge supported by black feminist politics and literary exploration and canon-formation. That she turned to the romance structure and formula in her best-known novel is therefore revealing about the cultural and political context that constrained her writing options. As bell hooks observes: "One constructs a tale so that it appears to address everyone even though it speaks in its deepest structure to a select few. Without a doubt, Hurston intended *Their eyes Were Watching God* to be an appealing story, one that would sell to a wide audience. To enhance the likelihood of such appeal she exploits many aspects of romantic fiction" (1995:246).

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### Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* describes the quest of Janie Crawford, a poor, black woman who encounters numerous trials in her relationships with men and a racist environment. Her grandmother's claim that "De nigger woman de mule uh de world" (14)[13] is the social lens through which Hurston explores Janie's subordination as part of a dominated black world and within the patriarchy of a black world. Janie grows up within the stark racism of early twentieth-century America. She also represents the women victimized by men who defend a precarious masculinity in the face of white male dominance. As Janie's grandmother puts it: "'de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks'" (14).

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[11] See Colette Guldimann (1997) for a detailed discussion of these.

[12] The Harlem literary renaissance, a period that witnessed the consolidation of literary and artistic activity among black intellectuals in the early 1900s suggests the upsurge of black South African literary activity in the fifties. Significantly, both processes were emphatically male-centred.

[13] All page references for this novel are to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, New York: Harper and Row, 1990.

Janie's first realization of a socially-marginal location occurs when she examines a photograph of herself together with the white children of the family for whom her grandmother works: "'So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuzz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark child as me. So Ah ast, where is me? Ah don't see me'" (9). The idea of the child establishing a secure sense of self - both through identification with, and distancing from a mirror image - is central to psychoanalytic formulations about the acquisition of subjectivity. This passage pinpoints an "aberration" in the child's experiencing of the mirror phase. As a social being, Janie is aware that the photographic figure of the "dark chile" signifies her inferiority in relation to the white figures around her. Her horrified response conveys the existential significance of her social difference from the white children. Her predicament is therefore similar to *Maru's* Margaret, who experiences herself both as "presence", but also as a "big hole...because, unlike other children, she was never able to say: 'I am this or that'" (15). Like Margaret, Janie cannot reconcile a socially constructed self with what is here hinted to be her innate knowledge of self, her knowledge of "me".

Janie's reaction to her photographic image is in many ways a central incident in the text, structuring its later exploration of her quest to "see me" and her belief that a real "me" exists. Like Head's Margaret, Janie possesses an elusive latent subjectivity suppressed by stereotypes and political subjugation. Both authors therefore develop ciruitous ways of exploring their potential in a world of others' myths about them. For Hurston, this potential is often linked to Janie's awakening sexuality. In the text's opening reference to it, she lies under a blossoming pear tree. At this point she escapes the labour prescribed by her grandmother and appears to create a refuge of pleasure. The blooming tree "called her to come and gaze on a mystery... It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why" (10). The narrator provocatively poses these questions without answering them in a way that resembles Head's questions about the sources of Margaret's creativity in *Maru.* In *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* the exploration of Janie's sexual desire is linked to a broader emphasis on her perception and knowledge. On one level, the passage casts Janie as the expectant heroine who passively awaits fulfillment through the hero's intervention. Yet it culminates in an emphasis on Janie's potential for independent discovery: "She searched as much of the world as she could see from the top of the front steps...Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience" (11). This reference to agency and independent desire

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encapsulates the broader framing and transformation of conventional romance patterns in Hurston's text.

In terms of the logic of the romance model, Janie's "looking" appears to be resolved by the arrival of "Johnny Taylor, tall and lean", seen by her grandmother "lacerating her Janie with a kiss" (11). When her grandmother chastises her, arranges her marriage, and dooms Janie to a love-less marriage, the narrative follows a predictable crisis formula in romance: the guardian figure denies the young girl's desire for a hero who will guarantee her happiness. But Hurston juxtaposes a quest narrative with the predictable romance one. Janie's story of independent self-exploration often dominates a romance narrative about fulfilment through another. Following the first reference to the kindling of her desire, she commences her journey towards self-discovery. Her first marriage is to the boorish Logan Killiks. When he tries to force her into drudgery and obedience, she retreats into the introspective questioning associated with the period before her marriage. "Wondering and thinking" (20), she sees Jodie Starks, "a cityfied, stylish dressed man with his head set at an angle that didn't belong in these parts" (26). She is won over by Jodie's promises of a better life. Caste again as the expectant young woman in a romance plot, Janie runs away with the ambitious hero who appears to promise her deliverance.

But her second marriage proves as constricting as her first. Her second husband is domineering and ambitious. As the first mayor in the black community in which they settle, he accumulates wealth by opening a shop, abuses poor and weak members of the community, and tries to condemn his wife to absolute servitude. When she becomes Mrs Starks, Janie has to tie up her hair, give up any rights to freedom and silently serve in her husband's shop. Hurston often diagnoses Janie's subordination in relation to the fragile sense of authority that Jodie's status as a black man engenders. Jodie compulsively prefaces his comments with the phrase, "I god" after becoming the mayor of a new black town. The insecurity that this suggests is commented on neither by the characters in the story nor by the narrator. It becomes an uncoded index of Hurston's subterfuge, a signal that what the text implies always exceeds what the narrator or any single character states. Janie's resilience in the face of her husband's bullying is conveyed more directly in the plot. Her husband, older than her, is forced to witness her youthful energy at a stage when he has little to look forward to. Although the "years took all the fight out of Janie's face" (72), she retains a presence that has simply been suppressed. At a particularly painful stage in their marriage, therefore, she is described as having two personae. One is the ghostly image of a subdued wife on which Jodie feeds. The other is the inquiring self who,

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from childhood, questions the roles and images that her society establishes for her. This questing is conveyed in the following description: "Then one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes" (73). While Janie rarely rebels actively against her husband, Hurston indirectly identifies and validates her character's self-possession. She therefore shows that her woman character possesses a suppressed and inalienable power that eludes her husband's dominance.

After Jodie's death, Janie's quest is linked once again to a romance formula. She meets the irresistible Tea Cake, who "looked like the love thoughts of women...[who] was a glance from God" (96). The formula that surfaces here introduces the dashing hero who offers the heroine an adventurous life denied in her previous partnerships. Ostensibly, Tea Cake is the ideal lover, and a character who apparently acknowledges Janie's independence. Most importantly, he takes her away from her constricting home. Much of Jane's journeying is explored through her departure from oppressive homes. Yet each move leads her to a prison. When she leaves her home with Tea Cake, she appears to enter a totally different home. Tea Cake and Janie do not settle down in the way that her husbands expected her to. Living as migrants, they travel to wherever Tea Cake is able to find casual work, and spend most of their time in a fertile area known as the "muck". The "muck" is home to travelling groups of workers among whom Janie discovers a sustaining sense of community. Although Hurston, like Head, avoids romanticizing a rural idyll, the muck is described as a hybrid space of cultural and emotional freedom: "Sometimes Janie would think of the old days in the big whitehouse and the store and laugh to herself. What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes? The crowd of people around her and a dice game on her floor! She was sorry for her friends back there and scornful of the others" (127). In Janie's relationships with Tea Cake, therefore, Hurston "introduces a model of heterosexual bonding based on reciprocity and mutuality" (hooks, 1995:250). As hooks points out, Tea Cake is aligned with a community that seems to challenge the principles of white American society. Unlike Jodie, he is "linked to a repudiation of materialist values, and [develops] a non-exploitative relationship to nature [and a] radical disengagement from a market economy" (hooks, 1885:250). His pioneering activity in developing a socially harmonious black community is therefore strikingly similar to Maru's messianic role in Head's novel.

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Although Tea Cake frequently embodies the principles that Hurston associates with both interpersonal and social relationships, certain images and aspects of her narrative often disturb the impression of a romantic idyll. At the same time that Hurston creates a hero who initiates a liberated society, then, she shows that her heroine's independence is constrained by the patriarchal framework that underpins his authority. Shortly after the start of their relationship, Janie wakes up to discover that her lover has disappeared together with the money she pins to her clothes. When he returns having doubled the money by gambling, both Janie and the reader are assured of his fidelity and worthiness. This reassurance is reinforced when Tea Cake, disturbed by Janie's fears, announces that Janie will in future "partake wid everything" (119). In the next breath, however, he qualifies this: "But dis time it's gointuh be nothin' but tough men's talkin' all kinds uh talk so it ain't no place for you tuh be" (119). Janie's adventurous lover becomes increasingly ambiguous. He displays unreasonable jealousy when he starts to believe that Janie is attracted to another man, and the narrative repeatedly hints at a pattern of his betrayal or neglect.

The most graphic unsettling of the idyllic relationship is the account of Tea Cake's disturbing death. During a storm that ravages the muck, Janie and her lover flee for their lives. After he is bitten by a rabid dog, Janie faithfully nurses him. Tea Cake, overcome by his disease, attempts to shoot her. In self-defence, she shoots him. Two plots give different explanations for Janie's act of murder and her lover's aggression towards her. The romantic model stresses the poignancy of the hero's tragic death as well as the extreme way in which the heroine is forced to defend herself. On another level, the allusions to cosmic upheaval locate Janie's desire in a realm beyond rational explanation. Commenting on the recurrence of similar metaphors in romantic fictions, Catherine Belsey writes: "Floods, tempests and earthquakes are always other, external, beyond or out of control, and from the point of view of humanism they represent the return of nature, challenging the sovereignty that the Enlightenment attributes to the rational subject. Disasters mark the limits of human mastery" (1994:27).

The "excess" of Janie's desire, then, is signalled in ways related to the cosmic allusions that Head also associates with her characters. The bizarre story also allows Janie to define Tea Cake in a manner that totally subverts the image of the flambouyant lover who guarantees a heroine's happiness. After Tea Cake falls victim to rabies, he is totally transformed. The manic Tea Cake amplifies earlier hints at his aggression, jealousy, betrayal and neglect. The almost surrealistic plot that Hurston introduces

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towards the end of the novel radically recasts a hero who is idealized in a romance plot, and it is within this recast story that Janie confronts her lover as her tormentor. As Diane Sadoff observes, "Hurston has motivated her narrative, perhaps unconsciously, to act out her rage against male domination and to free Janie, a figure for herself, from all men" (1985:22). Throughout her novel, Hurston represents an independent woman character by destabilizing the formulae that privilege male agency and the resolution offered by romantic unions. Each of Janie's relationships introduces a hero that, according to the codes of popular romance, provides the resolution of the heroine's desire. While the heroes become increasingly ideal, the text circuitously dislodges the literary conventions that exalt them. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* therefore captures the position of a central woman character stifled by, rather than liberated in a model of romance.

Hurston not only draws attention to this subordinate peripheral location. She also illustrates Janie's independent yearning by representing her central character's independent narrative. While omniscient narration dominates in the novel, it is introduced and concluded by first-person narration. In the first and last chapters, Janie is seen to tell the story of her life to her friend. The novel ends as it begins: Janie's voice provides a source for continuing and reaching beyond the closure generally offered in romance. This story explicitly continues *after* the romance stories that are told by the third-person narrator. The romance formulae in which a woman's story is situated in dominant cultural conventions is therefore transcended when Janie tells her own story, and, equally importantly, communicates to a receptive listener. The culmination of an independent search suggested by her frame story is linked to a final home-coming. After Tea Cake's death, she reclaims an oppressive home created for her by her second husband.

Molly Hite discusses the implications of Hurston's frame tale in the following way: "It behaves...like the frame or margin that Jacques Derrida has discussed under the rubric of the parergon. Conventionally extrinsic, supplementary, or inessential to that which it borders, a parergon is simultaneously intrinsic and essential inasmuch as the priority of the center depends entirely on the oppositional relation of centre to margin. Yet to call attention to this margin is to destroy its marginal status, for the parergon is what it is by virtue of 'disappearing...just as it expends its greatest energy'" (1990:446). As Hite suggests, Hurston's parergonal frame raises philosophical quandaries about creativity that emerges from marginal locations. The elusiveness of this parergon has led a critic like Mary Washington to claim that "Janie's voice is dominated by men even in passages that are about her inner growth. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston has not given us an ambiguously

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female character. She puts Janie on the track of autonomy, self-realization, and independence, but she also places Janie in the position of romantic heroine as the object of Tea-Cake's quest" (1990:xiv). Like critics of Hurston's novel, certain critics of *Maru* do not acknowledge that Head charts her heroine's covert independence through formulae that appear to deny it. Hinting constantly at Margaret's autonomous consciousness and creative intensity, Head eludes dominant representational practices and codes at the same time that she appears to countenance them.

**The Paradoxes of Margins**

When the characters that conspire against Margaret flee the village and Dikeledi becomes school principal, Head seems to prepare the reader to discover a liberated Margaret in Part Two. Yet her voice remains hidden in this section, with Head suggesting that Margaret's latent creative powers somehow confound conventional representation. This slipperiness is conveyed at the start of the section focusing on her artistic development: "In fact, so quiet and insignificant were her movements that the people of Dilepe almost forgot there was such a thing as a Masarwa teacher. Now and then she caught their eye on her way to the shops or to school. They would laugh a bit, turn to each other and say: 'There goes the friend of Mistress Dikeledi.' She had no life outside those words" (93). Generally, Margaret appears to have no presence beyond the projections of other vocal characters. As a character who "lived on the edge of something" (16), she exists only in others' myths about her, and has "no weapons of words or personality, only a permanent silence and a face which revealed no emotion" (17). At various stages in the novel, therefore, she becomes Cadmore's student, Dikeledi's friend, and eventually the wife of Maru. Margaret's vacillating subject positions are continually shaped by and ancillary to others' desires or acts. Margaret is therefore presented in strikingly similar ways to Hurston's Janie. Like Margaret, Janie is situated in a text where other characters, especially her male partners, continually speak and act for or about her. The dilemma of her compound subjugation leads Head to consider the difficulty of representing her character's independence creativity. Her strategy is strongly reminiscent of Hurston's efforts to configure a parergon that is both situated within, yet also independent of a dominant centre.

Like Mouse in *The Cardinals*, Margaret possesses tremendous emotional and spiritual resources. Also like Mouse, these are often reflected in bodily signification, a form of expression that transcends language yet hints at a reflective consciousness. Both

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Margaret and Mouse have profound emotional feelings and a sensitivity that, for Head, is linked to visionary creativity. Margaret's suppressed emotions become clear when she confesses to Dikeledi, shortly after she is abused by her pupils: "Before you came in, I thought I had a stick in my hands and was breaking their necks. I kept on thinking: How am I going to explain her death? I thought I had killed a little girl in the front desk who was laughing, because I clearly saw myself grab her and break her neck with a stick" (47). It is implied that this emotional intensity gives rise to a potent creativity when Margaret starts to paint: "Something inside her was more powerful than her body could endure. It had to be brought under her control, put on a leash and then be allowed to live in a manageable form" (102).

Head deals not only with Margaret's resources as an artist, but also with the expression and communication of her creativity. Unlike *The Cardinals*, *Maru* stresses the heroine's ability to allow her creativity to "live in a manageable form" (102). One reason for this difference may be that Margaret is a painter, while Mouse is a writer. Head might be suggesting that language and writing constrain the expression of individual and independent creativity in ways that music and visual art do not. As a character acknowledges in *The Cardinals*: "'Word communication is dependent on reason and logic but there are many things in life that are not reasonable or logical. A jazz musician can say something to me in his music but it would be quite beyond me to translate into words what he is communicating through music. What he has to say touches the most vital part of my life but I can only acknowledge his message silently'" (1993:26). Yet the text plots a number of other clues about the sources, forms and effects of Margaret's artistic growth. These suggest that her situation in oppressive myths and structures is always similar to that of Mouse, but that Head resolutely charts her character's creativity in relation to a dominant world.

This negotiated creativity is represented through the stages of Margaret's artistic development. As a student of Margaret Cadmore, Margaret, like Mouse in *The Cardinals*, is the recipient of her teacher's gift. Margaret is taught to paint by Cadmore, and so largely learns a "skill" which is passed down to her. Although her teacher's creativity is associated with a visionary rebelliousness, it is clearly shaped by *her* subject positions and psychic needs. The ambiguity of her mentor's legacy is stressed in references to her authority and Margaret's submission: "She was a little bit of everything in the whole universe, because the woman who had educated her was the universe itself. There was nothing on earth that was not human, sensible and beautiful that had not been fearlessly thrown into the mind of

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the pupil, from Plato to W B Yeats" (20). Although Margaret is taught everything that is "human, sensible and beautiful", she is also the passive pupil who has had cultural resources "thrown into the mind" (20). In a similar reference describing Margaret's introduction to the poetry of Yeats, she seems to be encouraged to emulate her teacher's response: "'Damn it!' her educator had exclaimed, impatiently. "'You can't understand him because you can't hear and see the lake water lapping' and out whipped the sketch pad" (20).

Yet the text qualifies the idea that Margaret's creativity simply repeats her mentor's. When Dikeledi remarks that Cadmore's teaching was generous, Margaret candidly says: "She was not good. She was rich. She kept on throwing things away. I used to feel myself catching them, and that is how I learned" (88). In this provocative reference to the origins of creativity, Head uses both passive and active constructions. On one level, Margaret is the passive pupil who "used to feel myself catching", who "repeats" the teachings of her mentor. On another level, Margaret seems to interpret and control her own creativity. Unlike Mouse, she is someone who learned and knows how she learned. Margaret's learned "skill" is therefore linked to an independent power that leads her to paint, as Dikeledi remarks, better than her teacher. The autonomy of her artistic powers is forcefully conveyed when she is described as losing her connection with "everyday things": "Now she had lost the link completely, like a non-swimmer suddenly thrown into deep water. She could not discipline and control the power machine of production" (101).

Margaret's independence here is also suggested in her socially-unsettling claim when she first enters the village, "I am a Masarwa" (24). Wicomb (1990) persuasively considers how this sentence disrupts the character's usual location in others' discourses (1990:43). Margaret repeats the label of Masarwa and "other", but simultaneously claims the act of naming. In a similar way, her painting allows her to reconstruct the creative language that is imposed on her. Head also connects Margaret's creativity to her discovery of a liberating home. After the crushing of the conspiracy against her, Margaret establishes a harmonious connection with the village of Dilepe. This integration is evidenced in the way she makes a home for herself in the village's unused library building, in her rapport with the goats that visit her home and in her encounters in the village. As they did for Head, her environment allows her to root herself in a village and to choose "themes from ordinary, common happenings in the village as though those themes were the best expression of her own vitality" (107).

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Related to the serenity of Margaret's creativity are her feelings about and artistic composition for Moleka. When she paints for the man she loves, she represents a tranquil village scene at sunset, with Moleka in an "arrested, humble pose" and herself "quietly leaning on his shoulder" (113). Here she captures an ideal love which is "not even love as people usually think of it", but "everything else; necessity, recognition, courage, friendship and strength" (99). Margaret's vision of their relationship, then, has little to do with the ties of dependence which romantic love conventionally implies. Instead, they suggest her pantheist discovery of a home which "seemed to her the most beautiful home on earth" (61); Moleka therefore becomes part of her "recorded ...hour of peace" and a "static endless hour" (114-5).

Margaret's painting for Moleka straightforwardly expresses her dreams. In contrast, the painting claimed by Maru suggests subterfuge. Margaret composes a series of paintings which transform Maru's dream of a life with Magaret as a vision of "yellow daisies along a footpath leading to his home" (7). Her painting represents a house that gives off a bright yellow light, a field of daisies (reminiscent of an image in Maru's dream) and an embracing couple figured as "two dark forms" (103). When Maru sees these paintings, he claims them as an expression of his unified dream image and plans to marry Margaret. The house becomes the haven of their union, the daisies a symbolic reflection of their fulfilment, and the embracing couple a confirmation of their partnership and Margaret's need for him. Yet she does not ascribe a clear meaning or intention to her painting. While her artwork may have a fixed meaning for the man who marries her, they do not have these implications for the painter. Wicomb argues that these implications are tantalizingly subversive: "She paints her dream, which, in fact, is a projection of her powerful suitor's desire, and which later, when he sweeps her off into marriage, is translated into reality. But by separating the scene of his desire into discrete paintings, in other words by denying the unity of the composition, she disrupts the realisation of his dreams" (1990:43). As Wicomb shows, Margaret refuses to integrate the images as the harmonious romantic narrative that reflects Maru's desire. The distancing from Maru's ideal is stressed when she has a dream in which she separates herself from the image of the two embracing figures. As she tells Dikeledi, "a strong wind arose and began to blow me in the direction of the embracing couple. I was terrified. They did not want anyone near them and I could feel it" (103). She also confides that her dream recurs until she puts her images down on paper. When she paints the scene, she therefore inscribes her position as an interpreter of Maru's dream of partnership, rather than as participant in it.

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The many symbolic details of Margaret's paintings confirm the radical difference between Maru's visions and her own. Guldimann (1997) reads Margaret's composition in terms of film analysis. She argues that the character's freezing of separate frames subverts Maru's composite image, which has the naturalizing effects of unified film frames. Guldiman also shows that the yellow light in Margaret's painting could signify Moleka, who is elsewhere associated with the sun. Margaret therefore signals her desire for Maru's rival in a painting that the hero reads as an expression of her desire for him. Also noteworthy are Margaret's images of darkness and her dream about a "strong wind". The darkness seems to register her foreboding about Maru's idyllic vision, while the disturbance in nature metaphorically unsettles the impression of a harmonious relationship. As Belsey (1994:27) suggests in relation to other romance fictions, the metaphor of natural unpheaval configures desires that elude rational explanation and "happy endings". In the same way that Hurston's storm metaphor suggests Janie's irrepressible yearning at a moment when she appears to have achieved her happy ending, so does Head trace a passion that transcends Margaret's union with Maru. The symbolic clues in Margaret's painting constantly hint at her independence. The linking of a romance plot equating Margaret's happiness with Maru's heroism to a quest plot that traces Margaret's independence are remarkably similar to Hurston's.

Margaret's creativity, however, remains *connected to* Maru's images. As critics like Wicomb and Guldimann suggest, her subversive artwork responds to Maru's. In fact, the text traces a pattern in which Margaret's painting is constantly shaped and facilitated by others: Dikeledi buys Margaret the materials with which to paint; Moleka provides the home in which she paints; and Maru, Moleka and Diekeldi become the avid interpreters of her artworks. In the pattern that gradually unfolds, then, Margaret's creativity curiously straddles a reliance on others and her independent expression. A key to this paradox is Margaret's own view of her painting: "I first see something as it looks but it looks better when it reappears again as a picture in my mind" (104)."How things look" is their meaning from the perspective of the dominant codes and discourses associated with other characters. Margaret has the ability to make them "reappear", so that they acquire different, and, it is implied, visionary meanings.

In her discussion of the embedded discourses in visual art, Griselda Pollock discusses the strategies of *avant-garde* art, and offers suggestive formulations for considering Margaret's painting. Pollock proposes the terms "reference" and "difference"

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to analyze the way Impressionist painters created counter-canonical visual texts. "Reference" refers to the way artists engaged with previous subjects or styles, while "difference" signaled something new in subject-matter or technique...a definitive advance on that current position" (1992:14). Pollock is clearly dealing with a context and tradition that assume a highly commericialized field for producing, interpreting and selling art. But what is provocative is the idea of particular kinds of artistic creations becoming "gambits", "a term that not only suggests calculation but also implies a risk, a gamble" (1992:15). Margaret's artistic statements can be described as gambits that calculatedly "refer" to a legacy of canonical or hegemonic cultural texts, yet also inscribe a highly individual "difference". What is "visionary" about her creativity is her ability to reconfigure inherited texts and so produce new meaning.

The trickiness of this production of "new meaning" can also be explained with reference to the parergon, a concept that has preoccupied different philosophers and aesthetic theorists. Derrida writes: "This permanent demand - to distinguish between the internal or proper meaning and the circumstances of the object in question - organizes every philosophical discourse in art, the meaning of art, and meaning itself, from Plato to Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger. It presupposes a discourse in the boundary between the inside and the outside of the art object, in this case, a discourse on the frame. Where do we find it (1979:12). Like Hurston, Head finds a textual strategy for representing the parergon as it acquires meaning at the same time that it disappears. The parergon comes into view not only in relation to Margaret's subversion of Maru's image. It also surfaces in her other paintings. Especially important here is the way she reinterprets everyday activities and "rediscovers the ordinary".[14] The following passage describing her artistic transformation of a village scene indicates this: "The women carried water buckets up and down the hill but the eye was thrown, almost by force, towards the powerful curve of a leg muscle, resilience in he back and neck, and the animated expressions and gestures of the water-carriers as they stopped to gossip" (107).

The "rediscovery of the ordinary" is as much a feature of the creativity of Head's character as it is of her own writing strategy in *Maru*. In the same way that Margaret deconstructs Maru's dream, so does the text unsettle the familiar and predictable model of romance. Head's parergonal intervention surfaces at the end of the novel, when Maru decides to carry Margaret off and abruptly tells her "You must stop this self pity. There's

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nothing hurting you any more" (123). Until this time, Margaret has had no knowledge of Maru's interest in and plans for her. Her response is terror and a premonition of "the living death into which she had so unexpectedly fallen" (124). At the same moment, however, the text emphasizes Margaret's independent accomplishment, a "slow inpouring of life again" (123). Guldimann has explored the way that the start of the novel, prefiguring the romance story's end and a stage after the marriage between Maru and Margaret, helps to unsettle the predictable structure and meaning of romance. As she observes, this prolepsis sharply reminds us of the story "after the happy ending" (1997:100). A similar structural interruption of the romance story occurs in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie is situated as a narrator-protagonist who qualifies a narrative that can only culminate in the happy ending of conventional romance.

It is significant that Head and Hurston also trace regenerative meanings within romance in related ways. When Head explores ideal and liberating relationships between men and women, she develops a metaphor that recurs in her stories as well as in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The community initiated by Maru and Margaret is often likened to the liberating community, initiated around romantic unions, in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. This society offers a provisional political meaning in the novel, a provisional meaning which is also crucial to Hurston's vision of a restored and transformed black community. Hurston often shows that Tea Cake's tolerance and tenderness provide a form of leadership that is very different from Jodie's aggressive ambition. Moreover, the community in which Tea Cake thrives is quite different from the hierarchical world from which he removes Janie. At the same time, both writers highlight the way that romantic love can naturalize the subjection of black women within ostensibly transformed black communities. Both Hurston and Head are consequently concerned with the way that "subjugation" and "resistance" subsume different subject positions within dominated groups. Their composite texts draw attention not so much to contradictions or inconsistency, as to "deliberate but unobstrusive consciousness which insists that the marriage of distinct, contradictory elements in selfconscious paradox is the only way to approximate the comprehensiveness and wholeness of what some may call 'truth'" (Beard, 1991:583). In developing similar strategies, they also dramatize their positions in relation to dominant social relationships and cultural frameworks. The existential quandaries of their heroines are, therefore, also

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[14] Njabulo Ndebele (1986) gives a distinctively South African slant to this phrase when he affirms artistic

the writerly dilemmas of the writers. Head, like her character Margaret and the American writer Hurston, constantly registers the way she "feels herself catching things". Yet she constantly reinvents the fictions of her world.

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representations of everyday life rather than formulaic protest.

# CHAPTER SIX
# *A QUESTION OF POWER* AND "SOME 'OTHER KIND' OF KNOWLEDGE"

> I wonder if we are on the same track about realism and abstraction. What I would call abstraction is that whole body of intuitive responses we may live with but dare nor acknowledge because of the confusion and hurt they are likely to cause...I can never get it right, that one goes through the act of always saying one thing with some "other kind" of knowledge, only in the end to make a clear firm statement of truth. (Head in a letter to Giles Gordon, KMM44BHP124:2)

> The Hindus faced a broader concept of God than that presented by Christianity and had it (Hindiusm) not absorbed me at one stage I might not have survived so long. They say: 'We know of a God of both good and evil, the saint struggling against the sinner until the saint dominates.' If there is hurt in me, it is because I was not allowed the luxury of fiddling around with evil to the extent that when it is aimed at me, I can't grasp what is happening until I am almost choked to death. (Head in a letter to Tom Carvlin, GKMM38BHP22)

Explaining the reasons for the mixed and often disparaging reception of *A Question of Power*, Gillian Eilersen writes: "The abstruse subject-matter and high level of protracted desperation at which most of the novel is written are not components that lend themselves easily to being shaped into a readable form" (1995:142). Eilersen accounts for the "high level of protracted desperation" by stating that Head "explores a nervous breakdown from the inside, an entirely different undertaking from analysing or discussing one" (1995:143). As she suggests, the difficulties with interpreting the novel derive not from the fact that it deals with the unconscious, but from the inward perspective from which the unconscious is explored. Where novels like *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru* allude to obscure psychic processes, *A Question of Power* immerses the reader within them. It suggests themes of madness in relation to gender, race and the southern African landscape in ways that hint at J M Coetzee's *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) or Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1950). It also appears to echo seminal twentieth-century fictions of women's "madness" like Charlotte Perkins' *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1891), Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1972) or Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). Unlike these texts, however, Head's novel rarely offers the reader the security of the narrator's distance from the unconscious. It is this withholding of distance, of a "safe" way into and out of the text that explains the many passionate objections to the novel.[1]

The charting of unconscious processes from within partly accounts for the intensely graphic view of the central character's inner life. In the translation of Elizabeth's inner struggles as physical suffering, the memories and images of her unconscious become grotesque figures and bizarre acts over which she has no control. Head turns to the

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menacing images of dreams to represent a language that is both different from yet also inextricably linked to the images and codes of conscious perception. The register and style of the novel's treatment of psychic life, especially the central character's periods of mental breakdown, are therefore shaped by an emphasis on the visual and on processes of looking and being looked at. The specularity configured here is an activity of producing and imbibing cultural meanings. In particular, it is a process in which disparaging images of women, many of them mythic, constantly erupt into the central character's psychic world. Mythic images of women, like Medusa, the Hysteric, the Madwoman, or the Nymphomaniac, drift in and out of a nightmarish realm that is Elizabeth's inner world. The following extract, typical of much of the novel, clearly traces the connections between cultural images and the central character's perceptions and psychic life:

> She had a picture of a Southern lynch mob, a whole group of white men and women. Two black men hung dead from a tree. The lynchers were smiling. Medusa smiled like that in her mental images, but Medusa was as close as her own breathing, and each night she looked straight into Medusa's powerful black eyes...That night Medusa and Sello in the brown suit were engaged in an eager whispering conversation. At one point Medusa turned her head towards Elizabeth and smiled triumphantly. Sello was pointing to the figure of a man in the distance. She overheard him say to Medusa: "Don't worry, he'll kill her." (92)[2]

In descriptions like these, Head shows that the unconscious is structured as a language that encodes cultural and social memories, myths and images of a surrounding world. This explains Elizabeth's fixation with negative mythic images, and especially with mythic representations of women's sexuality. It is suggested that her conscious and especially unconscious perceptions cannot be separated from the pornographic discourses of the world in which she is situated. Her internalized horrors are therefore the horrors of her surrounding world *and* a world that she is part of. By blurring the boundaries between inside and outside, between private and public, and between psychic reality and historical process, Head offers an exploration of the unconscious associated with Jacques Lacan. Discrediting the idea of a "pre-symbolic" private self, Lacan identifies the linguistic structure of the unconscious and insists that "the Word...was in the beginning" (1977:61). Much of the force of Head's novel derives from the way she makes processes of subject-constitution corporeal and concrete. Inscribed both in the mind and on the body, oppressive myths are made manifest when, for example, demonic figures walk through the socially-subordinate central character or other victimized figures, or when one

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[1] See especially the responses of Paddy Kitchen and Tom Carvlin described in Chapter Two. Also see Eilersen's account of Head's battles with publishers and agents about this novel (1995:134-153).

[2] Page references for this novel are to *A Question of Power*, London: Heinemann, 1974.

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character is described as "opening [Elizabeth's] skull and talking into it in a harsh, grating voice" (193). One of the most graphic descriptions of the power of "the Word" is Elizabeth being subjected to the record-playing messages of Dan, messages that seductively combine both the beguiling appearance and the jarring underside of cultural myths.

While Elizabeth's inextricable entrapment within the "Word" is central to Head's exploration of psychic experiences, she often turns to a body of eastern philosophy that draws conclusions about consciousness very different from those associated with Lacan. Here she dwells on Elizabeth's painful efforts to find an attitude of freedom that can escape what is seen as the debilitating impact of worldly knowledge. As she does in novels like *The Cardinals* and *Maru,* Head associates the freedom of her woman character with spiritual repose. This freedom is partly traceable to Hinduism's belief that the self can exist as incorporeal and transcendent soul. It is also rooted in Hinduism's exploration of the connections between the subject that perceives and the world that is perceived. From the perspective of Hinduism and other eastern philosophies, this culturally determined opposition leads to a host of oppressive dualities. Spiritual liberation derives from the unity between perception and its object. This unity eradicates the compulsion to control a surrounding world and leads to complete serenity. In this framework, consciousness becomes the site of an internal mental effort to redefine a pattern of spiritually oppressive perception.

The "questions of power" in Head's novel constantly refer to spiritual configurations of freedom and confinement. While *Maru* deals emphatically with oppressive social and discursive domains, A *Question of Power* constantly combines these with spiritual ones. "Good" and "evil" recur in this novel. These terms are often invoked as poles in a Manichean opposition, especially in the second section titled "Dan". Here Head focuses primarily on the relations and myths that trap her central victimized character in cultural binarisms. She is a "racial hybrid" in a society where "racial purity" is valued, she is an exile and she is a woman. Elsewhere, however, "good" and "evil", existing in a curiously symbiotic relationship, are seen mainly as projections emanating from the perception of the observer. On this level, Head dwells abstrusely on questions about how Elizabeth may approach creativity, intelligence and serenity in ways which are genuinely independent, new and liberating

Although it is both simplistic and misleading to reduce *A Question of Power* to the author's psychological state, Head's detailed exploration of the psychic anguish of a central character can be explored in relation to her declining faith in the political freedoms

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and creativity offered by her life in Botswana. Shortly before starting *A Question of Power* and after she had completed *Maru*, she grew progressively more cynical about her situation in Botswana and increasingly preoccupied with the idea of her personal persecution. In the early seventies, letters to correspondents like Giles Gordon, Jean Highland and Naomi Mitchison register a mounting introversion and anxiety about victimization.[3] By 1972, when she started working on the novel, she fluctuated between moments of calm and the psychological distress and paranoia which first led to her hospitalization. Much of this vacillating is registered in her novel. The central character, Elizabeth, alternates between moments of "madness", where she lives entirely within her unconscious fears and projections, and moments of "sanity", when she inhabits and acts in an external world. While the overt fusing of autobiography and fiction suggests a pattern in previous novels, the realistic story of how a central character tries to make a home as an exile and outcast plays a peripheral role in *A Question of Power.* Head focuses primarily on Elizabeth's internal struggles.

Head's emotional and psychic state at the time of writing *A Question of Power* does not explain the novel's meanings, but allows us to consider the logic of her positioned concern with the unconscious. In a letter to Giles Gordon, Head wrote that the "dark area of the subconscious does interest me and would affect my writing and thinking but only in relation to what I survived and what I gained" (BKMM44BHP1). The complexity and range of images and themes in *A Question of Power* have baffled many critics, as revealed, for example, in Elizabeth Evasdaughter's claim that the novel registers an "overload of memories and observation that are in violent conflict with one another" (1989:80). Annette Kuhn provides a suggestive formulation for confronting this "overload". Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kuhn writes that the "Unconscious...may be regarded as the price paid for language and human culture" (1994:47). The effects of the repressions produced when the subject is culturally constituted are a surfeit of meanings. As Kuhn implies, the unconscious is the site where an "overload" registers the terrifying complexity of apparently stable human experiences.

This perspective is stressed in Jacqueline Rose's approach to Sylvia Plath's treatment of the unconscious. Dealing with the "spectre of psychic life" in Plath's oeuvre (1992:3), Rose shows how critics develop the following reductive objectives. On one hand, Plath is clinically diagnosed, so that her works are seen as evidence of schizophrenia and

[3] Eilersen offers a comprehensive account of Head's erratic emotional state in the early seventies and her eventual

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psychosis. On the other, her writings are interpreted as testimonies of her persecution. In this way, "psychic life is stripped of its own logic" and the "problem of the unconscious" is removed (1992:3-4). Pursuing apparently different directions, critics of Head's novel have treated *A Question of Power* in similar ways. For early reviewers and certain later critics, the novel becomes a testimony of "madness", with normative appraisals diagnosing the schizophrenia of both the text and its author. The normative view is explicit in Elizabeth Evasdaughter's "Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* as a Mariner's Guide to Paranoia" (1989). Evasdaughter treats the novel as a straightforward testimony of Head's psychic experiences. Defining the text as a "case study of paranoid schizophrenia", she lists its features of "paranoid schizophrenia" according to the *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1989:75).

Alternatively, a critic like Margaret Tucker stresses the interpretive power of the text. Yet Tucker straightforwardly sees its view of the unconscious as the world of power which the character needs to challenge. Focusing on Elizabeth as the victim of two male characters' sexual violence, she concludes that "*A Question of Power* is about "finding freedom from and amidst oppression; by exposing hierarchies of power, and in particular the objectification of women as the foundation of patriarchy, Elizabeth jumps out of Dan's and Sello's 'big picture' to form another time" (181). For Tucker, an "external" world is neatly opposed to the character's inner one, so that their connection is simplified. Criticism of Head's treatment of psychic anguish has therefore shifted between extremes in the same way that it has, according to Rose, for Plath: "between the idea of Plath as a victim of patriarchy (source of her ills) and the idea of her self-generating (blameworthy) psychic distress" (1992:129). This chapter considers how Head's treatment of the unconscious complicates the "issue of who is doing what to whom, where does the misery come from, in what...does it find its origins and cause" (Rose, 1992:130). The central character's persecution is often traced to her self-perception, and her struggle is not so much against an oppressive surrounding world, but with an inner world irreducibly enmeshed with an outer one. Through her self-analysis, Elizabeth discovers memories, anxieties and cognitive orientations that rule out any straightforward discovery of external causes and internal solutions.

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hospitalization (1995:134 -153).

In the course of understanding her perceptions and self-definition, Elizabeth turns increasingly to anchors offered by Hindu philosophy. Her path towards recovery parallels the writer's perception of her own. Although Head's early writings were infused with fragments of eastern religions and philosophy, she turned increasingly to Hinduism for explanations of her emotional turmoil in the seventies. Eilersen deals especially with her preoccupation with reincarnation and destiny as ways of interpreting her victimization. Referring to her letters to Jean Highland, Eilersen writes: "She felt herself to be part of a soul drama, a new act of the eternal conflict between good and evil...Behind everything she described was her underlying belief in reincarnation. In this life she was meeting up with spiritual giants who had been her friends and foes in previous incarnations" (1995:129). Eilersen also identifies Head's particular interest in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, reflecting the views of a religious leader whose attempts to fuse Hinduism with other world religions made his movement especially accessible in the west. Using western frameworks to translate a central Hindu principle, Ramakrishna stressed the location of suffering in perception, claiming that "Everything is in the mind. Bondage and freedom are in the mind. You can dye the mind with any colour you wish. It is like a piece of clean linen...If you keep your mind in evil company, your thoughts, ideas and words will be colored with evil; but keep in the company of Bhaktas, then your thoughts, ideas and words will be of God. The mind is everything" (Ramakrishna quoted in Noss,1980:213).

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**Father figures and the Unconscious**

> The terrible thing about three dimensional perception is that falsehoods travel side by side with truth. A portion of the falsehoods are an individual's own vanities and character weaknesses and they have a kind of whirlpool effect or destructive power...A position of freedom and goodness seems to only arise from embracing evil and knowing the ropes, so to speak. (BKMM44BHP1)

*A Question of Power* returns to father figures, but underplays a realistic narrative of origins to focus primarily on the repeated narratives and images of the unconscious. In this way it develops the exploration of "repetition" in *The Cardinals*. While the later novel fleshes out narratives and images elsewhere, it would be misleading to assume that it definitively explains abiding images and figures of the writer's unconscious and literary texts. Psychoanalytic critics have warned of the dangers of reducing patterns of repetition to neat causes, emphasizing that the psychoanalytic truth may figuratively repeat what is ostensibly explained. This caution is stressed especially in Lacan's emphasis that the subject is constituted within a symbolic-linguistic system - so that patterns in the

unconscious and in literary texts can never be reduced to extra-textual signifieds. The elusiveness of repeated patterns is also hinted at by Sigmund Freud when he explains the "uncanny" as "the discovery [of] whatever reminds us of this inner repetition-compulsion" (1953: vol 17, 230;232). Freud's formulation of the "uncanny" is especially suggestive in considering the recurring father figures in Head's work, a recurrence that she has described as something that "shocks me in my reasonable moments" (1993:vii).[4] As early as *The Cardinals*, the artistic struggle of a socially-silenced woman is connected to a powerful male figure who is often defined as a repository of the knowledge with which she must struggle. In *Maru,* figures of male leadership become more explicitly ambiguous. They frequently threaten to stifle the psychological and creative struggles of a socially-persecuted woman artist. *A Question of Power* develops an exploration of oppressively authoritative male figures since Elizabeth is often violently tormented by Sello, and especially Dan. The "uncanny" reappearance of father figures in Head's work does not, therefore, form a consistent pattern, yet it indicates their profound symbolic and psychological significance.

*A Question of Power* draws parallels between the experiences of the author and its central character more directly than *Maru.* Through the experiences of Elizabeth, a South African schoolteacher who settles in a Botswanan village with her son, Head represents many of the circumstances of her own solitary life in exile. The novel is primarily concerned with the hallucinations of Elizabeth, afflicted by mental breakdowns revolving around figures and memories that haunt her life in exile. Elizabeth begins to hear voices a few months after her arrival in the village of Motabeng. She frequently loses faith in the healing potential of her involvement in village life, and during her nervous breakdowns, is overwhelmed by the figures in her psychic world. When her hallucinating starts, she traces it to the legacy of her mother, the white woman she never knew. Having been incarcerated in a South African mental hospital, her mother bequeaths a "silent appeal": '"Now you know. Do you think I can share the stigma of insanity alone? Share it with me"' (17). *A Question of Power* does not, in the way *The Cardinals* and Head's self-narratives do, deal consistently with Elizabeth's quest in relation to maternal figures. But it does insist that gender myths and relations constantly shape her psychological torments.

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[4] Head was referring here to the way the figure of Johnny in *The Cardinals* was reconfigured in her work: "Imagination is something I distrust profoundly and the way I have created this man out of air, shocks me in my reasonable moments" (Head, 1993:xvii).

Like Margaret in *Maru*, Elizabeth is repeatedly defined as an inferior subject within different dominant relations and ideology. She is black; she is an outcast and refugee in Botswana; she is a "half-caste"; she is an orphan; she is believed to have inherited her mother's madness; and she is a woman in a patriarchal society. While the material and political determinants of Margaret's subjugation are clearly explained, these determinants are intricately conveyed through Head's presentation of Elizabeth's psychic life. The novel provides fragmented and brief references to her past and real-life experiences, and these are usually filtered through her consciousness. At the start of the novel, in one of her first memories, she recollects her oppressive naming by the principal of the mission school she attends as a child: "We have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native" (16). In a similar way to the shifting marginal positions in which Margaret is trapped in *Maru*, so is Elizabeth located in compound forms of marginalization forcing her to live "on the end of South Africa's life" (18).

While Elizabeth is dominated within diverse social and discursive forms of power, her entrapment is revealed mainly in relation to two male figures that repeatedly intrude on her psychic life. In the novel's framework of her everyday life, she barely knows the real Sello, "a man she had seen about the village of Motabeng who drove a green truck" (23) and who is well-known as a crop farmer and cattle breeder or Dan, "one of the very few cattle millionaires in the country" 104). In her inner world, however, the three make a "strange journey into hell" and keep "close emotional tabs on each other" (12). Initially, Sello functions as a supportive father figure who helps Elizabeth to understand and overcome her psychological torment. When she first encounters him, he appears in monk's robes as a spiritually enlightened teacher. Many of his liberating teachings are exemplified by heroic figures in Head's earlier and later texts. An important theme here is the pivotal role of the everyday struggles of ordinary people, and the view that "the Gods' turned out on observation to be ordinary, practical, sane people" (31). This theme is linked to the idea that politically liberating struggles are also spiritually healing ones. Thus, Sello's political vision has a spiritual basis: "All the push and direction was towards the equality of man in his soul, as though, if it were not fixed up there, it never would be anywhere else" (31). Throughout, Sello's spiritual authority is linked to eastern gods like Krishna, Rama and Buddha.

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As Part One proceeds, however, Sello's saviour image is seen to coexist with his own pursuit of power. In Elizabeth's other hallucinations, he appears in a brown suit as a figure "who had no contact with the Sello in the monk's robes" (39). In the form of a worldly and autocratic leader, he conceals an obsessive desire for control behind his "vesture garments" of spirituality: "Sello's favourite hunting ground had been India, and [Elizabeth] privately accused him of being the originator of the caste system" (32). She reflects on what he might have said: "the title God, in its absolute alll-powerful form, is a disaster to its holder, the all-seeing eye is the greatest temptation. It turns man into a wild debaucher, a maddened and willful persecutor of his fellow men" (36). Using what Evasdaughter refers to as "emblematic historical tyrannies" (1989:77), Head stresses the universality of her exploration of power: "Nearly every nation had that background of mythology - looming, monstrous personalities they called "the Gods", personalities who formed the base of their attitudes to royalty and class; personalities whose deeds were hideous and yet who assumed powerful positions" (40).

Power is therefore approached both from the viewpoint of instances of persecution at specific historical moments, and as a ubiquitous social and interpersonal pattern. In this pattern, subject positions generate parasitic relationships between rapacious oppressors and their dehumanized victims. With the frequent references to ancient Egyptian deities and myths, Head turns to the institution of theocracy and the way structural power relations become sanctified norms. Worldly powers are seen to lead to cultural perceptions of innate supremacy, indicating how insidiously those in power assume a godlike status. An obvious figure of naturalized despotism is the Roman emperor Caligula, whose authority was attached to divinity before and after his death. Head's other exemplars of power mania include Napoleon, Hitler and Al Capone. Not only does she isolate figures that have persecuted others throughout history. She also describes a "meeting of the mythological and the socio-historical" (Achufusi, 1987:101) in which mythological embodiments of power like Satan, Zeus, Lucifer and Set reveal that power is embodied in a variety of guises. Elizabeth's perceptions constantly shift between a view of the specific in, for example, her memories of apartheid South Africa, or her understanding of Hitler and Word War II to a view of power in archetypal figures from different cultural contexts.

Head shows that power becomes a compulsive force and unleashes an insatiable need for victims. Her cosmic view in this novel develops insights associated with overtly destructive figures in *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*. It indicates that power

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engenders a manic behaviour that is more intractable than material oppression. The cosmic view discloses patterns concealed by the apparently commonplace figures and events of everyday life and by ostensibly disconnected historical cycles. It is a view that therefore echoes the paranoid perception in much of Head's letter-writing. In the same way that Head does in many of her letters, Elizabeth perceives "some coherent, broad, overall pattern" (40) and uncovers the menacing forces concealed by everyday actions and behaviour. This process is especially clear in her battles in relation to Sello, whose oppressive power explicitly surfaces in his relationship with the figure of Medusa. When she first appears, Medusa is the serene wife of the monk-like Sello. With Sello in the brown suit, the woman who is the "extreme of spirituality" (37) is transformed into the "wild-eyed Medusa" (38). Medusa's status often parallels the position of Elizabeth when she becomes, symbolically, a projection confirming his power.

In an explicit reference to Medusa's symbolic meaning, the mythological figure is explained as the representation of how a "man is overwhelmed by his own internal darkness", as the "direct and tangible form of his own evils, his power lusts, his greeds, his self-importance" (40). This is directly related to Sello's invocation of Medusa as what he has "hidden away in his subconscious" (58). Through Medusa, Sello is able to displace his repressed impulses and project them onto a demonized female figure. This pattern is rooted in Head's distinctive interpretation of the Greek myth of the Gorgons: the trio of terrifying Gorgon sisters becomes a projection of what man denies in himself. Although the threat of Medusa is removed when she is killed by Perseus, Medusa's decapitated head continues to pose a threat. The story of Medusa's power - that the sight of her turns men to stone - admits to the fragility of "manhood" as a fiction based on repression and projection. When "man" sees Medusa, he ceases to exist, losing a "self" as symbolic presence in a frozen "absence". This interpretation of the myth explains Sello's anxiety about Medusa. While she initially appears as a force that he controls, she periodically eludes this control and displays an "evil" greater than his own. Sello's desperate need to control her is thus traced to his psycho-existential need to preserve his fictive sense of dominance and control.

It is noteworthy that the text suggests that Elizabeth too is trapped in a current in which "anyone in possession of power of the spirit could be Lucifer" (199). In one of her hallucinations, she sees "a group of people [who] 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. They said nothing, but an old woman out of the crowd turned to Elizabeth

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and said: "Will you help us? We are people who have suffered" (31). By confronting such spectacles, Elizabeth is made to realize that, despite her own history of persecution, she may also be propelled by delusions of superiority. She therefore confronts her potential to persecute others, a response that is suggested when her anger towards the Batswana suddenly gives way to racist attacks.

Her awareness of power as a pervasive force within and around her points to the spiritual routes for transcending it. These routes often lead to Medusa. When she takes over Sello's persecuting role, Medusa frequently taunts Elizabeth with the idea of her sexual inadequacy and social inferiority. Her taunting focuses especially on Elizabeth's ascribed positions as a woman, as insane and as "coloured". Shortly after her first appearance, Medusa "impart[s] some top secret information" to Elizabeth "about her vagina" (44) and transmits a sexual sensation which "enveloped Elizabeth from head to toe like a slow, deep sensuous bomb" (44). Elizabeth is seen to rationalize her projected inadequacy by reflecting that "She might have had [a vagina] but it was not such a pleasant area of the body to concentrate on, possibly only now and then when necessary" (44). Her responses reveal her psychological struggle as she both accepts and denies Medusa's messages of her sexual inadequacy. In the abrupt shifts in Elizabeth's self-exploration, Medusa's reference to sexuality is linked to Elizabeth's memory of her perceived "insanity", and she recalls Medusa's smile when she had her first mental breakdown (44). At the same moment, Elizabeth is reminded of another anxiety when Medusa announces that "You'll only drown here. You're not linked to the people. You don't know any African languages" (44). Medusa underscores the implications of Elizabeth's "coloured" status and associates it with alienation and political powerlessness. For Elizabeth, this reminder of being "rigidly classified Coloured" causes her to fall "into a deep hole of such excruciating torture that, briefly, she went stark, raving mad" (44).

In this sequence of hallucinations, Medusa ritualizes Elizabeth's repressed anxieties and oppressive memories. While these originate in social texts, they also constitute Elizabeth's self-perception and the knowledge through which she tries to resist official positions. Although she tries to question her oppressive locations, her dilemma is that she does not possess the psychological, spiritual or discursive freedom for resisting them. This difficulty is underscored when the meanings Medusa attaches to Elizabeth affect her attitudes and behaviour in the real world and the "ugliness of the inner torment was abruptly ripped open and exposed to public view" (50). At a stage when Elizabeth seems determined to continue her day-to-day life, she takes her child shopping. When she

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encounters a Motswana clerk in the post-office, she is suddenly consumed by racial hatred. The account of the surfacing racism in Elizabeth's mind suggests that her repressed thoughts physically overwhelm: "She was choking for air...The insistent hiss was mean, stifling, vicious. Whom could she accuse to end it? She sprang to her feet, slamming the chair against the wall, and shouted: "Oh, you bloody bastard Botswana!" ...Then she simply opened her mouth in one long piercing scream" (50). This mental breakdown encodes the tormented workings of her psyche and her perception of her struggle with it. Elizabeth is clearly unable to control the psychic violence within her. Yet in the poignant reference to her powerlessness to find a target to "accuse, to end it" (51), the passage also captures her desperate effort to end the source of her torments in her own mind. The gap between Elizabeth's psychic resources and her desire for freedom explains her anguished battles with the figure of Medusa. Medusa is not, as Huma Ibrahim puts it, "the other"; she "inhabits part of Elizabeth's consciousness" (Ibrahim, 1996:138). Elizabeth eventually acknowledges, therefore, that this figure functions as the projection of myths that she herself internalizes.

Head's starkly visual representation of Elizabeth's psyche is continued in descriptions of the character's mind as a form of receptacle extraneous to herself. At one stage, Sello leads her to a cess-pit which he claims is created by Medusa: "It was alive, and its contents rumbled. Huge angry flies buzzed over its surface with a loud humming" (53). In this description, Elizabeth's unconscious is symbolized as a repository of the "filth" which she inherits and over which she has no control. When Sello reveals this image, he forces her to confront it against her will. Significantly, Elizabeth, immediately prior to confronting the cess-pit, laments the powerlessness of her "so-called analytical mind" (52). In the same way that Elizabeth externalizes facets of her unconscious as Medusa, so does she confront with horror the pollution of her mind.

Medusa's status as the projection of both Sello and Elizabeth sheds light on Sello's role in her psychological struggle. Although Elizabeth is often represented as his victim, she often sees his plight as similar to her own. The two are often aligned in a joint endeavour to understand power and sources for transcending it. Reflecting on her relationship with Sello at the end of the novel, Elizabeth concludes: "He frightened her deeply. He'd conducted a strange drama, in a secret way, and it had been so terrible that she had gone insane...Funny thing, though, she really adored Sello, as though they were two companions who shared a permanent joke" (200). As Maria Oulassen points out, Head's perception of "soul-evolution" (1997:11) is important to an understanding of the

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relationship between the two characters. Reincarnation means that personalities have transmigrating souls and that past lives affect their relationships and struggles in each incarnation. Head, at the time of writing *A Question of Power,* was deeply preoccupied with these questions in her own life. Through the close relationship between Sello and Elizabeth she explores the possibilities for inner growth between two personalities who are seen to share previous trials and an ongoing spiritual quest. This pattern seems to emerge obliquely in the relationships and similarities between Maru and Margaret in *Maru* or Johnny and Mouse in *The Cardinals*.

Sello's stature as a spiritual mentor is stressed even when he tortures Elizabeth. His own claim about himself, that he is a "spiritual superman" (63) is not simply contested in Elizabeth's (or Head's) diagnosis of worldly power. Rather, Sello emerges as a prototype of the spiritually enlightened presences that appear throughout Head's fiction. It is important, then, to consider how his spiritual greatness is often celebrated in the text, and how this is connected to patterns in Head's other fictions. At the start of the novel, Sello is represented as a universal hero since "it seemed almost incidental that he was African"(11). Stressing his tremendous wisdom and perceptiveness, the novel captures his pantheist encounters with his surroundings: "He loved each particle of earth around him, the everyday event of sunrise, the people and animals of the village of Motabeng; perhaps his love included the whole universe" (11). Like Makhaya and occasionally Maru, Sello possesses the vision that leads to a uniquely receptive interaction with his surrounding world. Descriptions of his spiritual resources therefore foreground his cosmic importance as a figure of enlightenment, a mature soul whose cycles of rebirth and enlightenment prepare him to value everything that surrounds him. Most importantly, his spiritual maturity allows him to function as a guru. His teaching is not directly instructive, but revolves around a sharing of experiences and journeys. The mentoring relationship between Sello and Elizabeth is significantly different from the one between Mouse and Johnny, or between Margaret Cadmore senior and Margaret. Many of the encounters between Sello and Elizabeth suggest a Platonic dialogue, in which the teacher prompts the pupil, both through direct questioning and through his acts, into greater awareness. Elizabeth is therefore able to feel that the two of them "were twin souls with closely-linked destinies and the same capacity to submerge other preoccupations in a pursuit after the things of the soul...[which] did not bear comparing with the lofty statements of mankind's teachers" (12).

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In her persuasive discussion of the influence of eastern philosophy in *A Question of Power*, June Campbell explores Sello's role as a guru and draws the following conclusion:

> Head's use of the Buddha, as the intermediary who guides and challenges Elizabeth in the guise of Sello, reflects her belief in the importance of individual enlightenment not only of our own world, but also of the motivations of others. It is Sello's role in unfolding a series of grotesque and confusing scenarios which...challenge all the fears and concepts that are harboured within her. He does this by enabling Elizabeth to consider and confront the various aspects of her existence – her physical being-in-the-world, her relationships with those around her, and her inner search for meaning and spiritual freedom. (1993:72)

Elizabeth's tutelage, therefore, does not occur through passive learning, but through the self-discovery and exploration that Head often admired in certain aspects of Hindu teaching. The reference to eastern teaching is stressed in the allusions to Sello's status as a Buddha figure, in the transmigrations of both Sello and Elizabeth, and in the flexible teacher-pupil relationship that is central to certain forms of Hinduism.[5] In *A Question of Power*, Head turns emphatically to spiritual teaching, to a process of self-generated discovery that is facilitated through, but not directly taught by a socially powerful teacher figure. This figure of the male leader has little to do with conventional authority or power. Instead, it assumes a visionary breadth that gives his actions a cosmic significance. This magnificence about heroic figures is developed in three of the main subjects of *Serowe* and is exemplified in the figure of Sebina in *A Bewitched Crossroad*. The patterns in these later texts as well as in *A Question of Power* suggest that Head tentatively resolves her paradoxes about what the pupil can learn from a teacher without capitulating to the oppressive legacies of instruction, regimentation and repetition. By locating the source and effects of teaching in a universalized realm of spiritual greatness, Head describes forms of authority and intelligence that do not erode innate and independent creativity, but nurture it.

The effect of Sello's mentoring is not, however, straightforward for Elizabeth, and her spiritual recovery is hesitant. This uncertainty is captured in two images that, at the end of Part One, convey her partial recuperation. The first is an image of Elizabeth being crowned. She is given a crown not of the powerful, godly and often demonic figures in her illusory world, but one which "resembled that of earthly queens" (96). Explicit references are made to the pivotal struggles of everyday people, to the idea that it is unacknowledged and seemingly ordinary struggles that constitute meaningful oppositions to power and become divine and spiritually liberating. The connection between Elizabeth's unrecognized

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struggle towards new perceptions and her "godliness" is stressed in her claim at the end of the novel: "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (206). In this transformation of the Islamic creed, Elizabeth both questions institutionalized religious power and affirms her spiritual salvation. She also cryptically links a spiritual liberty that, according to Hindu philosophy, ends cycles of rebirth and earthly suffering, to the birth of her own creativity. Denying inherited and authoritative teaching and institutionalized power, she acquires the resources to identify liberation in unacknowledged human experiences, and also defines herself as the visionary source of new perception. This "ending" might seem inconclusive and abrupt. Yet it marks the esoteric answer to Head's recondite questions about subjectivity, spirituality and the foundations of creativity in the novel.

The second image refers even more explicitly to the form of Elizabeth's struggles. Here Sello again shows her the "opening of the cess-pit", the mind reflection which previously terrified her. But this time it is purged of its horrifying meanings: "It was like a crater that had opened up in the earth, and so deep, so endless was the fall to the bottom of it that it seemed bottomless. It was quite clean and empty now, so that its jagged stone walls seemed to be made of light. It was full of light" (97). At this stage, Elizabeth appears to have acquired the strength to accept the psychic world that previously overwhelmed her. Her mind is likened to a bottomless hole, with its emptiness and light suggesting that oppressive memories and myths have been expelled from her unconscious. It is stressed, however, that she continues to battle with deeply engraved trauma. Even when she seems to achieve her spiritual freedom, her perception of a purged "bottomless hole" suddenly changes: "A loud slithering noise reached her ears. There seemed to be an endless procession of dead bodies, flat on their backs. One after the other they pitched in until the hole was full. She had brief glimpses of their faces as they hurtled past her. They were the people she had briefly seen in hell, who had jumped on the bandwagon of willful evil" (97). The resurfacing of demonic figures in Elizabeth's unconscious indicates her ongoing struggle with the idea that the mind reproduces evil. While she aspires to the possibility of serenity, she is constantly influenced by tormenting memories. That the demonic figures are dead may indicate her intellectual understanding of their ultimate

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[5] Nirad Chaudhuri deals with this in his discussion of the unique relationship which Hinduism postulates between gods and human beings, one in which individuals may upbraid, castigate and approach gods, who often are seen to have the failings of ordinary mortals (1979:19).

impotence in view of her potential cognitive reorientation. Yet their ultimate superior power for Elizabeth is her inability to expel a deeply ingrained cultural legacy from her mind.

The baffling relations involving Sello, Medusa and Elizabeth thus configure a process in which Elizabeth's battle to understand her "self" is graphically represented as her struggle with two demonic and often ambiguous figures. While the psychic battle is externalized as a battle against two oppressive figures, essentially it is Elizabeth's internal probing of "questions and more questions, tentative propositions, with all the time and patience in eternity to solve the riddles" (53). In her thoughts about her encounters with Sello towards the end of Part One, Elizabeth concludes "He has performed some delicate operations. He has seen that evil and good travel side by side in the same personality. He has diagnosed the evil, isolated it and ended it. There's no more Medusa" (98). Together with Sello, therefore, Elizabeth learns to confront Medusa as a figment of the unconscious from which she cannot escape.

In her interpretation of the Medusa figure in *A Question of Power*, Olaussen considers how Freudian and feminist psychoanalytic interpretations position Medusa's gendered meaning differently: for Freudians, as evidence of penis envy and the lack of women, and for feminists, as threats to masculine self-fulfilment. Olaussen concludes that Medusa's role is evidence that "Head's writing partakes of two traditions at the same time: the Western, male tradition where the female is negatively defined and excluded and the feminist tradition which tries to rewrite the feminine" (1997:195). Yet Elizabeth's struggles constantly lead her to confront Medusa, with whatever symbolic meanings she encodes, as the projection of the perceiver. Elizabeth is able to liberate herself from cultural habits of codifying the world and constructing symbolic figures in ways that are "tormented by dualistic hallucination" (Campbell, 1993:79). These habits are entrenched in Elizabeth's unconscious. But they are engendered by a social environment, especially the Manichean legacy of apartheid, which shapes her being-in-the world. Elizabeth's mental struggle leads her neither to conquer nor appropriate Medusa, but to understand her role as a symbolic construction. In this way, she is also able to free herself from Sello - as Medusa's source, as her persecutor and as her ambivalent teacher. Sello's symbolic death at the end of the novel, "so shrunken that his monk's cloth flapped about his form like a scarecrow's rags" (96), implies that the central character acquires the psychological freedom to claim "his" teachings, persecutions and projections as her own.

The trajectory of Sello's relationship with Elizabeth traces her effort to understand her complicity with oppressive memories, images and self-perceptions. It also discloses

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the relevance and, ultimately, the subordination, of social powers to Elizabeth's self-analysis and transformed perception. Questions of power are translated both as struggles with good and evil, and as the perception of good and evil. One of the clearest indications of ethical norms in relation to social and spiritual powers surfaces in Elizabeth's perceptions of sexuality, and especially homosexuality and incest. The novel's first reference to homosexuality is Elizabeth's recollection of her past in District Six, where "all the coloured men were homosexuals and openly paraded down the streets dressed in women's clothes" (45). At this point, she sees the homosexual coloured man as a victim, similar to herself, of racism. The "weak, homosexual Coloured men who were dying before her eyes" (47) symbolize the degrading effects of oppression in Elizabeth's hallucinations. But homosexuality also surfaces in relation to moral degradation. When Sello appears in one of his guises with "four grinning, smirking Asian men", his sinister power is described in terms of his homosexuality (120). Here homosexuality becomes synonymous with the "evil" that Elizabeth judges elsewhere. Descriptions of *how she responds* to "evil" draw attention to the way she agitatedly categorizes the world she confronts. It is often her tortuous codifying of her world that leads to her psychological trauma. The following passage, capturing Elizabeth's loathing and frenzied reflections on homosexuality, clearly indicates this: "It was one thing to adopt generous attitudes, at a distance. It was another to have a supreme pervert thrust his soul into your living body. It was like taking a walk on slime; slithering, skidding and cringing with shame. It was like no longer having a digestive system, a marvellous body...it was simply having a mouth and an alimentary tract; food was shit and piss. It was like living in the hot feverish world of the pissing pervert of the public toilet" (138).

Images of incest surface in Elizabeth's unconscious in a similar way to homosexuality. At times, references to Sello's incestuous relationships refer to his sexual violence and abuse. Yet they also register Elizabeth's horror of acts deemed socially taboo. This becomes especially clear in Part One, when Elizabeth is haunted by a "weird little girl who rolled her eyes and said 'I like to sleep with my daddy.' When Elizabeth picked her up she turned round and bit her on the hand" (64). In this reference, incest seems to transcend conventional political analysis in terms of violation and abuse, and is located in the perversion of a little girl. Olaussen suggests that Head's treatment of sexuality at this point registers her broader unease with hybridity. Arguing that Head introduces "homosexuality in relation to hybridity", and that "fear of incest seems to stem from the confusion of categories that it entails", she concludes that "Head's writing

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is...characterised by a fear of the hybrid status" (1997:211). But Olaussen's conclusion conflates Head's perceptions with the representation of Elizabeth's. While her reading may explain Head's reflections on sexuality elsewhere, what is striking about Elizabeth's perceptions in *A Question of Power* is her effort to liberate herself from socially-conditioned ways of seeing. Elizabeth's internal journey leads her to learn that moral states are never absolute or objective, while her spiritual distress is caused by the fixation with identifying good and evil.

This liberation in object-perception is what Sello, in the opening pages of the novel, is seen to achieve. Sello is introduced as one whose "soul was a jigsaw". His pantheist and self-reflective serenity leads him to say "'I might have died before I found this freedom of heart'" (11). Sello's introspective musing at the start of the novel is suggestive of Maru's at the start of Head's previous novel: "Only Maru knew the answers. He paused awhile and looked towards the low horizon where the storm brooded...There was so little to disturb his heart in his immediate environment. It was here where he could communicate freely with all the magic and beauty inside him" (1972:7). Through Part One's exploration of Sello in relation to Elizabeth, then, Head returns to her celebration of new perceptions and creativity. Together with Sello, Elizabeth learns that "evil and good travel side by side in the same personality" (98). Without resolving the quandaries of her external world, Elizabeth embarks on a process of self-reflection towards inner strength. Campbell explains the connections between Elizabeth's spiritual struggle and the novel's social manifestations of power in the following way: "The existential questions of being, by which Elizabeth is tormented are shown to have both a political and spiritual dimension ...Ultimately, there is no one question of power addressed by the novel, but rather the subjection to analysis of the very meaning of power itself, through all its various manifestations in Elizabeth's life" (78). At the end of her journey with Sello, Elizabeth's spiritual recovery is stressed: "She had been forcefully thrown into a state of death, alongside Sello, battered and smashed about, but she instantly sprang to life again, laughed and flung her hands into the air with a bounding sense of liberation" (100). The implications of her self-exploration and "bounding sense of liberation" for her creativity are emphasized in her triumphant affirmation at the end of Part One: "May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds" (100).

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**The Subjects of Power**

Dan is a less equivocal figure than Sello. As Ibrahim (1996:142) remarks, Dan is the focal figure for exploring powers associated with Manichean notions of good and evil. Where Sello's relationship with Elizabeth is ambiguous and ultimately liberating, Dan's arrival is unequivocally malevolent. Dan is a figure of considerable social and political dominance, one whose social status is associated with his autocratic attitudes towards others. The real Dan is a millionaire and flashy dresser, a personality who straightforwardly represents the violence often only hinted at in Head's imperious male figures. While Sello's power is often associated with religious figures, Dan's powers are emphatically profane. One of the memories invoked by Dan is the birth of the South African Union, and, for Elizabeth, the recollection of her country's racial history (115). Another is the figure of the gangster, "the big-time guy from hell" (126). In two of his appearances before Elizabeth, Dan begins speaking the rough, street-wise language of the American gangster, a register celebrated in the journalistic context in which Head first began writing[6] and one which, as *The Cardinals* reveals, she interrogated. Misogynistic, aggressive and worldly, Dan often suggests only the more brutal sides of the womanizing Johnny in *The Cardinals*. With Dan, Head turns to forms of power that lie beyond Elizabeth and that, from outside, undermine her personal struggles for freedom. While he is Elizabeth's projection to as great an extent as Sello is, he forces her to confront, in stark detail, the worlds of oppressive power in which she lives. Yet Dan, by embodying oppressive social power, also allows Elizabeth to understand its foundations and, paradoxically, its precariousness. Dan is exposed as someone with a profound lack of inner or spiritual resources. He is overwhelmed by an obsessive need to live only through dominating others. Elizabeth becomes his coveted object, a figure he needs to control and possess as part of his own myth of superiority. Dan feeds off her not so much as an individual, but as an embodiment of the abject victim he needs to project.

The predatoriness of his power is represented as physical and psychological violation, with his "large grasping hands gathering every thread of [Elizabeth's] life to themselves for a total command; a total encroachment of her mind and soul" (159). Dan's obsession often mirrors Sello's, with Head developing insights about the way positions of social dominance engender a compulsion to project others' inferiority. With Dan, however, she concentrates exclusively on an impulse towards mastery, rather than any reflective

[6] Head's perception of this language and the cultural ethos it encodes is evident in *The Cardinals*. See Chapter Three.

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effort to understand it. His questing is consistently outwards, a process that exemplifies a colonizing act. Indirectly, Dan is an individuated site through which Head envisions a world, in stark contrast to his, based on communication and reciprocity. Focusing on a character unable to develop relationships of equality, Head turns to the way in which power erodes humanizing relationships. Significantly, Sello punctuates Elizabeth's potential liberation from Dan's persecution with a reminder that "Love is two people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the soul of the other like a goul" (197). Through Dan's constant efforts to "reduce woman to an object and a sign of culture, rather than the subject/producer of it" (Tucker, 1988:177), Head explores both specific and general processes of oppression. She focuses on particularized ways in which women are dehumanized in patriarchal societies. But she also invokes the violence and humiliation of a range of master/slave relationships. In this way she provides a specific focus for exploring Elizabeth's entrapment in other patterns of oppression and for suggesting wider cycles of power.

By dwelling on Dan's "male gaze", Head shows how Dan invades her personal boundaries and, consequently, her sense of herself as a separate being. Olaussen points out that the relationship between Elizabeth and Dan is an archetypal colonial one. Focusing on the notion of "mental rape", as well as on the invasion of the boundaries of Elizabeth's body, she stresses that rape functions metaphorially in the text (1997:204-8). The process through which dominating subjects invade the boundaries of marginal subjects is constantly probed in Head's writing. Its casting in *A Question of Power* reveals her concern with a power dynamic that defines both interpersonal relationships and contextually-specific encounters between groups. The preoccupation with boundaries and invasion also uncovers various moral, political and philosophical ideals. While invasive acts are repeatedly condemned in Head's writing, she also envisages humane interpersonal and inter-group interaction. She therefore contests an archetypal "colonialism" not by postulating notions of fixed or isolated being, but by celebrating non-oppressive *exchanges.* These extend from the inclusive community in *When Rain Clouds Gather* to the subjective responses of Elizabeth to figures and worlds beyond immediate ones. Elizabeth discovers a freedom defying Dan's not by retreating into herself, but by interacting with others and with her enviroment.

Dan's relationship with Elizabeth is often inflected by the formulae of romantic relationships traced in other novels. But Head probes the personal, psychological and discursive implications of man/woman relationships with much more foreboding than she

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does in *Maru.* While the effects of Dan's control are manifold, its form is consistently sexual. Part of Dan's strategy of control involves wooing Elizabeth in the guise of the idealized romantic lover. Initially, he adopts the pose of the hero of romance fiction who "made [Elizabeth feel like an ancient and knowledgeable queen of love" (106). But the ambivalent attitude towards a romantic hero in an earlier novel gives way to sustained condemnation. Dan abducts Elizabeth in ways that are reminiscent of Maru's abduction of Margaret, but also far more sinister. Like Margaret, Elizabeth briefly envisages a harmonious image that is central to Margaret's perceptions of her relationship with Maru: "a man and a woman...wrapped in an eternal embrace. There were symbols of their love. There were two grape-trees with the roots entwined; there was a broad wide river coming down in full flood" (108). The promise of a romantic idyll for Elizabeth is immediately undercut with the comment that "There was nothing else, no people, no sharing. It was shut-in and exclusive" (108). Another inversion of the idyllic romantic union is Dan's relationship with Miss Pink Sugar-Icing. The account of their relationship refers to the popular romantic tune "April in Paris", which eventually collapses into discordant incoherence. In this way, it conveys the friction that may conceal apparently harmonious romantic relationships between men and women: "instead of the familiar soft, low blend of the double bass, drums and piano, a chorus of women screeched: April in Paris, what have you done to my heart, giggle, giggle, giggle" (166-7).

Dan's image as a grotesquely subverted romantic hero also surfaces in his encounters, witnessed by Elizabeth, with other women, many of whom are pornographic figures. By dwelling on his pornographic representation, Head deals with a discourse that is "the most symptomatic and demonstrative of the violence which is done to [women] through discourses, as well as in the society at large" (Wittig,1992:26). As Monique Wittig shows, pornography is also a "harassing tactic...It orders [women] to stay in line, and it keeps those who would tend to forget who they are in step; it calls upon fear" (26). Figures in Dan's pornographic discourse include The Womb, Miss Wriggly-Bottom, Madame Squelch-Squelch, Miss Body Beautiful and Miss Pelican-Beak. Their behaviour and names clearly indicate their status as the fetishized objects of masculine desire. One of their effects is to taunt Elizabeth into imagining her lack, her failure to live up to a socially acceptable image of womanhood. Others, like Miss Sewing Machine, Sugar-Plum Fairy and Miss Pink Sugar-Icing are stereotypes of docile womanhood. Their victimization illustrates the range of subordinate positions for women in romantic relationships. Miss Sugar-Plum Fairy, for example, is an ethereal figure whose excessive gentleness leads

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her to defend Dan despite his obvious infidelities. Miss Pink Sugar-Icing embodies down-to-earth wifely virtues and dutifully performs domestic tasks. Feeding off female stereotypes, Dan needs to make Elizabeth submit to myths of masculine control. The image of the intrusive recording that invades Elizabeth's mind recurs, and emphasizes the cultural messages he uses to twist her thoughts. This brainwashing becomes explicit when his "hands reached for her head... opening her skull and talking into it in a harsh, grating voice" (193), even though the violation bears "the creepy pathetic undertone of, supposedly, a great love they had hidden away together in some distant past" (147).

Central to Elizabeth's liberation from Dan is her understanding of the complementary role she plays in relation to him. One of the crucial references to his psychological dependence on her is his perception of her as "real gold". Here it is suggested that the spiritually impoverished Dan needs to feed off Elizabeth's spiritual richness and projected inferiority. Power is therefore explored as the pathology of the dominating subject, with Head implying that the socially powerful are often less free than the socially powerless. Elizabeth's recovery is partly facilitated by her understanding that Dan's persecution of her stems from his failings, and not from hers. His reason for tormenting her is to convince his victim that she is weak, that his dominance is justified. As Part Two unfolds, pathology and weakness are progressively located not in the victim, but in the persecutor. This diagnosis is confirmed at the end of the novel, when Sello discusses Dan with Elizabeth in the following way: "Bring an inferior in contact with a superior; he jumps on you and tramples you into the dust...There's nothing I can do about the filth of his mind and heart, but I saw a way of taking away his power, through you" (199).

The paradoxical dependence of "the superior" on "the inferior" surfaces when Elizabeth, confronting Dan's pornographic images, is made to play the role of a moral and behavioural referent. At these moments Dan is threatened by the independent and uninhibited sexuality of women like Miss Body Beautiful and Madame Squelch Squelch. Miss Body Beautiful, for example, "had given him such a shock that he had sprinkled his surroundings with the holy-water sprinkler" (164), while Squelch Squelch was "so awful for him...that he threw up after the job" (165). Elizabeth is used here when "He suddenly grabbed hold of [Madame Loose-Bottom] and brought her face to face with Elizabeth. This was probably meant to be a soul-confrontation of evil with good, because as Elizabeth looked at her she slowly dissolved into nothing" (164). At many stages, then, Dan has no control over the sexuality of his women. The key distinguishing feature of the pornographic

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image is of course its amenability to male control; if an image of female sexuality is no longer controllable, it ceases to be pornographic. It is at moments when sexualized images of women exceed Dan's control that Elizabeth is, in a sense, summoned to help Dan to subdue them. A particularly striking example of this is the threat posed both to Elizabeth and Dan of Miss Body Beautiful: "The next thing he could not stand was the orgasm of Miss Body Beautiful. It was feverish and apparently affected him in a painful way. She was made to expose everything. The flesh of her private parts had a raw, red look as though the surface skin had been rubbed off by many hands. Like a small child wetting her pants, she had an orgasm right on top of Elizabeth. The following day Elizabeth tried to rise out of bed and collapsed again with a high delirious fever" (164).

As this passage reveals, both Dan and Elizabeth are often intimidated by the sexuality of the women ostensibly under Dan's control. Unable to discipline them, Dan is simply a witness to their overwhelming sexuality. The relationship here invokes the triad of Sello, Elizabeth and Medusa. Elizabeth appears to be aligned with the male character as the female character, eluding the male, demonstrates a threatening power. At these points, Elizabeth seems to be situated within the moral universe that the male character constructs. Yet it is important that the powerful sexuality, however independent, of these women continues to consign them to binary symbolic positions as the moral inferiors of men. Elizabeth tries to elude this position in order to live a life that is entirely owned by her. She yearns for the refuge offered by the ethos of the mind. Yet it is not the notion of "mind" that many feminists would associate with the masculine and public realm of the symbolic: "She had lived a life other than this, where her soul was her own, and the peace within had let her mind meander in all sorts of dreamy pathways. She had writers she loved, and had kept their books beside her bed and each night read and re-read their most glorious soaring passages" (148). The introspection defined here transcends a corporeal and sensual world that is often connoted in the text as culturally feminized and disempowering. Elizabeth's "peace within" also rises above the worldly and masculinized powers associated with Dan. In a realm where "her soul was her own" Elizabeth claims a spiritual domain that eludes the restrictions and prescriptions of a socially-coded world.

Dan's power in the novel is also the source of his destruction. Head often shows that his authority is dependent on specularity, on narcissism, voyeurism and pornographic scrutiny. Dan's power rests solely on his ability to project women as the debased objects of his controlling gaze. Constructing his myths of authority in relation to pornographic images, he exults in the power that derives from Elizabeth's seeing him as he wants to be

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seen. Elizabeth is compelled simply to acknowledge the spectacles of mastery he orchestrates. A similar mastery is established through his voyeuristic and pornographic scrutiny of women, including Elizabeth. Here he possesses the power of all-seeing observer, an observer who has the power to look at and oppressively codify others. Yet Elizabeth's passivity is not always a position of victimization. Charles Larson comments that "Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Elizabeth's multiple sexual fantasies is that she is never a participant in them. Rather she is a voyeur, watching the others in a kind of fascinated way but not involving herself" (1974:169). Larson's reference to Elizabeth's "voyeurism" and "sexual fantasizing" imply appetites that the text emphatically associates with Dan. Yet the idea that Elizabeth remains distanced from, and most importantly, the witness to a world in which Dan is ascendant, is crucial. Elizabeth is seen to possess an elusive threat that Dan feels compelled to control. Her independent resources allow her to position herself not only as the object of Dan's gaze, or the witness to his supremacy, but also as a watchful observer who returns his gaze. By watching Dan she contests her position as object, and therefore also his position as a superior subject. Forced to acknowledge his illusory power, Dan confronts his own fundamental weakness. Elizabeth's reflective scrutiny of one who embodies oppressive violence demonstrates Head's own treatment of power. Like Head, Elizabeth conquers power not simply by indicting or contesting it, but by exposing it to itself, by unravelling how it works.

**Creating "New Worlds"**

Dan and Sello illustrate different facets of the looming male presences in Head's oeuvre. This separation emerges in the frequently contrasting male figures in *Maru,* as well as in the ambiguities that each, especially Maru, exhibits. *A Question of Power* deals with two notions of subjectivity through Dan and Sello and with two, frequently contradictory notions of power and evil. Equating Dan's power with the worldly powers of characters like Moleka, and, at certain points, Maru or Johnny, Head invokes the idea of evil in relation to drives that lead a dominant subject to victimize others and to his own destruction. This probing of power is conveyed in Head's claims about *A Question of Power*: "I argued that people and nations do not recognize the point at which they become evil; but once trapped in its net, evil has a powerful propelling motion into a terrible abyss of destruction. I argued that its form, design, and plan could be clearly outlined and that it was little understood as a force in the affairs of mankind" (1990:69).

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In contrast to Dan, who represents the worldly powers from which Elizabeth must free herself, Sello is an embodiment of the potential spiritual greatness configured in her other fictions. *A Question of Power* consistently unveils the transcendent notions of subjectivity, power and consciousness that permeate Head's perception of politics, of personal and social liberation and creativity. These transcendent views dominate in relation to Sello. Through Sello, Elizabeth discovers "The elegant pathway of private thought [that] stretched ahead of her, shimmering with light and undisturbed by the clamour of horrors" (206). This pathway leads her away from the corrosive effects of experienced and apprehended social evils on the unconscious, on daily existence and on conscious perception. By envisaging "the human mind as a location for the resolution of all struggles, personal, social and political" (Campbell, 1993:68), Head shows that the individual may unlearn an inherited cognitive arrangement. In particular, she shows that the mind can be freed from socially-driven thought that suppresses, excludes and distorts. This liberation not only leads to enlightenment and serenity. It also allows the individual to develop mutual and receptive relationships with other human beings and a surrounding environment.

As she does with certain affirmations of freedom and creativity elsewhere, Head associates Elizabeth's recovery with serenity and tranquillity. These calm moments are captured when she intermittently establishes sustaining contacts with village life. Like Head's other novels, *A Question of Power* shows that the liberating world Elizabeth discovers is one that the character invests with independent and transforming meanings. Motabeng, where Elizabeth lives, is described as barren, its name meaning "place of sand" (19), yet she renames it "The Village of the Rain-Wind, after a poem she had read somewhere" (20). In her mental journey, she vacillates between accepting a real and oppressive Motabeng, and acquiring the ability to reinvent it. She constantly catches glimpses of the sources of a potentially liberating perception of her surrounding world and the figures that people it. Her main struggle involves her ability to make recreating gestures.

The first of these gestures is offered by Eugene van Rensburg, the educator and exile whose quiet dedication to Motabeng's development enchants Elizabeth, despite her precarious emotional state. Shortly after her first breakdown, she is struck by his role in relation to a "magical time" (59), when the rainy season prompts cultivation and growth. In a similar way to Gilbert in *When Raineclouds Gather,* van Rensburg initiates the productive processes that offer rich metaphors for creativity in previous works. Like Head's other

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exiles who create new homes in Botswanan villages, van Rensburg is a visionary artist: the "practical genius of the Eugene man excited her interest. It was so broad and impersonal, so free and unconcerned" (61). It is noteworthy that Elizabeth is fascinated by the prospect of the tranquil and uncomplicated creativity of those she observes. Like Makhaya, she yearns for freedom from the attachments she has internalized, for the capacity to recreate with the same spontaneity demonstrated by the "Eugene man". Elizabeth's role as a schoolteacher interestingly punctuates this yearning. At a stage when, because of her mental instability, she is forced to resign from her job, she recalls the mechanical methods of teaching she is obliged to perform: "English composition was the starkest, bleakest lesson of the day. Someone had set the pattern, and it remained the furthest reach of the children's imaginations 'Life in Botswana - When the rain rains we go to the lands to plough. We plough with oxen. The cow is a very useful animal. We use every part of it. We sell its skin for leather. We sell its bones. Glue is made from its hooves...' They trusted nothing else. It was safe and thoroughly known by heart" (67). Elizabeth's anguish over the rote learning in which she is professionally involved coincides with her own battles to transcend the oppressive fictions and memories in her mind. Her pupils' entrapment, therefore, is also her own. Interestingly, it is when Elizabeth agonizes about the quandary of oppressive fictions that she refers to a text confronted in *The Cardinals* by Mouse, also poised to explore her independent creativity through inherited stories: a child's primer based on the adventures of "Fuzzy Wuzzy Bear" (67). As it does in Head's first novel, this text refers to the magical potential which inherited stories, however predictable and culturally alien, can offer. In *The Cardinals*, Mouse is able to transform and appropriate the vapid story. In the context of Motabeng's poverty, however, Elizabeth concludes that: "all magic was dead or had not even begun to live" (68).

While Elizabeth's healing is intermittent and hesitant, important moorings for her creativity are offered by Motabeng's productive activities. Eugene van Rensburg's interpretation of the village self-help brigades becomes, from Elizabeth's perspective, a trope for rejuvenation. In the middle of his pragmatic discussion of small-scale industry, he uses a phrase which resonates with hope: "We want to turn people's attention to their natural resources" (69). Van Rensburg's dedicated practical activity is reconfigured by Elizabeth in similar ways to Makhaya's philosophical transformation of Gilbert's pragmatism in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Another character who speaks the compelling language of practical action is the young gardener with whom Elizabeth is commissioned to work. Like Eugene van Rensburg, "Small-Boy" lives in a world of practical construction,

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and his language and attitude become inspirational to Elizabeth. In a similar way to Gilbert, Small-Boy speaks the language of uncomplicated scientific cultivation, but with an assurance and tenor which turns his scientific register into poetry for Elizabeth. But of all the characters who affect Elizabeth's everyday life, it is mainly Kenosi, Elizabeth's partner in a gardening project, who provides her with a source for personal regeneration. Elizabeth is immediately struck by Kenosi's self-containment: "No other woman so strikingly resembled a cat in all her gestures. Her movements were extraordinarily quiet, soft, intensely controlled" (89). Described in ways similar to other figures who affirm Head's ideal of serenity, Kenosi has "deep silence and concentration", and a "wonderful majesty and purposefulness" (88). Elizabeth's fascination with figures like Eugene van Rensburg, Small Boy and Tom stems mainly from the purposeful action in which they are involved. It is primarily Kenosi's inner freedom that Elizabeth seems to admire.

Elizabeth's encounter with the character of Camilla, the Danish expert whose will, arrogance and aggression motivate her presence and work in Motabeng, reveals an entirely different response. Elizabeth is horrified by Camilla's arrogance and need for control. For her, the Danish woman exemplifies a colonizing arrogance, precisely the restless outward questing she associates with Dan. When Camilla brashly interrupts Small-Boy's activity with her corrective interpretation, her behaviour is likened to colonial intrusion. Her manner is colonial not only because she assumes her cultural and technological authority in relation to the Batswana. She also refuses to abandon past selves, to give herself up to a new environment and question the knowledge she has imbibed. A very different Danish exile is Birgette whose tremendous sensitivity allows her to respond spontaneously to her environment and to others: "So sensitively attuned was she to the feelings of others that Elizabeth nearly shouted out aloud with joy. The sun might go down and the stars come out. The beautiful girl in front of her was part of that shift from light to shadow and darkness" (81).

In contrast to the way she perceives characters like Birgette, van Rensburg and Tom, Elizabeth does not always feel that she has been able to free herself from the shackles of past myths and selves. Most importantly, she is not able to immerse herself in the dedicated productive activity that they pursue. The hints of productive recreation in Part One constantly represent her *potential* to inhabit new worlds. By the end of Part One, Elizabeth appears to have reached an understanding of the myths that haunt her existential freedom. But she still has to confront the figure of Dan, embodying an oppressive surrounding world that constantly threatens her psychological well-being. The

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main figure in her contact with an external world during her battles with Dan is Tom. Reminiscent of Gilbert in *When Rainclouds Gather,* Tom seems emphatically worldly and earthy. His brash energy gives him an air that is different from the reserve and serenity of many of the characters to whom Elizabeth is attracted: "He had hard, thick muscles on the arms and back and clutched the spade firmly with thick, grubby hands. He did not care about greetings. Maybe some other time" (111). Tom also makes his first appearance singing the popular song, "Hello, Dolly", his brashness immediately suggesting Dan. Yet Elizabeth recognizes the sensitivity beneath this: " That was the surface, a rough, crude fellow... Where did any friendship begin of that other kind where people turn their heads slowly and stare deeply into the mystery of life? Because that was what she remembered most about him throughout that year - he kept on turning his head with a sudden deep expression of wisdom in his eyes" (112).

While Tom attaches importance to practical political struggles and seems impatient with Elizabeth's inward concerns, she confides in him about the importance she attaches to spiritual growth: "'Africa isn't rising. It's up already. It depends on where one places the stress. I place it on the soul. If it's basically right there, then other things fall into place. That's my struggle, and that's black power'" (135). What she gets in return is not a specific response to her struggle, but Tom's broad offer of friendship and support, the evidence of human exchange that contrasts with the oppression associated with Dan. Tom therefore represents an alternative and sustaining friendship, a relationship that her inner torments seem to deny, but that her spiritual struggle ultimately leads her to validate. Towards the end of the novel, the hallucinatory figures of Sello and Dan still relentlessly intrude, but by this time Elizabeth seems assured of her potential power to free herself from inner and external torments. Her new power stems from the serenity that allows the free flow both of known and experienced horror as well as a belief in good. It is also emphatically creative, and suggests a consciousness that, while confronting destructive social myths, relations and events, imagines ideals beyond them.

The end of the novel captures Elizabeth's discovery of this creative space: "At sunset, when work was over and everything was peaceful, slowly sipping a cup of tea, she began to jot down fragmentary notes such as a shipwrecked sailor might make on a warm sandy beach as he stared back at the stormy sea that had nearly taken his life" (204). Elizabeth does not create something entirely of her own, but recalls a Lawrence poem, "Song of a Man Who Has Come Through", which holds a distinctive meaning for her. On one level, this appears to indicate that she is only on the verge of her "own" creativity. On

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another level, the rewriting of Lawrence's poem indicates the composite creative process that Elizabeth can pursue. Her writing cannot divorce itself from previous texts, memories and images, but can, because of her newfound spiritual freedom, reposition and redefine past memories and fictions. A similar affirmation surfaces in relation to Elizabeth's encounters with Kenosi's textual world. Significantly, it is mainly when Kenosi's pragmatic activity is translated into writing that Elizabeth discovers a rejuvenating creativity. As Tucker has shown, "Not only is the actual garden work a source of healing for Elizabeth, but it leads to language and the power of the written word" (1988:180). When Elizabeth reads Kenosi's record of her gardening, she seems to be captivated by the way her friend, a Tswana-speaker, claims and rewrites the English words: "The spelling, oh, the spelling was a fantastic combination of English and Setswana: "Ditamati 30c", she wrote. "Pamkin 60c, Dibeeteruti 45c, Dionions 25c, Dibeans 20c, Dispinach 15c, Dicarrots 25c'" (203). In Chapter Three, I explored the potency of this extract with reference to Head's preoccupation with the force, within language, to configure new worlds. Head links Elizabeth's serenity at this stage to her recognition of this power. But the passage also suggests another pattern. Elizabeth is captivated by Kenosi's "fantastic combination of English and Setswana". She seems to recognize that this combination offers a model for her own hybrid recreation of "inherited languages".

Discussing recurring references to writing and language in *A Question of Power*, Tucker writes that Elizabeth's notebook, in which she records her gardening activities, "appears several times in the book, with increasing significance as the text progresses" (1988:180). She goes on to show that, from the time when the insensitive and critical Camilla grabs it, it "travels from silence to meaning to poetry" (1988:180). The cycle described in this formulation suggests Head's transformative uses of language in relation to her personal and artistic struggles. I have shown that the novel dwells on internal struggles with cognitive orientation and perception. Head is as deeply concerned with liberating ways of seeing the world as she is about ways of transforming it. In confronting ways of seeing, she revisions many of the familiar oppositions that structure socially-regulated life, oppositions such as right and wrong, good and evil, subject-perception and its object. By perceiving oppositions not as exclusive domains of experience, but as the effects of destructive forms of perception, and therefore as a continuum, the mind "wander[ing] in all sorts of dreamy pathways" (1974:148) is able to comprehend the breadth and richness of human experiences. The reorientation of thought and perception, the unlearning of inherited cognition that compartmentalizes, suppresses and

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misconstrues, can establish the foundations for a substantively liberating creativity. References to the freedom that accompanies perception "beyond duality"(Campbell, 1993) are constantly implied in the enduring or intermittent serenity of characters in *The Cardinals*, *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*.

In *A Question of Power*, however, Head probes the difficulties of acquiring this enlightenment as well as the quandaries of how spiritual struggles address racial and gender domination in particular, but social injustices more generally. The questions raised in this novel seem to have led her progressively to re-think some of the fundamental determinants of existential being. Novels like *The Cardinals*, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, all dwell on autobiographical characters whose being-in-the-world is crucially shaped by their persecution in various social worlds. It could be argued that later fictions redefine relations between social subjects and their physical and cultural worlds by emphasizing the individual's radical ability to redefine an external world and also to reassess a conventionalized separation from it. Craig Mackenzie offers the following model for categorizing Head's fiction: "The work of Bessie Head can usefully be divided into two sections: an 'inwardly directed' phase (*When Rainclouds Gather* 1969, *Maru* 1971 and *A Question of Power* 1973) followed by a period of more 'outwardly-directed or 'socially-oriented' *work (The Collector of Treasures* 1977, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* 1981 and *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* 1984)" (1989:19). While this model captures Head's shift from autobiographical protagonists to social and communal foci, it may neglect the extent to which her "socially-oriented work" explicitly inscribes subjective perception and autobiographical representation. At the end of *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth places a "soft hand" over "her land" in a "gesture of belonging" (206). In the chapters that follow, I suggest that this peaceful gesture anticipates the way subjectivity and individual creativity reverberate within Head's social, historical and ethnographically-oriented writing.

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# CHAPTER SEVEN
# CLAIMING AN INVENTED HOMELAND: *SEROWE: VILLAGE OF THE RAIN WIND* AND *THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES*

> The opening pages of the book, the General Portrait of Serowe, are sheer music in words. Unless I have made a bad grammatical error, I'd prefer those irregular rhythms to stand like that. I've had trouble with editors before trying to make that kind of music look proper. It was deliberate. That's music, not grammar. (Head in a letter to a Heinemann editor, AKMM59BHP120)
>
> "Lawrence said: 'Art for my sake'. I agree..." (Head in an essay, "Some Notes on D.H. Lawrence").

I showed in Chapter Four that Head's representations of Botswana uncover the symbolic value she attached to her adopted country, rather than her perception of its practical value as a haven. She explains this symbolic import in the following way: "In my eyes Botswana is the most unique and distinguished country in the whole of Africa... It is a land that was never conquered or dominated by foreign powers and so a bit of ancient Africa, in all its quiet and unassertive grandeur has remained there" (1990:66). Botswana offered the model of an enclave state providing a refuge and sense of community for persecuted exiles during social expansion, territorial struggles and ethnic conflicts in southern African. Like *When Rain Clouds Gather, Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* traces this legacy through stories in which outsiders - both from a materialistic western world and a politically corrupt South Africa - find nurturing environments for their creative energies in a Botswanan village. Both the fictionalized village of her earlier novel and Serowe, the village in which Head settled, offered symbols of growth based not on orthodox standards of public success, but on domestic, rural and communal perseverance and co-operation.

Head began working on *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* shortly after the publication of *A Question of Power.* That she was acutely disturbed by responses to the novel is evident in her comment that "People have a complacent way of saying to me: 'Your first novel is just what Botswana is like, but I don't understand Maru. I don't like it...' By the time they got to Power, they were definitely uneasy! I've had people here walk up to me, stare at me with great unease and then say: 'I've just read A QUESTION OF POWER' After that they will say no more...none of the gushing tributes I received for Rain Clouds." (BKMM44BHP84). By turning to social history with *Serowe*, she seems to re-establish a representational mode initiated with *When Rain Clouds Gather* and jettisons her previous modernist treatment of psychic experience. Acknowledging this in a letter to Giles Gordon, she wrote: "The Serowe book was really a temporary retreat from my own

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tortures" (BKMM44BHP84). While the shift appears to signal a fundamental deviation from previous autobiographical concerns, I suggest that *Serowe* continues to address urgent psychological and imaginative themes by highlighting the creative powers of the artist in relation to newly confronted homes and extended metaphors of regeneration. *Serowe* is also closely linked to the short story collection, *The Collector of Treasures*. In an interview with Jean Marquard, Head said: "The short stories I have written arose out of contacts I made with local people...I had my plan for the history and not everything could be used. The surplus material I worked into short stories - mainly about calamities women experience in the village" (Marquard, 1978/9:50). Craig Mackenzie notes that the generic distinctions between *Serowe,* as "documentary reportage" and *The Collector of Treasures* as imaginative fiction can obscure their similarities. (1989:45). While the differences in convention are significant, the texts reveal connected rhetorical and imaginative impulses.

### *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*

> The three men are all of the same kind. They wanted to change the world. They had to make great gestures. Great gestures have an oceanic effect on society - they flood a whole town. (Head, 1981:xv)
>
> I have lived most of my life in shattered little bits. Somehow here, the shattered bits began to grow together. There is a sense of wovenness, a wholeness in life here; a feeling of just how strange and beautiful people can be – just living. (Head, 1981:x)

In *When Rain Clouds Gather,* Makhaya's flight to Botswana allegorizes the artist's efforts to reclaim the symbolic resources of a new environment. *Serowe* reconfigures this allegory by representing a village whose leaders, inhabitants and everyday routines richly connote productive freedoms and psychological recovery. Head developed an interest in the history of the Bamangwato, Botswana's largest ethnic group, and its leader Khama the Great in the early seventies. In 1972, she was commissioned to produce a portrait of Serowe as part of Penguin's World Community Series. Her hostile exchanges with a Penguin representative, Milly Daniel indicate that her version of a village portrait was not what Penguin had envisaged.[1] Ultimately, Penguin did not publish *Serowe;* after protracted handling by various agents and publishers, it was published by Heinemann in 1981. Penguin appears to have had many reasons for challenging Head's "portrait". For example, the eclectic straddling of generic boundaries defies any distinct set of conventions. The willfulness of Head's formal innovation is evident in her claims about her

[1] See BKMM144BHP134 and AKMM61BHP24.

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"non-fictional" writing. In 1970, when Gollancz seemed to offer her an outlet for non-fictional work, she wrote:

> The issue at stake is whether Gollancz might find my very off-beat ideas suited to the non-fiction bracket. For one thing, I could not produce a journalistic, well-informed non-fiction book on Africa, Southern Africa in particular, but I could produce a collection of essays, in free-wheeling, intuitive style on almost any of the sorrows which plague mankind and black people in particular, taking into account that I shoot anywhere and don't care much whom I kill especially if the victim is on the wrong side of truth. (AKMM24BHP19).

*Serowe* offers a baffling fusion of romanticizing ethnography, popular history, epic narrative, biographical history as well as postmodern ethnography. The complexity of the text also derives from what many historians would describe as its ideological contradictions. On one level, Head turns to everyday life, to the stories, experiences and viewpoints of ordinary people. Following the conventions of Marxist, feminist and new history, she emphasizes social processes generated by socially subordinate groups, and subverts elite, bourgeois and patriarchal perspectives. On another level, she constructs epic narratives that conflate historical processes with the personalities of heroic leaders. She therefore uses a traditional method which Hayden White describes in the following way: "The 'ideological' effect of this perspective consists in its transformation of history into a spectacle, unfolding before the mind's eye of the reader with all of the color, intensity, and fascination of a theatrical production. The events of a narrative representation must be charged with all the mythical resonances attending the notions of 'fate' and 'destiny'; the characters must be larger than life ('heroic') and more complex, more noble and more interesting ('exceptional') than ordinary people. Everything has to be focused on those grand "conflicts" and "climaxes" of which only "heroes" can be agents"(1995:60). The flagrant "contradictions" of Head's text, however, are held together by the coherence that derives from narrativization, from the recurring vision conveyed through emplotment, characterization and storytelling.

*Serowe* is strongly oriented towards "history from below"[2] a paradigm which began to succeed traditional explorations of political leaders and macro-events by concentrating on the daily life of workers, and other subordinate groups. Head incorporates into her work descriptions of everyday life in Serowe and first-person accounts based on interviews with a broad selection of village residents. She also turns to an ethnographic tradition by exploiting participant observation and acknowledging her interpreting presence - within the

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text - as field-worker and narrator. The ethnographic impression of inside knowledge through participant observation is captured in the section titled "Things Unique to Village Life" of her introduction. Combining an explanation of the "green tree" in the village, an account of Serowe's dogs, interpretations of the traditional Setswana calender and people's names, the different subjects in this section seem to be based on an arbitrary selection. Yet it is also typical of an ethnographic strategy that seeks to convey unmediated social flux. *Serowe* exploits social history and ethnography because their conventions create the impression of an "authentic" inside view, and allow the author to preserve a marginal society threatened by global urban centres.

While Head appears to be deeply concerned with a detailed inside view, she is also highly conscious of her role as a manipulator. Cherry Clayton writes that there is "minimal authorial intervention in *Serowe*" (1988). Yet this seems to explain the unorthodoxy of Head's intervention, rather than her forsaking of authorial control. As I shall show, the author is deeply concerned with establishing an overall subjective frame for her text. At the same time that her social history announces an "inside view", and her introduction prepares the reader for verifying conventions, *Serowe* stresses the reconstructive thrust of narrative. The introduction announces a preoccupation with particular themes: social reform and educational progress; self-help; migration and construction. It was this overt self-consciousness and authorial manipulation which Penguin's representative found unacceptable when she claimed that Head's choice of themes was too selective and that her work fell outside of the "realm of a true village book" (BKMM44BHP134).

Characterization is as important as thematization in Head's construction of narrative. This is revealed in her representation, through a three-part structure, of three Botswanan leaders: Khama the Great, leader of the Bamangwato; Tshekedi Khama, the regent who succeeded Khama; and Patrick van Rensburg, the former South African educator who settled in Serowe and who is also fictionalized in *A Question of Power.* Head tells the story of Serowe "through their contributions to the community and the response of that community to their ideals and ideas" (xiv).[3] The three leaders share a quality that, for the author, acquired the status of a personal creed. Like her heroes, Head sought to extricate herself from oppressive social positions and to flourish creatively by finding liberating locations. Thus, her fascination with Khama's Christianity does not stem

[2] Jim Sharpe offers a comprehensive discussion of this in "History From Below" (1994).

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from her sympathy with the Christianizing mission he initiates, but from her fascination with his commitment to new beginnings and determination to build alternative worlds:

> I speculated deeply on his absolute commitment to Christianity because it was the basis for all his social reforms...The traditions and taboos which all tribal people adhere to, I tend to regard as a kind of external discipline...When I think of Khama's conversion to Christianity and his imposition of it on the tribe as a whole - it more or less forced him to modify or abolish all the ancient customs of his people, thus stripping them of certain securities which tradition offered. If his acceptance of Christianity was an individual and moral choice, then it meant that he carved out a new road for the tribe. (xiv)

Head repeatedly extols those who refuse socially-prescribed courses and create their own destinies. Tshekedi Khama, regent of the Bamangwato after Khama's death, emerges in a similar light to his predecessor. Where Khama's heroism pivots on his commitment to Christianity, Tshekedi is lauded for introducing formal education in Serowe. Head chooses the South African who settled in Serowe, Patrick van Rensburg as her third great leader: "The greatness of the man was that the day came when he simply said to himself: 'That's enough.' Then he came, seemingly quite accidentally, to Serowe. He seemed to step into Tshekedi's shoes and continued, at more creative levels, to stimulate an intense interest in educational progress" (x). Van Rensburg initially sets out to start a high school, but becomes increasingly concerned with wider vocational skills and labour opportunities. This leads to the co-operative "brigades" dedicated to developing printing, building, gardening, pottery and carpentry in the village. *Serowe's* heroes have much in common with the valorized figure of Gilbert in *When Rain Clouds Gather.* But as in Gilbert's case, Head invests their specific activities with the rebellious energy of the pioneer who breaks away from an oppressive past and productively reassembles the resources of an alien environment. The stories of Head's pioneering heroes therefore have the allegorical import of vision quests and epic narratives.

The three leader figures in *Serowe* also share a capacity for independent thought and judgement. It is implied that their wisdom does not derive from formal education or inherited knowledge, but from an intuitive dedication to justice and social freedoms. In a letter to Randolph Vigne, Head wrote that: "One thing that interests me about Khama is the question of natural genius or intelligence, without book learning. I have seen how it works out in village life as I have worked with completely illiterate people who are brilliant at picking up facts and details and he had that knack" (1991:180). The nonconformist vision of Khama the Great is also associated with his son, Tshekedi. Like Part One, Part

[3] All page references for this text are to *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, London: Heinemann, 1981.

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Two underscores a leader figure's capacity to generate far-reaching changes in his environment. Tshekedi orchestrates the building of numerous schools in Serowe and also introduces the so-called "self-help projects", which performed various services for the village. Head's interviewed subjects suggest that labour was often compelled, and frequently refer to the authoritarianism of Tshekedi's schemes. For example, Lenyeletse Seretse, whom Head introduces as a diplomatic man, admits: "The suffering we went through... It was a year of drought... Each man had to bring along his own rations, paid for out of his own pocket, but it didn't really work out... Soon, we were all starving. Some members of the regiment had brought their horses. They died. We ate them. We ate wild rabbits or anything we could catch in the bush " (81).

The chronicle of Lenyeletse Seretse, which recalls both the austerity and rewards of Tshekedi's programmes, suggest that sacrifice and dedication are necessary preconditions for the construction of new domains. This idea permeates the text as a dictum, becoming both a rationalization and model of the author's own protracted battles against authority, difficult material circumstances and oppressive myths. The value of the three leaders' schemes and their metaphoric appeal for the author rests not only on their determined struggle against difficult and trying conditions. The notion of "self-help" - singled out as an important theme in *Serowe's* introduction - acquires a significance beyond its usual application to development programmes and social reconstruction. Self-help programmes are traced from Khama the Great through to van Rensburg, and connote resolute individual struggles to wrest a subjective order from surrounding chaos.

The story of the austere Pat van Rensburg in Part Three picks up the theme of a disciplined and determined initiation of new worlds. Like Tshekedi, van Rensburg concentrates on education and builds three high schools in Botswana. Following the introduction of his first school, he resigns as its principal and turns to rural development and new challenges. Quoted at the start of Part Three, an extract from one of van Rensburg's papers refers to "agent of progress". Three lines later the paper uses the formulation "agents for progress". In the context of Head's text, the phrases broadly invoke the independence and perseverance Head associated with the artist. I have shown how the idea of natural genius as a source of creation often preoccupied the author. Independent genius implied an ability to create visionary worlds - whether practical or imaginative - in defiance of and without recourse to dominant models. Head is captivated by Khama the Great, Tshekedi Khama and Pat van Rensburg because their energy

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seems to evolve quite independently of the dominant codes and conventions which, for her, were often suspect and disempowering.

In Head's oeuvre, the great man is on one hand an iconic figure, "a mythical man...not a flesh and blood reality" (1993:xvii). On the other hand, he is often conceived as a social and human subject who illustrates typical weaknesses, worldly desires and moral failings. These ambiguities surface with Johnny in *The Cardinals*, Makhaya and Gilbert in *When Rainclouds Gather*, Moleka and Maru in *Maru* and, to a far greater degree, Sello in *A Question of Power*. In *Serowe*, however, Head turns only to iconic presentation of hero figures. She therefore disentangles her representation of visionary greatness from her diagnositic and moral concerns with social power or human character. This separation seems to be clearly evidenced in the way she chose to extol Patrick van Rensburg, avoiding the doubts and reserve of her interpretations of him in letters as well as in *A Question of Power*. The consistent eulogizing of great men in *Serowe* therefore becomes a form of metaphor, configuring ideals of spiritual greatness, wisdom and genius that permeate all her writing. Sara Chetin's comments about this symbolizing process in Head's short-story collection are suggestive. Chetin suggests that the author "subtly leads her audience into the realm of myth where her characters become so stylized that no reader is allowed to identify with them - or even accept them as plausible - but must use his/her imagination, as Head has done, to translate historical experiences into a larger symbolic context that questions the universal nature of existence" (1989:115). In some ways, this addresses questions that critics have raised about Head's valorizing of male figures. Many of the great men that Head eulogized were not meant to represent social or individual beings, but to symbolize particular ideals. That Head chooses men as her exemplars is revealing about the gendered world she writes within.

The symbolic use of male leader figures is connected to her use of mythic apparatuses, and to epic narrative structures and stylistic features. Sections dealing with Khama, Tshekedi and van Rensburg reveal an elevated register and linear form of storytelling, and culminate in the heroes' climactic achievements. Thus, the section entitled Khama starts with the lofty style of grand narrative: "Wherever there is a spark of genius or true greatness in a man, mankind pays its homage. And so it is with Khama" (3). Here the narrator, effacing herself at the same time that she rhetorically elevates her subject, is the deferential chronicler of an awesome greatness that the reader is persuaded to admire. Tshekedi's stature is often presented by means of links drawn to his father, although it is also constructed through rhetorical emphases. The start of Part

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Three, describing Patrick van Rensburg, uses even more pronounced rhetorical techniques: "He has an air of impersonal abstraction, the legend and the fame. The legend was his diplomatic position in South Africa and his abdication from that position on personal grounds. In later years the fame of his educational theories for developing countries spread far and wide... Had he been a Tolstoy we might have had *My Confessions* and *What I Believe*, in relation to that tortuous country, South Africa" (135).

Elsewhere, the register, style and narrative structure are very different. Head often presents informants' first-person narratives impressionistically, explicitly marking their status as utterance, as what is quotidian and commonplace. The ordinariness is continued when she interrupts informants' narratives with her own, grounding the reader in the world of the everyday, a world of her mediating activity, of real people and prosaic lives. A section from Chapter Nine illustrates this well: "One interview I had with the old man, Ramosamo Kebonang, seemed at first the most frustrating task I had ever undertaken. He was very old and ill. He wheezed and whined his way through the interview. He couldn't concentrate and he said all sorts of irrelevant things" (67). It is especially when the stories of Khama, Tshekedi and van Rensburg are juxtaposed with the rest of the text that they acquire the compelling status of legend. However schematic, idealistic or selective, they function as powerful moral sources and illustrate Charles Taylor's discussion of the power of words and of storytelling when they "tap a source hitherto unknown or unfelt... or... restore the power of an older source that we have lost contact with... or bring us in contact with a source we have been longing for" (1996:96-7). As Taylor further observes, these stories may exercise a "force of attraction of their own" (1996:97), so that their alluring value resides entirely within the story, and not in the people or events that the story summons forth. The modern-utilitarian mindset, remarks Taylor, is sceptical about this myth-making because it has often mystified forms of social and religious absolutism. Yet the frequently metaphysical notion of "the good" filters through the most naturalistic forms of storytelling.[4] Most importantly, the ongoing mythic resonances in storytelling - for example, in contemporary biographical narration - is evidence of a deep cultural need for these myths and their power to invoke ethical ideals. The powerful moral and social cadences of Head's myth-making in *Serowe* are a penetrating expression of her

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[4] At least part of the suspicion (and even hostility) towards Head's myth-making around great men stems from the modern unease with epic and its traditional associations with institutionalized power. The hostility probably has a distinctive form in South Africa and its awesome racist legacy of founding father figures.

idiosyncratic view, influenced by her reading of Brecht, "that the artist is a servant in a very real sense, that the artist concentrates on social problems" (1989).

Head's biographical narratives of Khama, Tshekedi and van Rensburg allow her to textualize abstract ideals and to convey an immediate source of spiritual greatness and genius to the reader. Embracing Romantic notions, Head is preoccupied with forms of transcendent genius and visionary depth that flow entirely from within. These have little to do with criteria of "greatness" or "social relevance". The Romantic conception of imaginative genius easily coheres with Hindu views about divine intelligence and spiritually-inspired creativity. Head's epic storytelling, therefore, while it may appear to offer only naïve portraits, sustains her abiding universal and cosmic concerns. The prominence of her preoccupation with an elusive genius, with nonconformist intellectual power in *Serowe,* is partly traceable to the fact that she wrote this work shortly after a novel locating much of the distress of the central character in myths that oppressed and misrepresented her. *Serowe* symbolically explores a possible source for Elizabeth's deferred creativity and returns to the vexing and elusive question of origins, the genesis of a "new voice" that defies oppressive fictions that trap subjects in silence or psychic despair.

I have suggested that the narrativity of *Serowe* foregrounds an authorial desire connected to Head's experiences of dispossession, exile and oppressive confinement. The manifestation of this desire in her "social history", a documentary form which conventionally disavows desire, is reflected in the range of author personae in the text: Head as the individual who writes the work; the textualized persona of the narrator; the textualized figure of the researcher; and the "transparent" interpreter who "transmits" subjects' first-person narratives. The combination of these personae makes Head's role in relation to her subject-matter erratic and often deliberately duplicitous. Towards the start of *Serowe*, a textualized narrator appears to establish her position as part of the world she describes. This implies that she simply reflects village experience. The introduction to the text emphasizes this position with the use of the first-person plural pronoun: "Although we live by such an ancient pattern, no other village in Botswana is as dynamic as Serowe" (xiii). Occasionally, the use of first-person narratives based on interviews - often conducted through interpreters - ignores problems of translation and contributes to much of the text's impression of translucence. At some points, however, the textualized field investigator is distanced from the subject of her research. Here the text self-consciously defines the writer-researcher as one who reconstructs others' accounts and actively

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engages in a reconstructing process. This is clearly evident in the following: "Ever since the wind blew news of my book around the village, people began to take a keen interest in my activities, guiding me here and there to all their good story-tellers. 'What are you doing today, Mrs Head?' they asked" (67). Here the narrator dramatizes the questing activity of the author. Interludes such as these undercut impressions of the text's transparency and prevent the reader from accepting *Serowe* as an unmediated chronicle of history from below.

Significantly, Head's interviewed subjects do not always conform to linear narrative forms. They stray towards the incidental, the irrelevant or the tangential, and the author weaves a shifting picture that unsettles the impression of a closed and unified portrait. An example of this is the account of Katherine Pretorious or Mma-Seata, whose story starts off by dealing largely with her migration from South Africa to Serowe. Towards the end of her account, she repeatedly deviates from her central story. The author appears to take delight in the idiosyncrasies of a subject who resists her writerly control. The result is a fluctuating and digressive interlude usually absent in conventional ethnographic or historical texts:

> "I notice you smoke. Before my marriage I also smoked. After three years of marriage I noticed my husband looking at me, quietly. One day I said: 'Don't you like women to smoke?'
> And he said 'Not exactly.'
> From that day I never smoked again...We used to be dead scared of scorpions in the house. One night one of my babies was ill and I took him into bed with us...I intended sticking the napkin-pin into the mattress but accidentally stuck it into my husband's foot. He jumped three feet into the air and screamed 'What bit me?' He's been dead eighteen years, this May. He took ill with pneumonia for two months..." (57)

Here Head seems determined to stress the eccentric, the idiosyncratically human, the fluidity of her subjects. This occasionally lends *Serowe* the qualities of postmodern ethnography, which confronts the recalcitrance of researched subjects and the limitations of writers' control over them. As Stephen Tyler observes: "Because post-modern ethnography privileges 'discourse' over 'text', it foregrounds dialogue as opposed to monologue, and emphasizes the cooperative and collaborative nature of the ethnographic situation in contrast to the ideology of the transcendent observer" (1986:126). But the use of this discourse and the acknowledging of positioned dialogue in *Serowe* pivot not on self-consciously "postmodern" ethnographic strategies (which actually surface very intermittently in the text). Instead, they centre on the way Head makes visible her appropriation and transformation of researched subjects. According to the conventions of the "true village tale", the researcher retrieves a silenced world in a transcription that

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speaks for a "lost" society, or, as Stuart Hall caustically puts it, announces the "'recovery' of the past which is waiting to be found" (1989:70). Where social history usually suppresses the researcher's desires, Head turns to the genre to textualize them.

These desires are highlighted in her refutation of colonialist productions that construe southern African barbarism interrupted only by the arrival of colonial and missionary activity. Head punctuates her text with critical allusions to colonial and missionary perspectives, while offering images and stories that invest the past with qualities of nobility, compassion and agency. Although *Serowe* is primarily devoted to modern cultural processes, sections of the book, in particular Parts One and Two, are historical in the more conventional sense of representing the past, key historical events and important leaders. It is in these sections that Head overtly challenges colonialist representation. When she wrote *Serowe*, she had read J D Omer-Cooper's *Zulu Aftermath* (1966), one of the first and most influential "Afrocentric" historical accounts of southern Africa.[5] One important way in which she overturns colonialist myths is through accounts of Botswana's early social formations and leaders. These accounts are dispersed, and are often conveyed through Head's informants. She writes in Chapter Nine:

> All that was written of this period by white historians trod rough-shod over their history dismissing it as 'petty, tribal wars', denying for a long time that a black man should be known as a 'good boy' or a 'bad boy' and hurry up and down with the suitcases of his master, who was creating 'real' history. My own work concentrated more on the everyday world, so that I never seemed to find the time to linger on the past or to sort out what it was that made these old men so infinitely attractive to me. (67)

Although the text refers to the range of scattered Tswana groups before colonial boundary-making, the focus is on the Ngwato, the largest ethnic group in Botswana. Among the themes dealt with here are their settlement, their patterns of migration, and the lineages of their leaders. A persistent although implicit emphasis in these themes is the elaborate social evolution of the groups described, a history quite independent of settler-colonial intrusion at the time. The text deals with the tumultuous changes during the "Scramble for Africa". Yet Head's emphasis is on transformations shaped and initiated by Africans.

A counter-colonial orientation is also evident in the visibility of traditional voices and interpretations of traditional life. Two prominent sources of these voices are the independent churches and traditional medicine. In Chapter Nineteen, Head uses a polyphonic account to present traditional and modern medical practices and to signal divergent interpretations of illness and death. Informants who provide traditional

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[5] Chapter Eight provides a fuller discussion of Head's indebtedness to this historian.

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interpretations use a rudimentary and everyday style. An informant known as Rose, for example, uses animated direct speech to describe the diagnosis of an illness known as Malwetse: "The Tswanan doctor said: 'Causes of the sickness Malwetse is the wife. He cannot pass water. He cannot pass underneath altogether, all the passages are blocked up. She is pregnant by another man and this has blocked up the passages. She is the one who gives him this sickness.' The old people looked at the wife. She was very afraid so she said: 'I am not pregnant'" (119). This explanation is followed by a medical doctor's technical explanation of Malwetse: "The history is decorated with details probably added for effect, not from observation, and this makes it difficult to analyze. Certainly, promiscuity assists the spreading of venereal diseases, and the custom would promote health. But in this story, if the man was 'blocked up' he must have been ill for quite some time, that is, before he returned to his faithless wife. He probably collected his own diseases through his own unfaithfulness OR by living in poor socioeconomic surroundings while he was away"(121-2). As these explanations suggest, polyphony does not straightforwardly imply the equivalence of modern and traditional interpretations. While the doctor's explanation is not conclusive, the voice of scientific modernity conveys a "truth" deriving from the entrenched authority of western medical discourse. It is implied that even when "traditional life" is represented, it remains vulnerable to the recuperative effects established beyond her text. Head does not explicitly signal the hierarchical difference between western and traditional healing or medical discourses. Yet their juxtaposition in these passages suggests the intentional juxtaposition of socially marginal and culturally-dominant voices in a novel like *Maru*.

Another and more explicitly vindicating counter-colonial thrust in *Serowe* emerges in descriptions of the tolerance of the Ngwato and other Tswana group formations. A persistent theme is the way in which groups migrate and reconfigure at times of conflict. Despite the battles and social tensions of the period, conflicts seem to be resolved when groups simply disperse, resettle and develop new formations. Migrations are therefore explored as a "tradition established over the centuries to avoid bloodshed in a crisis and underlying the basic non-violent nature of African society as it was then" (95). Head's concern here is to discredit "white historians who, for their own ends, damned African people as savages" (95). The "Afrocentric" slant of Head's text lends it a partisan thrust that seems to be at odds with many of its autobiographical, lyrical and epiphanic moments. It is also interesting that she made strong claims about her historical accuracy and diligent scholarship for *Serowe*. She collaborated closely with revisionist southern

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African historians[6] and used scholarly conventions like detailed appendices and bibliographies. Her affiliation with this tradition, however, seems to have had less to do with a desire to emulate their scholarly rigour than with a need to textualize a subjective domain with authority and conviction.

This subjective domain is explicit in the emphasis on migration and transplantation. Many of the stories of individuals who make Serowe their home are reminiscent of the community-formation described in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The Serowe community, comprising exiles like the Afrikaner, Hendrik Pretorius, the disaffected South African educator van Rensburg, Head herself, as well as the hospitable original members of the village, is not united by any conventional bonds, such as racial, ethnic or national affiliation. Their sense of "community" stems from a joint commitment to social development, justice and reciprocal coexistence, all of which foster personal growth. In an interesting use of the migration trope, Head describes, at the start of her text, the growth of the green tree. Introduced by a South African when he comes to live in Serowe, this plant is not indigenous. The short description of the tree compellingly evokes the idea of abundant and rich growth with transplantation: "The plant has an amazing ability to reproduce itself. From planted cuttings, with little or no water, the Green Tree sends out new roots and starts a new life for itself" (xvii). This theme, conveyed through images of organic development, also appears in relation to Elizabeth's growth in *A Question of Power*. Margaret Tucker describes this when she writes: "The healing power of the garden and the community of women who work in it are clearly connected to Elizabeth's gradual rooting in the community. Elizabeth's success in raising the 'Cape Gooseberry', is symbolic of this rooting" (1988:180). Like the flourishing green tree, the thriving Cape gooseberry highlights the possibilities of the foreigner commencing a new and fruitful life.

The intense personalizing of the political through the theme of migration becomes clear when migration is directly linked to displacement and exile. The Ngwato, especially under the leadership of Khama, is seen as a group that easily accommodates outsiders. In her introduction, Head refers to Khama's tolerance when he welcomes refugees from both the Matabele and Anglo-Boer wars in his society. The pattern is traced to the present through descriptions of individuals like volunteer workers and traders who, having settled in the village and relinquished oppressive ties, immerse themselves in the life of Serowe. This transplantation is illustrated in the words of Jacklyn Cock, at that time a South African

[6] Her letters with historians like Mary Benson and Brian Willan are revealing here. See the discussion in Chapter Two.

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teacher at Swaneng, a Serowe high school: "South Africans who live near the top of a caste society have perhaps an arrogance and pride they are unaware of, and when I first came to Serowe I suppose I had that kind of pride. Swaneng has been the making of me in many ways" (139). References to the integration of exiles dominate the ends of Parts Two and Three. Significantly, this final section focuses on Pat van Rensburg, himself a South African exile who discovered a new life in Serowe. Another emblematic exile is Sonny Pretorious, a white trader who becomes a member of the Bamangwato tribe and introduces himself in the following way: "Ah, I'm not a good Pretorious. Some people have said to me: 'You're an Afrikaner. Go and live in South Africa. You'll get whatever you like with a name like Pretorious.' It would kill me quickly there. I sometimes go down to Johannesburg for shopping. I get muddled by this people-can't go-in-there. I sometimes leave before schedule. When I drive the car back over the border into Botswana I stop, open the flask of tea and then just sit and see a dove fly by. Botswana is the only place that's normal, to my way of thinking" (106). Given her own quest for a home, her frustrated search for a homeland in the face of the Botswana government's hostility towards refugees, and the projection of her desire onto Botswana and more specifically Serowe, this aspect of the migration theme holds a special appeal to the author.

Also important in Head's personalizing emphasis is the preoccupation, continued from *When Rain Clouds Gather*, on "creation". In fact, Head claims "an intimate knowledge of construction" (xvi) as one of the main themes of her work. Construction clearly informs the pioneering ventures of the three leaders on whom Head focuses, but she also alludes to creation from unlikely sources in other ways. The text's opening references to the adornment of mud huts and the Ngwato's building of towns explicitly discredit the dehumanizing technocratic construction associated with colonialism. Head returns to the subject of meaningful invention through her informants, many of whom are creators of traditional artifacts like clothing, huts, shoes, wooden utensils. The symbolic force of this activity emerges sharply in her account of Ramosamo Kebonang, an old man described as a "jack-of-all-trades". Head describes her feelings after spending a day with Kebonang in the following way: "Something about the day was lovely - it was like stepping back into an ancient world where everything had been balanced and sane; a daily repetitive rhythm of work and kindly humorous chatter" (70). Other informants' accounts painstakingly record their literal activity. The allusions to their dedicated labour in a secluded environment where resources are scarce and elementary indicate Head's discovery of ingenious textual ways for speculating about independent creative genius.

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The emphasis, both in the epic and naturalistic sections of the text, on development discloses a form of creativity that deploys socially-dominant resources without losing its distinctiveness. This theme is therefore closely connected to the independent vision of Head's hero figures. But it is also developed in the language used to describe creative acts. As she does in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head exploits the valency of a technical and documentary style. This emerges especially clearly in Part Three. Like parts of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, this section of *Serowe* sometimes imbues a literal register with the evocative and rhythmic force of poetry. Parts One and Two are often conventionally descriptive, while Part Three is dominated by accounts of the technical activity associated with van Rensburg's co-operative and educational projects in Serowe. The meticulous chronicling of the brigades, the Swaneng Project and the Boiteko Project transmit the pulse and generative images of an unstoppable creativity. Part Three returns to two central motifs: the idea of creating with limited opportunities and the resourcefulness of participants in co-operative projects. Both themes encode Head's sense of her own art: her struggle with a foreign and potentially alien other world in a manoeuvre to make that world a part of her subjective domain. In the same way that Head highlights her own desires in her use of the documentary form, therefore, she suggests subjective symbolic meanings in her detached technical style.

It is not only the connotative technical register that configures the transcendent world of the imagination, but also an elaborately poetic register. Marking a shift away from the consistent naturalism of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, this style prefigures the lyrical richness of sections of Head's historical novel. *Serowe* opens with a quotation from a poem by Harold Telmaque, a writer published in "a magazine of the sort I used to read then -- hoarsely and violently asserting blackness": "Where is the hour of the beautiful dancing of birds in the sun-wind" (ix). Head seizes on the poet's "unexpected" questing after the imagination and seems to align his deviation from the "hoarse and violent" with her own. The elusive idyll glimpsed in this line seems to be captured when Head describes the village landscape and launches into flights of poetic celebration: "But the light outside, at dawn, is unearthly too - a kind of white light; an immense splash of it along an endless horizon. This white light quickly pulsates into a ball of molten gold and here in the sunrise, you can time the speed of the earth's rotation as the enormous fiery ball arises" (ix-x).

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Through these evocative descriptions, imaginative and visionary reservoirs are invested in an ideal home. The wealth of resources offered by Botswana and Serowe explains why Head vacillated so frequently and easily between social history and ethnography on one hand, and traditional historical exploration of great figures and events on the other. No single convention or methodology offered adequate scope for the range of her literary assemblage and textual redefinition in relation to Serowe. *Serowe* becomes both the source for a liberating artistic vision, and the product of that vision. As a text, *Serowe* therefore enacts Elizabeth's "gesture of belonging" at the end of *A Question of Power.* Titling her epilogue, "A Poem to Serowe", the author quotes from Rupert Brooke's "The Great Lover". This quotation conveys rebirth and the start of new relationships and achievements. In the short description that follows, she invokes the everyday routines of the village as the source of a rehabilitating vision. Head's poem begins and concludes by signalling the writer's reclamation of her environment. It evokes scenes of the ordinary at the same time that it celebrates a wondrous landscape, thus hinting at the richness which the perceiver can discover in an apparently mundane world. Her concluding sentence underlines her self-conscious claiming of Serowe as a fiction for her own spiritual needs and imaginative concerns: "These small joys were all I had, with nothing beyond them, they were indulged in over and over again, like my favourite books" (179).

Like *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Serowe* transcends a Botswana in which the author frequently perceived shadows of the injustice, suffering and deprivations which first drove her from South Africa. Importantly, these difficulties led her to consider leaving the country. By 1974 she had made plans to emigrate to Norway. After completing *Serowe*, however, Head wrote to Randolph Vigne that she had cancelled her proposed departure because "After work like that with so much humour, value and information, this is my home" (1991:185). In view of the shifting personae in her letters, this single cause for her decision may seem dubious. But the claim does testify to the extent to which Head resolutely created and inhabited texts as worlds. Refusing the conventions through which historical, documentary or ethnographic realism appear as factual, disinterested and dead to authorial desire, Head self-consciously represents her adopted homeland as self-imagined and self-fulfilling. *Serowe* anticipates the historical novel, *A Bewitched Crossroad*, where Head directly exploits the fictiveness of historical reconstruction, pursues the play of desire in narrativity, and engages more directly than *Serowe* with a range of oppressive and culturally-dominant narratives. *The Collector of Treasures*, marshalling different strategies, themes and images, continues the author's composite

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production of a vision which is both a source of creative energy and the realization of that energy.

### *The Collector of Treasures*

> The hours I spent collecting together my birds, my pathways, my sunsets and shared them, with everyone; The small boys of this village and their homemade wire cars...The wedding parties and beer parties of my next-door neighbours...The very old woman of the village who knows so well how to plough with a hoe...These small joys were all I had, with nothing beyond them, they were indulged in over and over again, like my favourite books. (Head, 1981:179)

In her short stories, Head exploits much of the material obtained during research for *Serowe* as well as Botswanan history, legend and myth. Head was emphatic about titling the volume "tales", rather than stories, being clearly concerned with the narrativity that she considered central to *Serowe*. Drawing on different forms and techniques, the stories embrace a range of themes. Nigel Thomas provides an overview of their concerns in the following way:

> In general the stories are about the failure of colonial civilisation and the perennial oppression of women in Botswana society...More specific themes are: the defiance of traditional custom in asserting individuality...; psychological turmoil resulting from the conflict between Christian and indigenous practices and beliefs; the motives behind the creation of indigenous Christianity; the inevitable erosion of communal values when they come into contact with urban vice; the triumphing of the irrational (regression) in times of duress; the wisdom inherent in the communal courts (kgotla); the lethal elements of consumer values; the advantages of traditional over European marriage rituals; the limits of mask-wearing; the social disintegration that follows the dissolution of the mores of a society; the victimization of women and children in a society where no firmly enforced codes exist for their protection. (1990:95)

The scope of the stories seems to encourage an itemizing catalogue of the sort suggested by this critic. But random listing underplays the associative import and circuitous strategies of the writer's realistic details as well as the way her stories function not as "separate tales of a fragmented universe but...tales with a definite ordered purpose encompassing a unified vision" (Chetin, 1989:115). As the title of the anthology taken from the key story suggests, The *Collector of Treasures* is in many ways about the collection and redefinition of elements from a foreign world in a gesture of making them the collector's own. Referring to the collection of ethnographic material and art, James Clifford warns us that "collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture and authenticity" (1990:218). Although Head powerfully inscribes her vision on the world she confronts, she avoids possessive collection.

Head's stories seek to represent the locations or voices of subjects trapped in dominant gender myths and social structures. Where the dominant impulse in *Serowe* seems to be the imagining of utopia, the stories often critically explore power relations. But

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many of the rhetorical strategies in the stories suggest *Serowe.* Although critics have often explored Head's concerns with women's subordination and resistance, less attention has been paid to her use of mythic devices and configuring of moral utopias. Dealing with the uses of myth in "The Deep River", Chetin has described these preoccupations in the following way:

> The purpose of her mythical construction has a wider symbolic significance than to merely reinforce the ethics of a particular community. Her ability to romanticize and free herself from the constraints of the original myth indicate that she sees myth as a vehicle for imaginatively exploring what is possible in the future. Head is attracted to the universality and timelessness myths in general seem to have to offer and her tales seem designed to consider the problematic aspects of human experience and why we have arrived at where we are today, excluded from a paradise we search for but can never reach. (1989:116)

My discussion of the stories therefore deals both with Head's analytical concerns with socially-imposed experiences and with her emphatically productive emphasis on new ones.

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**Elusive Voices**

In Chapter Six I argued that *A Question of Power* focuses on pornographic discourse in ways that convey the violence of broader colonial or master-servant relations. On one hand, pornography's violent representations of women illustrate the physical abuse and mastery of those who are seen as socially inferior. On the other hand, pornography projects fictions of inferiority on women in ways that typify the misrepresentations of many other dominant discourses. Like her novel, Head's short stories return to a view of the female body as a site of violent inscription and physical mastery. This encourages the analytic depth suggested by Elizabeth Grosz, who examines the role of the body both as a creation of, and in producing knowledge. She writes: "Knowledges are effects of a drive for mastery, a visceral force or impulse to appropriate and subdue...Knowledges are a product of a bodily drive to live and conquer...They are products of bodily impulses and forces that have mistaken themselves for products of mind (1995:37). In dealing with knowledge as a will to power, Head confronts and connects the two analytical approaches to the body that Grosz identifies (1995:33). One defines the external body as it inscribes social beliefs and laws. The other is concerned with internal or psychic patterns. Head's stories therefore extend her characteristic strategy of grounding a comprehensive view of human experiences in concrete and graphic processes.

Head's attention to the body allows her to hint at broader power relations and discourses. But she also links immediate and specific miseries to culturally emblematic injustice in a pattern that Rose defines as her "movement from the personal, to the historical, to the universal" (1994:411). By focusing on what is said about and done to individual bodies, Head exploits a signifier with the potential to make her characters' anguish sharply evident. This is evident throughout her oeuvre. In *The Cardinals*, Mouse's defeated physical appearance is often an index of her socially suppressed potential, and others' disparaging references to her appearance constantly reinforces her subjugation. *Maru* makes it clear that Margaret's anatomical body is a culturally inscribed signifier. Her story is also the story of successive appropriations of the bodies of San people, so that she is constantly seen through her body's cultural and historical meanings. In *A Question of Power* Elizabeth is repeatedly projected as the object of predatory sexual desire. By battling to free herself from hallucinations in which Dan attempts to dominate her, she struggles to free her body from its violent misrepresentation. The stories in *The Collector of Treasures* exploit the body as a signifier in similar ways to Head's novels. Analyzing Head's stories in relation to other black women's writings, Francoise Lionnet suggests that the body in pain is an almost universal signifier (1993:150). She therefore suggests that representation of bodily communication or of the threatened body may convey the intricacies of domination and resistance in ways that elude "language" and "verbalization." For Head, representation of the body provides incontestable evidence of both her characters' suffering and socially silenced "presence".

"Witchcraft", "Heaven Is Not Closed" and "The Wind and a Boy" convey the powerful signifying impact of the body in pain. "Witchcraft" provides a startling metaphor of suffering by drawing on traditional Setswana stories of supernatural affliction. Mma-Mabele, the central character, decides to shun sexual relations with men and says: "I don't want to show myself any more" (49).[7] Determined not to surrender her body to sexual conquest, she also embarks on a path of economic independence. She becomes the main supporter of a family consisting of her sister, her sister's child and her child. Using a naturalistic strategy, Head develops a moving account of Mma-Mabele's proud self-reliance: "At the end of the month Mma-Mabele came home heaped with treasures, a salary which was twice that of her sister Maggie, a number of old cotton dresses and a pair of shoes...The two sisters...happily pooled their salaries together on Mma-Mabele's

[7] Page references are to *The Collector of Treasures*, London: Heinemann, 1977.

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lap...Mma-Mabele's salary alone could feed the whole family for a month. So she sat with her head to one side, and with a thoughtful, serious face, worked out their budget for the month" (50). In a family without male providers, Mma-Mabele prospers as a bread-winner, assuming the primary supportive responsibility conventionally accorded to, but forsaken by men. The reasons for her condemnation as "he-man" (49) are therefore two-fold; she undermines the rationalization of men's mastery of women by refusing to be sexually controlled and by asserting her economic independence.

By drawing on traditional explanations of physical suffering, Head suggests that the full significance of her character's story eludes naturalistic description. Immediately after securing a job, Mma-Mabele is inexplicably assailed by bodily torments: first large chunks of her hair suddenly disappear; later she is subjected to crippling pains. The source of her affliction eventually assumes a physical form: "It was a misshapen thing walking towards her with a huge misshapen face. She lay on her side that night and the thing, it looked like a man, bent and placed its mouth on her chest and pressed a forefinger and thumb into her forehead. She was quite powerless to protest or move" (53). The Tswana doctor who claims to help her welcomes her suffering, eager on one hand to extract high fees for his services, and on the other gloating over her thwarted aspirations to independence. Mma-Mabele's sickness takes her to the brink of death. In an unexpected ending, however, she recovers. The story concludes with her angry response to an inquiry about how she was cured, a response which is also an enraged indictment of her world: "'You all make me sick! There is no one to help the poor, not even God. I could not sit down because I am too poor and there is no one to feed my children'" (56). In this abrupt conclusion Mma-Mabele speaks not as an individual inexplicably attacked by the supernatural, but as a woman whose efforts are constantly subverted by a "terrible horror in the society" (48). This "horror" appears to defy rational explanation or human agency. There are no "logical" explanations for her bizarre symptoms or abrupt recovery. Instead, Head uses the metaphor of witchcraft to convey the extremity of an independent woman's subverted struggle for autonomy and well-being.

In ways similar to "Witchcraft", "The Wind and A Boy" highlights an apparently impersonal law that assumes a starkly physical form. The story's tracing of the psychic implications of physical trauma also links it directly to "Witchcraft". Sejosenye, an old woman, lives with her grandson when all her other relatives migrate to the city. "A gift to keep her heart warm" (70), the young boy is the centre of her life. But he cycles into the village on his new bicycle and is killed in an accident. A suggested theme is that a

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disruptive modern world destroys a traditional idyll epitomized in the devoted relationship between the grandmother and her grandson: the bicycle is a gift from his urban-dwelling mother, and he cycles along a newly-constructed road. But the story also hints at a seemingly transcendent pattern in Sejonyese's suffering: a merciless destiny seems to thwart the old woman, who has nothing of value in life but her grandson. She dies a week after him, her death signalling the extremity of her anguish. Like Mma-Mabele in "Witchcraft", Sejosenye is an innocent whose rudimentary contentment is destroyed by a seemingly relentless law of injustice. In both stories, a malevolent energy that seems to defy all human control conveys the idea that deep-seated injustices undermine the efforts of socially powerless figures to achieve even the most elementary happiness. Although the persecution to which they are subject is social, the enormity of their physical and psychic pain, and the complexity of the forces in which they are trapped defy conventional social analysis. Yet the fatalism is not despairing. Head suggests that the tremendous innocence of her characters situates them in a realm that transcends the spiritual corruption surrounding them. Her victimized women characters seem to illustrate her view that spiritual power may often emerge from profound suffering. Commenting on Head's tone here, Kenneth Harrow writes that Head inscribes an "ironic fatalism" and shows how the "lines of [women's] lives are reduced, brought into focus and purified" (1993:169).

While many of the stories describe the effects of violent knowledge and acts on women's bodies, others plot examples of women's bodily communication. A story which hints cryptically at this is "Heaven Is Not Closed". In this story, a deeply committed Christian woman marries a non-Christian and is denied access to the church by an autocratic missionary. A victim of authoritarian judgement, Galethebege appears to register guilt for her sins by not assuming a Christian posture for death, although she anticipates her death and claims that "'I shall rest now because I believe in God'" (7). The story launches a critique of Christianity's chauvinism, embodied in the missionary as "the representative of both God and something evil" (11). The commentary on missionary hypocrisy is conveyed through the words of Ralokae, Galethebege's husband: "Their love was enslaving black people and he could not stand it...They were full of tricks. They were a people who, at sight of a black man, pointed a finger in the air, looked away into the distance and said impatiently: 'Boy! Will you carry this! Boy! Will you fetch this'" (10). Head captures the brutal effects of Christian bigotry in the anguished arrangement of the old woman's body: "She lay on her right side with her right arm thrust out above her head" (7). Galethebege's supplicating posture seems to convey her effort to open the gates of

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heaven for herself and her husband. The story conveys the poignancy of Galethebege's frustration. Ralokae, her husband, is an eloquent critic of Christian injustice and intolerance, although it is Galethebege who suffers because her irregular choice is accepted by neither of the powerful forces in her life. Galethebege's bodily signs in death seem to convey her final wordless judgement of a world which has denied her right to make independent and non-exclusive choices: to marry the non-Christian she loves while remaining a Christian.

The tension between the body as a site of control and as a source of agency is described in two of the best-known stories in the collection "The Collector of Treasures" and "Life". "The Collector of Treasures" minutely diagnoses the predatory and aggressive masculinity associated with a character who creates "such misery and chaos that he could be broadly damned as evil" (91). Garesego, the character referred to here, ruthlessly abuses his wife Dikeledi in a system of domination that Lionnet aptly refers to as a "quotidian form[s] of sexual slavery"(1993:134). Emphasizing the persistence of a gendered hierarchy between the pre-colonial and post-independence periods, Head compares Garesego to a beast: "Like the dogs and bulls in society, he also accepted no responsibility for the young he procreated and like the dogs and bulls and donkeys, he also made females abort" (91). The vicious will that he displays surfaces in the kind of metaphor that marks the horrific male dominance in *A Question of Power*: "As the mating progressed one dog would attempt to gain dominance over the festivities and oust all the others from the bitch's vulva...No doubt, during that Herculean feat, the dog imagined that he was the only penis in the world and that there had to be a scramble for it" (91). In the story's claim that men like Garesego cause women to abort, Head extends a metaphor of bodily signification and conveys the idea of a traumatic and premature denial of human potential.

Dikeledi's body is often inscribed as a conquered and docile body. She is mastered first by her uncle, who sees her as a useless and dependent female body. He says to her, "'you'd better marry Garesego because you're just hanging around here like a chain on my neck'" (92). Later, her husband treats her as the receptacle of his aggressive sexual desires before abandoning her and their children. Reclusive and struggling to support her children, Dikeledi acquires the means to rebuild her life during the eight years of their separation. When she decides to appeal to her husband to help her educate their son, he returns to her home with the aim of reasserting his dominance. The threat of Garesego's return is presented as physical violation. His words to her are described as "delivering her

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a blow in her face" so that the "blow glanced off her face which she raised slightly in pride" (99).

Dikeledi ultimately attacks the source of her torment. She castrates Garesego when he falls asleep drunk. Retribution is emphasized in the description of the male body in pain: "With the precision and skill of her hard-working hands, she grasped hold of his genitals and cut them off with one stroke. In doing so, she slit the main artery which ran on the inside of the groin. A massive spurt of blood arched its way across the bed. And Garesego bellowed. He bellowed his anguish" (103). As Lionnet suggests, the themes of disfiguration, castration and imprisonment feature in a pattern that shockingly unravels gender politics. When Dikeledi murders her husband, the pattern reaches a form of resolution as the female body, fixed as passive and victimized, performs an act of aggression conventionally associated with the masculine body. The deliberate hyphenation of the charge against Dikeledi as "Man-slaughter" (88) indicates that she challenges the root of male sexual dominance. By using a cyclical structure and starting with Dikeledi's severe punishment for her crime, the story, as Barbara Harlow suggests, "recasts her protagonist's crime in political terms" and foregrounds the "judicial and penal reprisal for husband murder" (1987:135).

On one level, Dikeledi's imprisonment after she murders her husband symbolizes her extreme physical containment and surveillance. Yet she retains her spiritual autonomy despite her bodily entrapment. The author defines a form of self-realization that transcends the imprisonment of the body. In a similar way to Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*, Dikeledi constructs what Lionnet refers to as an "alternative space, a parallel world with utopian possibilities despite the restriction of movement that prison implies" (134). In prison, Dikeledi joins a group of husband-murderers who have endured histories of persecution similar to her own. It is apparent that women in their position have no recourse to socially-sanctioned defence, and that their lack of rights limits their ability to defy male control except through the act of physically destroying them. Their supportive alliances suggest that they form a sustaining community in opposition to one that sanctions or ignores their anguish. Moreover, Dikeledi continues to knit, and cherishes the moments of tenderness associated with her friendships in prison as well as with earlier phases of her life. Her imprisonment offers her opportunities for spiritual well-being and artistic creation. Forgoing the association of liberating meanings with physical states of freedom, Head emphasizes Dikeledi's ability to salvage a liberating existence. She therefore registers her continuing emphasis on affirmative self-definition through the

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construction of independent discursive domains: "And so the woman Dikeledi began phase three of a life that had been ashen in its loneliness and unhappiness. And yet she had always found gold amidst the ash, deep loves that had joined her heart to the hearts of others. She smiled tenderly at Kebonye because she knew already that she had found another such love. She was the collector of such treasures" (91). The character's "life" sentence is consequently ambivalent. By killing her husband, she ultimately reclaims the spiritual release and independence which Garesego's return in the story so radically threatens.

"Life" is related to "The Collector of Treasures" since it explores the victimization of a woman in the face of the punitive reprisals of patriarchy. As they do in the title story, these reprisals acquire the status of law and justice. Lionnet comments on this when she argues that Head's stories signal how women's repressed struggles are inexorably ignored or recuperated by interpretive and narrative acts that reproduce a masculinist symbolic order (1993:150). The story appears to concentrate on a cultural conflict in which Life, a westernized black woman, returns to her village and refuses to adopt the submissive behaviour demanded from village women. She is eventually killed by a husband who expects his wife's obedience. Head implies that an explanation of Life's story needs to transcend the fatalist view of "cultural conflict" suggested at the end of the story. "A song by Jim Reeves was very popular at that time: 'That's what happens when Two Worlds Collide'. When they were drunk, the beer-brewing women used to sing it and start weeping. Maybe they had the last word on the affair" (46). The conclusion, problematicized by the qualifier "maybe", suggests that Life's story is the tragedy of a subject whose story is never satisfactorily told.

Head charts a story that is inaccessible to a dominant symbolic order by focusing on a "silent" pattern in which Life tries to claim her independence. As opposed to Dikeledi's "docile body" during much of the story, Life, as her name boldly suggests, is a character whose body is undisciplined. Determined to control her sexuality, Life is the only woman in the village who sells herself to men. Significantly, her prostitution indicates both sexual and economic independence. When she marries, the prospect of her husband's control is described as a physical threat, "almost throttling her to death" and "seem[ing] to strike her a terrible blow behind the head" (43). The independence that Life tries to claim is linked to the beer-brewing women in the village. With their distinctive language and conduct, they constitute a subculture at the edges of their environment. They threaten its moral fabric since their command of their sexuality, reproduction and labour resists

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social control. One of the most persistent themes in cultural myths about the female body is the perception of its being naturally without boundaries and therefore in need of cultural policing. The beer-brewers' promiscuity, rowdiness and drunkenness exemplify the perception of women's innate and threatening "looseness". When Life frequents a bar avoided by the beer-brewers, she crosses a boundary that even they acknowledge and displays an excessive "looseness".

Life, described by her husband's friend as "rotten to the core" (42) therefore radically challenges a male-centred civil society. Her husband is first titillated by the idea of her difference (or the allure of being able to control it), but ends up being threatened by its implications: his lack of control. Ultimately he becomes a custodian of the social policing of women's undisciplined corporeality. Interestingly, when Lesego kills his wife, his action is precise and calculated, a purposeful patriarchal act masked as a "crime of passion". Lesego returns to his yard after the murder and calmly explains to his friend that he had thought: "'I'd better kill her because I cannot understand a wife who could be so corrupt'" (46). He does not, as his friend later suggests he might have done, "walk away", but takes his wife's life because he knows that he is supported by a legacy of patriarchal law.

Like Life, Gaenametse in "The Special One" has an undisciplined body. She yearns for the freedom to fulfill her sexual desires regardless of her society's strictures about female sexuality. Although this story is very short, it raises a number of recurring themes about women's sexuality and subjectivity. It is therefore worth discussing at some length. A woman in her late thirties, Gaenametse cherishes her body, acts on her sexual desires and has young male lovers. When the narrator first meets her, she "flaunts" her sexuality with a brightly-coloured scarf and illustrates the "looseness" which Head associates with "Life's" beer-brewers' and central character: "She was walking rather rapidly and in a peculiar way with the wide, swaying footsteps of a drunk. She only cared about herself because she was looking at nothing and she would have walked right past me" (82). Through Gaenametse, the story reveals the ways in which independent female sexuality is fixed as "excess", deviant, abhorrent and unclean, as that which cannot be condoned within the symbolic order.

The treatment of female sexuality in this story, as well as in "Life", interestingly frame the deep anxieties about female sexuality registered in *A Question of Power*. Certain critics have read these anxieties as evidence of the author's ingrained horror of female sexuality. They have therefore focused critically on her capitulation to the

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stereotypes of a male symbolic order. Olaussen, for example, interprets the mythical malevolence of Medusa, a symbol of women's sexuality in *A Question of Power,* as evidence of Head's patriarchal response to female sexuality (1997:195). Yet far from expressing her own beliefs, Head's exploration of the pathologizing of women's sexuality often exposes social practices and stereotypes. A novel like *A Question of Power* reveals how women's perceptions of their own sexuality are inextricably entangled with the hegemonic images of their worlds. "The Special One" suggests that an independent sexuality, even when it can be claimed, is defined only with reference to dominant myths. The story consequently highlights the entrapment of Ganametse as her struggle to fulfill her independent sexual desires is thwarted by the male-centred taboos of her world.

This is the only story in which Head uses an on-scene first-person narrator. Since the narrator lives in but is not entirely part of the society she describes, the device conveys the precariousness of Gaenametse's position in her society. Direct and spontaneous, she stumbles through life trying to fulfill herself. She is often unable to fathom or conform to insidious social demands. There is considerable poignancy, conveyed by the narrator but left largely to the reader to decipher, in this character's ingenuous yet single-minded questing through a world that judges her relentlessly. Much of the pathos derives from her ignorance of the division between women's public personae and their private desires and knowledge.[8] Gaenametse's sexual feelings are not unique, and she innocently tells the narrator about socially-respected older women who have young male lovers. One of these is Mrs Maleboge, a mutual friend introduced as "a short, stout woman, with a very sad face, who always wore a shawl and a white cotton kerchief wound rather unbecomingly around her head; the kerchief obscured a quarter part of her face so that her sad black eyes stared out from under it" (81). Although Mrs Maleboge acts on her desires, she carefully preserves the mask of a respectable mature woman. Thus she reserves her attacks on male dominance and her sexuality for a domain concealed from public scrutiny. This is clearly revealed at the baptismal party of her grandchild. The occasion (to which Gaenametse is not invited) is a public event that confirms Mrs Maleboge's respectability as a grandmother and Christian. When the narrator is given directions to Mrs Maleboge's home and mentions her party, Gaenametse naively says: '"I am her best friend and she never told me that she was going to have a party! I am going to the party too! Come, I'll take you to her home. It's just around the

[8] This gap, as her letters indicate, seems to have been a source of deep interest to Head.

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corner'' (82). Upon their arrival, Mrs Maleboge abruptly isolates them from her other guests and closets them in a hut where they "picked up the dialogue at the exact point at which it had left off when they last met" (82). In this way Mrs Maleboge separates women's critical knowledge and independence from a public space which gives her a social identity and censors her self-knowledge.

In the course of the story, Gaenametse becomes increasingly responsive to her society's taboos against women's sexual gratification. When the narrator sees her after six months, she is no longer the "wild and beautiful woman of that Sunday...[and had] exchanged the lovely light chiffon scarf for the white cotton kerchief worn by Mrs Maleboge...so that only her eyes peeped out beneath it" (83). By emulating the respectable persona of her friend, Gaenametse tries to rescue her dignity from a social narrative that perceives her as "that one", who was "driving her husband mad...[by] pester[ing] him day and night for the blankets" (84). Unlike her friend, Gaenametse cannot pursue a duplicitous life. Risking her already precarious reputation, she publicly confronts a young man about their secret affair and his refusal to acknowledge her. When the narrator sees Gaenematse for the last time, she has married again. This time it is to a man described as "quite elderly, with greying hair...[who] politely clasped his hands together, exchanging greetings, and quietly went back to his Bible study" (86). In view of her new husband's extreme sobriety, Gaenametse's quest - for sexual freedom and for a life where public morality will not constrain personal knowledge and desire - does not seem to be realized. The story ends by suggesting her continued frustration. Gaenametse's claim to the narrator, that she is her husband's 'mosadi-rra', his special one, expresses her continued longing, rather than contentment.

Gaenametse's simple quest for personal happiness is constantly thwarted by the codes of a dominant world. "Jacob: the Story of a Faith-Healing Priest", describes a contrasting resolution to a women's quest for independent sexuality. Johanna in "Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest" is condemned in a similar way to Gaenametse and Life. Her sexuality is policed by a community who "spent some time discussing her misdeeds with rising wrath, flinging around such terms as harlot and loose woman who took her sin slightly" (30). But Johanna and her numerous children are welcomed in the home of Jacob, a priest who refuses the narrow morality both of orthodox Christianity and the independent church movement. Jacob's religion, which countenances his tolerance towards Johanna and her children, is a direct contrast to the exclusive and dogmatic Christianity that denies Gathabege's right to choose in "Heaven Is Not Closed". Joanna's

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freedom is gained through the intervention of a heroic male character. Yet the pattern is not simply the formulaic message that male tenderness completes a woman's questing. It provocatively suggests that a socially subjugated character like Johanna cannot realize her desires in a highly repressive society without the support of those who have powerful positions in it.

Head's stories show how bodily signification can break the metaphoric silences associated with muted, excluded or socially-marginalized speech and writing. Christopher Miller's discussion of women's writing explores this rhetorical intervention. He discusses the connected practices of "coming to voice", silencing, exclusion and writing in relation to African women's writing as it unsettles both male-centred and western-centric canons (1990:247-55). Focusing on the fixation with "silence" to define women's marginalized writing, he claims that the recurrence of this term,[9] assumes a universalistic opposition between silence and writing. In this way, according to Miller, the oppositional force in certain women's writing is problematically universalized. His interrogation of the culturally-coded meanings of "silence" and "communication" sheds light on the way Head confronts broader possibilities for communicative acts and signifying practices. The metaphors of "speech" that are almost obsessively invoked in discussions about writing assume that communication is intrinsically oral, aural or verbal.

Indirectly, Miller helps to develop Lionnet's claims about the universal meaningfulness of bodily signification. Both suggest that there are a variety of forms for representing voices beyond the frameworks of language and writing as they are conventionally understood. Verbal or textual silence may coexist with other forms of communication, other expressions of knowledge. It may, in fact be a "powerful antidote to the Western view of silence as death" (Miller, 1990:266). The opposition that Miller perceives between Western and African norms does not really apply to Head here. But the idea of opposing Western norms of communication does convey Head's concern with innate and socially transcendent forms of consciousness. Turning to Hinduism, Head often suggests that superior consciousness flows from within and is *impeded* by the acquisition of language and cultural knowledge. Considering her indebtedness to Hindu philosophy, her perception of silence may not necessarily mean exclusion, powerlessness or ignorance, but may configure forms of spiritual enlightenment that do not rely on social channels of communication. Head's turning to bodily signification from her earliest work

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suggests not only that she felt she could exploit bodily signification as a graphic illustration of suffering and resistance. It also suggests an interest in representing extraordinary forms of knowledge and communication.

### "Essential Gestures"[10]

While a number of Head's stories deal minutely with patriarchal hegemony in relation to the circuitous resistances of women, others appear to transcend quotidian and contextually-specific circumstances. Explicitly connected to her research for *Serowe*, the stories often cohere as part of her own compelling textual home. Like many of Head's other texts, the stories trace the author's struggle with various textual forms, and highlight her engagement with the codes and processes that allow narrative to convey meaning. Challenging the conventions of realism or any distinct form, the stories often reveal the ways in which Head idiosyncratically moulded familiar signs. Processes of thematization, emplotment and characterization are therefore often more significant than any straightforward anchoring of signifiers. As important as the scrutiny of relationships and women characters' subjectivities in the collection, then, are the formal features of the stories or what Lionnet refers to as the "performative powers of narrative" (1993:147). Head's enthusiastic exploration of different myths, archetypes and storytelling modes seems to form the groundwork for her venture into narrativizing history in *A Bewitched Crossroad.*

One indication of the stories' performativity is their recourse to orality. Nigel Thomas (1990) observes that Head makes considerable use of features like extensive interpretation and the reduction of action to a few central ideas. But the oral origins of the material she reworked, the oral modes suggested by her informants and the rural context which she made her home often offered the potential for emphatically self-defining narration. They also formed the mythological apparatus for representing universal moral messages or archetypal motifs. Far from adopting the conventional role of the oral narrator as guardian of communal values, Head exploited orality in an entirely subjective way. Certain stories appear to explore the possibilities offered by oral forms in primarily technical terms. They do not seem to offer distinct moral meanings or themes. For

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[9] He refers to various formulations, especially in the titles of feminist books and articles, that insistently stress the destructiveness of silence (1990:250).

[10] Nadine Gordimer, as Lionnet points out, uses this term in a way that is very reminiscent of Head's storytelling (Lionnet, 1993:147).

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example, an oblique and inconclusive didacticism is illustrated in "Snapshots of a Wedding", which deals with the educated, conceited and calculating character of Neo, whose name appears to highlight her affectations. The story often provides cameos of her selfishness and cunning. Neo is defined as "a new kind of girl with false postures and acquired, grand-madame ways" (78). She is contrasted with Kegoletile, pregnant by Neo's future husband and "always smiling and happy; immediately and always her own natural self" (78). "Snapshots" therefore presents the force of tradition as natural and morally superior, and westernity as affected and inauthentic.

But this pattern is unsettled as the story progresses. At the end, Neo is subjected to an older in-law's instruction to "'Be a good wife! Be a good wife!'" (80). This social injunction disturbingly suggests the policing of characters like Life or Gaenametse. The framing of Neo's imperfections is also puzzling in view of Head's critiques of women's entrapment in marriages elsewhere, and in view of her cautions against romanticizing traditionalism. Dorothy Driver explains the ambivalence in this story by claiming that "the final command...given by the aunt, is placed in the context of ritual and habitual gesture which form so important a part of Head's presented world" (1993b:161). Driver's conclusion can be extended to Head's fascination with the ritualizing effects of storytelling practices. The author seems intrigued by the ways in which fragments from interviews, stories told to her, or events that she observed, can be endlessly reworked into narratives. Irrespective of their logic or political meanings, these narratives transform random "snapshots" into a coherent and compelling textual whole. In his discussion of the synthesizing role of narrative, Paul Riceour draws attention to the way that "Emplotment ...engenders a mixed intelligibility between what has been called the point, theme or thought of a story, and the intuitive presentation of circumstances, characters, episodes and changes of fortune that make up the denouement" (1984:68). Ricoeur's discussion of imaginative innovation through emplotment suggestively explains Head's preoccupation with ingenious forms of storytelling. Exploring narrative sequences that may confuse refererntial meaning, she often immerses herself in the productive act of synthesizing the elements of her story. The indulgent experimentation here differs from the battles with culturally-dominant plots in novels like *The Cardinals* and *Maru*. In these earlier works, the exploration of narrative techniques seems to be burdened by the fact that her subject-matter severely limits the models she is able to discover.

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The experimental patterns of "Snapshots of a Wedding" are continued in "The Village Saint". Chetin suggests that this story is an "allegory about the tension between subjective responses and objective reflections and their interrelationship with the powerful weapon of language" (1989:123). This reading hints at the extent to which the story, like many of the others, registers the tremendous flexibility and potential of storytelling strategies. It starts off with a concise framing moral, "People were never fooled by facades" (13) and goes on to develop a circuitous account of a self-righteous old woman and her son. The story appears to highlight Mma-Mompati's subtle manipulation of her son and her smug piety. When her son, Mompati marries, she persecutes his wife. Mompati, ultimately realizing his mother's bullying, refuses to submit to her demand for his salary and defies her. Until this point, the story appears to present a coherent message illustrating its opening moral statement in relation to the hypocritical Mma-Mabele as self-styled "village saint". It goes on, however, to describe Mompati's domination by his wife and *her* implied hypocrisy. His final words in the story are an admission to his friend that ""I never do anything without first consulting my wife"" (18). We could speculate that an original story - reworked by Head - conveyed a patriarchal myth about women's propensity to nag. It is possible that Head was intrigued by its codes and preserved in her own narrative much of its original meaning and structure, but also inconclusively traced its writerly elements. It is revealing that the published story, deviating from the sequential and logical arrangement of events in a story like "The Collector of Treasures", has a meandering structure which is distinctively oral. This structure is similar to that of "Jacob". Both stories have drifting "linear" plots where events are accumulated in a contingent and paratactical way. They differ markedly from the "tentacular" plots of written stories. For example, in "Life", "The Special One" and "The Collector of Treasures", events tightly cohere within the panoramic view that the narrator offers the reader.

Some of the stylistic aspects of orality that Head returns to are the use of succinct codas; a linear repetition of ideas for cumulative effect; the frequent dramatic use of quoted speech and dialogue and features of speech in narration. In "The Village Saint", narration is marked by performative signals like "Oh, the story was a long one (13) and "Oh, the Devil had taken Rra-Mompati's soul for good, people said" (15). A striking example of speech features in narration is illustrated in "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration": "Now, during his lifetime Monemapee had three wives. Of these marriages he had four sons...It was about the fifth son, Makobi, that the dispute arose. There was a secret there...She was young and beautiful and Sebembele, the senior son,

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fell in love with her - but in secret" (2). In "Heaven is Not Closed" Head dramatizes the figure of the story-teller, so that her created character ends up as the primary narrator of the story's action. A related stylistic feature of the story is its emphasis on communication and audience participation. By using a character to tell a story to represented listeners, Head dramatizes the narrative event as a direct encounter between audience and narrator, an encounter that echoes her own interest in receptive audiences. It is noteworthy that this aspect of orality is guaranteed in the letter, where the writer can establish direct contact with and responses from her addressee. I showed in Chapter Two how important this contact was in Head's letter-writing. Like letter-writing, oral performance offered opportunities for establishing direct communication between the storyteller and an audience.

Head's oral conventions allow her to develop a vision that is both subjective and universal. This vision also results from the use of mythical structures, legendary forms, and archetypal themes and figures. In some stories, Head favours the succint and unified message of the conventional oral legend. In "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration",[11] she provides what she describes as an "entirely romanticized and fictionalized version of the history of the Botalaote tribe" (6). Describing the sources of the story to Alice Walker, she wrote that she had originally intended to include the story in *Serowe,* but because her informant gave her six different versions, "I thought I'd give my own romantic version of the history" (CKMM76BHP9). Focusing on the heroism of Sebembele, who defies traditional authority when he marries his dead father's wife and leaves the tribe, the story also configures abiding thematic concerns. Head affirms their flight from the kingdom of Monemapee and eventual creation of the Botalaote tribe that finds shelter among the Bamangwato. Thus the aetiological story returns to the themes of migration in *Serowe.* It also traces migration to certain groups' persecution, and elevates their quest for paradisal homelands. Thomas observes that many versions of the original tale highlight the disruptive role of women in fragmenting the tribe, a view confirmed in Head's letter to Walker. She cites the informant for her story as having said '"We lost our place of birth over a woman"' (CKMM76BHP9). The original tale therefore configures a patriarchal lapserian myth similar to the biblical story of Eve. Whatever meanings were conveyed in the original tale, it is clear that Head's version projects her own desires and

[11] For another discussion of this story, see Chapter Three.

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moral ideals. She turns to another biblical story, the story of Exodus, and of a paradise regained, to discover new resonances for "old" signifiers.

Like "The Deep River", Jacob in "Jacob: the story of a Faith-Healing Priest" obviously echoes a powerful biblical story which is metamorphosed in a variety of non-Christian contexts. Like the biblical Job, remorselessly tested by a god to whom he remains faithful, Jacob undergoes enormous trials and endures undeserved misfortune. Losing his privilege and wealth first when his uncle cheats him out of his inheritance and later when he is robbed, he follows a call to renounce materialistic pursuits and to dedicate himself to spiritual growth. He rejects the dogmatism of Christianity as well as the mercenary faith-healing cults of priests like the wealthy Prophet Lebojang. Jacob, however, receives the reward of communal happiness, while Lebogang receives a death sentence after killing children in his power-hungry rituals. The story makes a clearly didactic point about the rewards of a faith uncontaminated by material ambition and greed, and the retribution that attends avarice and selfish ambition. In its obvious invocation of a biblical story, it also reveals the moral sources to which Head turned to anchor an enduring and universal vision of moral and social good.

Although certain stories that convey moral ideals echo the lofty motifs and archetypal figures of stories that have become universal, some of them are more quotidian and ordinary. These take the form of moral allegories, in which succinct messages are encoded in particular events. "Looking for a Rain God" uses the image of the innocence of children in "Jacob" and describes the extreme anguish of a family. Driven to desperation at the prospect of a severe drought, members of the family kill the youngest children to sacrifice to a rain god. Metaphorically, it is a story about the sacrifice of the helpless and disempowered by those in positions of relative power. "Looking for a Rain God" also offers a warning against obsessive and blind faith. While it captures the anguish of the adults threatened by catastrophic drought, it also judges their terrifying submission to a collective irrationality. Group faith in a traditional creed is thus equated with a destructive conformity to collective behaviour, a conformity that Head repeatedly condemns elsewhere.

Stylistically very similar to "Looking for a Rain God", "Kgotla" is anchored in a similar cultural context, yet offers a message about traditionalism that is very different from the message conveyed in "Looking for a Rain God". The story deals with the long-suffering and supportive Rose who marries a blind man. His literal sightlessness connotes a profound male arrogance. His possessive attitude towards his wife leads him to accuse her of infidelity and to abandon her for another woman. The story emphasizes Rose's

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dignity and strength. Summoned to the traditional public court, the kgotla, she promises to extricate her undeserving spouse from the financial tangle caused by his new relationship. In an autobiographical slant in the story, Rose is described as an outsider. The story's conclusion, while providing a moral reminiscent of the traditional story-teller's, has strongly personal repercussions for Head's own desire for integration in her adopted home: "The forefathers were right when they said that the finest things often came from far-off places" (68). It is especially significant that Rose, accused by her husband of promiscuity, is exonerated and accepted through the community's traditional court. The story describes the virtues of traditional laws in which disputes are democratically resolved and the rights of all are guaranteed. It is also evidence of Head's creation of a vision of moral order, communal harmony and democratic egalitarianism, an idyllic state that may not convey her perception of actual practices. The artifice embedded in this story is evident in its diametrical difference from Head's insights into women's persecution and limited legal recourse in stories like "Life" and "The Collector of Treasures".

Oral modes and material suggested by her environment and Serowe residents provide Head with an abundant reserve of symbols and plots for different configurations of social and personal ideals, as well as for interrogating circumstances that constrain these. Her collection illustrates an essential gesture of belonging as she reaches out towards an alien space and reinvents it from the perspective of her imaginative needs and ethical convictions. The collection consequently mirrors the triumph that *Serowe* negotiates in relation to what Head has defined as "nothing" (1991:46). Re-writing the minimal resources offered by the small village, Head creates textual worlds that firmly articulate her complex philosophical, autobiographical and moral concerns. Her comments from her preface to "Witchcraft" therefore define her strategy vividly: The least I can say for myself is that I forcefully created for myself, under extremely hostile conditions, my ideal life. I took an obscure and almost unknown village in the Southern African bush and made it my own hallowed ground. Here in the steadiness and peace of my own world, I could dream dreams a little ahead of the somewhat vicious clamour of revolution and the horrible stench of evil social systems" (1990:28).

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# CHAPTER EIGHT
# PASTS, PRESENTS AND UTOPIA: *A BEWITCHED CROSSROAD*

> I live in a village where "to sit and think" is the only pastime the men have. This peaceful pattern of life was generally applicable to the whole of southern Africa, in past times. I cannot understand how you came upon this. Nothing has been accurately recorded about southern Africa; people do not have so much there for survival (in a spiritual sense) and that is why I am so attached to this small extract from your book. I thought I would write to you and express my appreciation. (Head in a letter to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, CKMM353BHP1)

Craig Mackenzie argues that Head's phase of "interiority culminates in the cathartic *A Question of Power*", while *A Bewitched Crossroad* "involves a surmounting of problems of isolation and alienation that characterised her earlier phase and a new commitment to Botswana, and particularly the people of Serowe" (1989: 4). In this chapter, however, I show that the impulses of Head's fiction are continued in historical storytelling that concentrates on southern Africa during the nineteenth century. *A Bewitched Crossroad* was completed over a ten-year period,[1] yet much of the novel grew out of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind.* Although Head began the commissioned village history with some reservation, she was to develop a range of imaginative techniques for presenting earlier concerns metaphorically. In addition to the obvious storytelling that led to *The Collector of Treasures*, social history and ethnographic research prompted a burgeoning interest in the imaginative possibilities of historical narrative. Head effusively described her historical research in letters to acquaintances, to fans, to the historians with whom she collaborated and in short essays.[2] The intense and exultant creativity occurred at a time of continued despair about her circumstances in Serowe and in Botswana. Rather than leading directly to a newfound sense of social identification, therefore, the "discovery" of her country of exile was largely figurative.

*A Bewitched Crossroad* is comparable with *Maru* in the way it conjures up a legacy of cultural fictions. Like stories about the San, nineteenth century southern Africa becomes a series of fictions that textualize the subjective and cultural needs of interpreters. By exploring these fictions we can consider how Head's novel reverberates as a cultural text. As Paul Ricoeur observes, all societies participate in social imaginaries, the collection of stories that motivate certain perceptions or actions, and that constitute its members' reality. "Telling a story" writes Ricoeur, "is the most permanent act. In telling their own stories, cultures create themselves" (1991:169). In *A Bewitched Crossroad*,

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[1] See Eilersen (1995:260).
[2] Head's "What Does the Botswana Novel Say" (KKMM457BHP26) and "Some notes on the value of collecting oral history from local people and student papers" (KKMM457BHP53) are especially revealing here.

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Head writes within a particularly impassioned stratum of the social imaginary. A period whose meanings have been vigorously contested, the nineteenth century has become the present's battleground. In the same way that the San have been continuously constructed, so has the nineteenth century been "discovered", "excavated", and constantly recreated. The period holds a special fascination because of its association with pivotal and enduring social processes. The nineteenth century saw the introduction of modern nation-states and colonial boundaries, the fixing of ethnic and linguistic categories and the systematic intervention of colonialist political, economic and cultural systems. At the same time that it has signified major transformation, however, it has been construed as a "blank space". The region's oral culture meant that a written tradition of history relied mainly on the literate culture introduced with colonialism. The remoteness and voicelessness of the nineteenth century has therefore provided enormous scope for reconstruction and the definition of a historicizing present. Interpreters have stabilized knowledge and languages that were oral and fluid, redrawn and fixed geographical and social boundaries and encoded the past in a symbolic order largely appropriate to the present. "Voiceless" and "blank", the past is also a "crossroad", the meeting point of past and present, interpretation and its object.

As Cherry Clayton (1988) and Huma Ibrahim (1996) suggest, much of the force of Head's novel derives from its "writing back" to existing historical accounts. Dealing with the unusual way in which Head defines the "historical novel", Clayton writes that the text "constitutes a decisive modern historical judgement of colonial history" (1988:63), and distinguishes it from historical romance, where history is dramatized through a primary focus on characterization and overtly fictionalized events. Head creates a text in which explicit fictionalizing coexists with the structures and conventions of historical storytelling. How she perceived her intervention into historical writing is only partly relevant to the cultural resonance of her text. As her research for *Serowe* indicates, Head *did* consciously align herself with particular traditions, emphatically condemning those that she found oppressive. The conscious affiliations and disavowals are also evident in *A Bewitched Crossroad.* Yet the powerful revisionism of her novel rests not so much on the way she responds to specific interpretations, as on the way in which it disruptively echoes within a social imaginary.

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**History, narrativization and nineteenth-century southern Africa**

In a comprehensive study of historical storytelling, Hayden White (1995) explores the range of narrativizing devices in history from the nineteenth-century to the present. His survey deals both with the recreation of historical subjects and with the reconstructive processes of textual and narrative strategies. The wide variety of narrative processes he identifies is evident in the many historical writings about nineteenth-century southern Africa. A written historical tradition commences with British colonial and Afrikaner nationalist history. These mutually reinforcing approaches were contested by Africanist and liberal writings. In these oppositions to colonialism, the agency of indigenous actors and events was stressed at the same time that writers drew attention the destructive impact of colonialism. Various revisionisms followed this broadly anti-colonial response. These included the austere structuralism of Marxist accounts, historical materialism that focused on early slave-trading, and forms of "history from below".

Colonial models confront nineteenth-century southern Africa through familiar colonial binaries: the barbarism, stasis and ignorance of Africa are opposed to civilization, progress and enlightenment. One of the earliest codifications of these binaries is G M Theal's eleven-volume *History of South Africa* (1904). A painstaking documentation of events, his study focuses on the theme of "'whether civilization or barbarism was to prevail'" (Theal, quoted in Saunders, 1988:27). With Theal, the colonial presence establishes ascendancy through a classificatory and selective system of "'facts that can be proved...that cannot be misinterpreted'" (quoted in Saunders, 1988:18). Theal's *History* actively constructs the superior colonial subject. By referring to the "law that impels Europeans to struggle for knowledge and power" (1964, vol 10: 1), he identifies the autobiographical thrust of his knowledge production. The scope he provides for rationalizing domination is evident in the range of Afrikaner-centred accounts that directly and indirectly draw on his work. Although Theal initially endorsed British colonialism, much of his writing affirmed the world-view of an Afrikaner underclass. Ken Smith describes this in the following way :"He was the first English historian to comprehend the striving and struggles of the republican Afrikaners, and as such they welcomed his work...By giving the Great Trek a prominent place in his 11-volume *History of South Africa*, for the first time the Great Trek was placed against the broad background of the history of South Africa" (1988:37). Theal's methods and subjects were therefore extended by the Afrikaans historians who consolidated Nationalist Party rule from 1948, and especially by the prolific F A van Jaarsveld. Drawing heavily on Theal's research and arguments, van Jaarsveld

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denies the physical existence of an indigenous population and allows the Voortrekkers to confront "empty land...unpopulated territory" (1975:54).

The message of triumphal white-settler agency is anchored in particular narrative devices. The emphasis has been on epic grandeur and a "specifically dramatistic perspective on historical events" (White, 1995:60). Van Jaarsveld and other Afrikaner-centric history turned victoriously to epic heroes venturing beyond the British colony to discover new homes in the hinterland, to icons of courageous Afrikaner men and persevering frontierswomen. In the symbolic feminization of foreign landscapes, the white male hero was equated with a conquering masculine sexuality, while the surrounding environment passively yielded to colonial penetration. The icons and epic stories of this storytelling feature prominently in the hegemonic culture introduced with apartheid. During the period of Nationalist Party rule, both black and white schoolchildren were taught from history textbooks dominated by images of Voortrekker wagons, Afrikaner pioneers or the Great Trek, and that celebrated myths of frontiers and embattled Afrikaner heroes. The singular message was that southern African history began with the arrival and civilizing mission of white people. Evidence, recorded in later studies, of autonomous African processes was seen simply as testimony of native chaos and primordial tribalism. White settlers, it was believed, initiated history by introducing large-scale and civil society, implementing social laws and structures, and establishing the society that would guarantee order and human progress. The African presence was registered in two peripheral ways. Either blacks became ancillaries in the white march towards progress (as servants, slaves or abject political allies) or they were defined as the barbarous enemy. Traditional South African history textbooks abound with terrifying images of Shaka, symbol of a savage precolonial world, of degenerate and slothful natives, or of physically grotesque racial stereotypes linked especially to the Khoisan. These negative images played a central role in affirming everything that white South Africa stood for: order, civilization, progress, enlightenment, racial and cultural superiority. Pre-colonial African people and society were everything that whiteness was not.

Afrikaner-centric and colonial history was challenged from the mid-1900s by historians who developed an African-centred tradition. This tradition grew out of a growing liberal political movement after 1948, and contested racist history as part of a broader protest against apartheid. A seminal text in this tradition was the *Oxford History of South Africa*, which appeared in two volumes between 1969 and 1971. Liberal historians like Monica and Francis Wilson, Leonard Thompson, Leo Kuper and Mary Benson focused on

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African agency and indigenous historical processes. White settler activity was described not as the start of civilization in the region, but as marking the onset of Africans' oppression and cultural destruction. An especially polemical and controversial challenge to colonial narratives came in the form of the militantly Africanist history of J D Omer-cooper. In his *The Zulu Aftermath: A Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Bantu Africa* (1966), he demonstrates that southern Africa - prior to the arrival of the colonizers - was not a stagnant space devoid of subjectivity and innovation. Focusing on the expansion of the Zulu kingdom and its repercussions, he turns to life beyond the colonial frontier, and grants centre stage to African processes in the hinterland. The mass migration, militarization and general structural evolution of southern African polities are seen largely in terms of autonomous nation-building and the wars and upheaval of "mfecane". A term that conveys the turmoil of the period, "mfecane" also captures the idea of indigenous historical dynamics. Omer-Cooper, extolling the social changes in the 1900s, therefore writes: "when external influences were to assume dramatically increased importance for the development of Africa, internal forces... were to bring about far-reaching changes...These great movements were independent of European influence in origin" (1966: 2).

Importantly, Omer-Cooper's focus is the centralized military state, the large-scale aggregation of small "tribes" as major "tribes" like the Tswana, or Swazi, but epitomized by the Ndebele or Zulu. These are ruled by enterprising leaders who embark either on massive colonizing campaigns or consolidative nation-building. Omer-Cooper vindicates demonized figures like Shaka by emphasizing an ambitious process driven by African heroes. Implicitly, his model of nation-building and visionary leadership offers archetypes for African nationalism during the sixties. The struggles against colonialism during the sixties would find inspiration in stories celebrating the combative heroism of the past. David Cohen also remarks on the foothold that Omer-Cooper, and more generally, the mfecane thesis gained in historiography: "Mfecane, for years, held currency among historians as an appropriate, serviceable structure for representing the complex migrations of peoples across southern Africa in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, set in motion, it was averred, by the rise and expansion of the Zulu kingdom" (1994: 71). Yet Omer-Cooper's engagement with colonialism is not only antagonistic. He clearly locates his past in a model of militarization, power-consolidation and state-building that is emphatically masculine and imperialist. His narrative style, emphasis on nation-builders and preoccupation with military processes all elevate the colonial paradigm and a

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seemingly ineluctable law of conquest, expansionism and state formation. Paradoxically, his revisionism repeats patterns of colonial and Afrikaner-centric myth-making and the basic narratives of imperial enterprise. While it challenges the authority of white or metropolitan authority, it constantly lauds colonizing acts. It is noteworthy that his interpretation of the period before mfecane echoes colonial accounts of native "prehistory". Startlingly reminiscent of colonial writings, this betrays a compulsion to create a nationalist counterpart to colonialist representation, an African presence that is on a par with the metropolitan colonizer:

> The reorganization of society on military lines was accompanied by a new ethos. The...naive curiosity which meant that the visitor to a Bantu village was immediately surrounded by a mob ...staring... openly begging for gifts, was replaced by a more reserved attitude. .. pride ...a sense of discipline, order and cleanliness...at once attracted the attention of European travellers. (1966: 37)

While Afrikaner-centric and Africanist histories have been characterized by overt-myth-making, grand epic and alluring stories of triumphant heroes, South African history underwent a radical stylistic and ideological transformation with Marxist history. Purporting to make a total break with the "conventional wisdom" of colonial and Africanist persepectives, Marxists condemned all storytelling in history as ideological. They therefore avoided political patterns (treated as features of the "superstructure") and anchored the state-building extolled by Omer-Cooper in a perception of determinate modes of production. By dealing with the economic processes of class struggle, they claimed to evade "imaginary" storytelling and the fixation with exceptional actors and events. Marxists adapted terms that explain capitalism to their explanations of nineteenth-century "pre-capitalism". They therefore showed how relations of production, class exploitation and patterns of distribution can be analyzed in pre-capitalist formations in much the same way that they can be examined in capitalist ones. The emergence of the centralized system, the "chiefdom", "polity" or "kingdom" signals the emergence of complex exploitative relations and nascent "classes". Structural developments are explained as groups' attempts to extend control in the ultimate pursuit of surplus appropriation. This approach provides a convenient foundation for examining the penetration of capitalism as "articulation". "Articulating" modes of production ostensibly register how precolonial societies interact with settler-colonial ones. Yet the processes described through this term capture the determinacy of colonialism and capitalism. While the purported aim has been to explore the particular dynamics of pre-capitalist southern African societies, the

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emphasis has been on how proto-capitalist relations of production have always driven social and political processes in the region.

Two implications of the Marxist frame need emphasizing. One is the continued concern with narrativization. On one hand, Marxist history of the nineteenth century - compared with the flagrant storytelling of other traditions - was always succinct and minimalist. The favoured mode was the essay or article, rather than the book-length study. In fact the disciplines of politics, economics and anthropology were preferred to history, which was seen to lapse too easily into myth-making. On the other hand, Marxists adhered not only to a distinct plot, but also to a heroic narrative. Central to their emplotment of events was the law of surplus accumulation, a law around which all human action was seen to revolve. In their introduction to the influential Marxist collection of essays, *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa*, Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore write: "Much, although not all, of southern Africa's ninteenth-century history until the discovery of minerals, is the story of how increasingly powerful African and colonial state systems incorporated their weaker neighbours into their social formations and appropriated their surplus, and of how in time the white and black groups came into conflict with one another, to the ultimate victory of the colonial states" (1980:6). While Marxist history claimed to dislodge the cult of heroism and the ideology of storytelling, it granted a focal place to the heroic narrative of capitalism. The social processes of the past were framed by the teleological story of the origins and development of the capitalist mode of production. This leads to a second implication. While Marxist history appears to disavow colonial domination, it retains a preoccupation with metropolitan agency. By transposing processes that explain a phase in western capitalism onto a different society and ignoring the possibility of its distinctive dynamics, Marxists universalize the laws of the metropolis, and entrench the notion that the third world can be straightforwardly "read" according to the interpretive codes of the metropolis. Nineteenth-century southern Africa becomes a proving ground for the metropolitan production of knowledge, "present" only as it demonstrates the authority of a particular interpretation.

An explicit transfer of metropolitan laws occurs in a historical materialist model that does not quite fit into the influential structuralist school. This historical perspective was developed by Julian Cobbing's provocative debunking of the mfecane model. Cobbing generated a heated debate about Zulu expansionism between the 1800s and 1900s by

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condemning Omer-Cooper's narratives as fictions that ignored important historical facts.[3] He departs from Marxists' concern with the self-sustaining economic laws of African polities, and sees evolving African societies as products of the slave trade. In the face of the conventional belief that only northern Africa was affected by the slave trade, Cobbing argues that slave trading profoundly affected the southern regions of the continent from the late eighteenth century. The small-scale societies typical of the area gradually expanded in order to defend themselves against Portuguese and British traders. For Cobbing, the root of state formation and mass migration in the 1800s is not an internally-driven mfecane, but the demands for and illegal capture of slaves by the British and the Portuguese.[4] From Cobbing's perspective, therefore, an indigenous population becomes active only by reacting to colonial prompting, with a southern African "margin" being simply appended to an account of the progress of the metropolitan centre. Beyond the oppositional surface exposure of exploitative colonial practice, Cobbing resituates the colonized in a position of peripheral passivity.

Many have contested Cobbing's themes.[5] While reluctant to underplay his evidence of long-term imperial interests in the region, they have questioned his denial of African agency. Less critical attention has been devoted to the stylistic and formal aspects of his representation. Yet these strikingly reveal the discursive underpinnings of his thesis. First, it is striking how Cobbing's project reflects a will to knowledge which is obvious in its titling as "Jettisoning the Mfecane" (1989) and "Overturning 'The Mfecane'" (1991). Here he explicitly defines his basic aim as a contest with particular knowledges. In openly locating this as the object of his interpretation, he testifies to both of the foundations of Michel Foucault's idea of the will to knowledge: the fact that the non-neutrality of historical consciousness derives not merely from its "not being true", but from the extent to which its forms belie all pretension to neutrality. It is noteworthy that his study is characterized by the passion of open feuding which actively undercuts the "return to history" (1989:6) he presents a case for. Cobbing argues for the conventions of scientific consciousness consistently betrayed by his own language: "The mfecane ... breaks down in every one of its sectors... The whole is rotten; and so is each of the parts... There is no half-way house. The thing is unreformable, unadjustable, unrepairable" (1989:14). His sparring with

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[3] David Cohen (1994:70-76) provides a detailed discussion of this.
[4] The influential impact of Cobbing's intervention is evident in T.R.H Davenports 1991 edition of *South Africa: A Modern History*. In his preface to this fourth edition, Davenport writes that it has become untenable to deal with the nineteenth-century under the rubric of "mfecane" and draws heavily on Cobbings' view that what is conventionally known as the pre-colonial past is ultimately shaped by the present.

mfecane theorists, relentless working on data and determined revival of fictions that bolster his own are explicitly driven by what Michel Foucault describes as the "rancorous" will which "fears nothing but its own extinction"(quoted in Sheridan, 1981:119).

Traditions of South African history reveal different narrativizing processes at the same time that they reclaim abiding assumptions. Storytelling about individuals and specific events became central to colonialist and Afrikaner perspectives, while Marxists dwell on the ascendant stories of "impersonal" economic forces. Liberal and Africanist history creates epic heroes and compelling narratives that dislodge those buttressing colonial conquest. Yet the epic forces and synthesizing plots in each view consistently dramatize the imaginative needs of "present" orientations. This leads to a situation in which "the subject - in the form of historical consciousness ...appropriate[s], brings back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find[s] in them what might be called his abode" (Foucault,1972:144). More importantly, these "abodes" reveal what Riceour has referred to as integrative and reproductive functions (1991:308-318). By reconfiguring plots of imperial ascendancy or projecting masculine views of the advance of history, "changing pasts" reproduce enduring social identities and relationships. Ricoeur uses the term "ideology" to describe collective storytelling in which revisionisms reinforce their authority by reverting to entrenched fictions of power. The conservative operation of ideology is usually associated with manipulative elites or explicitly repressive fictions. But it aptly defines the fixed plots, themes and interests, mediated through historicizing, that ritualize anterior social worlds and patterns of authority. Questioning the epistemological bases of writings about the southern African past, David Cohen draws attention to the way that old patterns are confirmed in ostensibly new positions: "How does the debate reproduce older lines of discussion in new language? And how do adversaries achieve, through conflict, agreements over the language and terms of debate, a common question or reduced set of questions" (1994: 74).

While Head was familiar with certain trends in the canon described, she did not have a specialist interest in historiography, and was probably unaware of the so-called "mfecane debate", which surfaced shortly after her historical novel was published. She was probably also unacquainted with the Marxist writings that, from the late seventies, claimed to question the mythologizing of southern African history. In particular, she did not

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[5] See David Cohen (1994: 70-75).

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have an academic or theoretical knowledge of recent traditions of "history from below" or "women's history". These latter orientations disavow the claims to authority or objectivity evident both in early racist history and in many "revisionisms". Jim Sharpe explains how "history from below" responds to a long tradition of varied yet curiously homogenous historicizing:

> Traditionally, history has been regarded from classical times onwards, as an account of the doings of the great. Interest in broader social and economic history developed in the nineteenth century, but the main subject-matter of history remained the unfolding of elite politics. There were, of course, a number of individuals who felt unhappy with this situation, and as early as 1936 Bertolt Brecht...offered what is probably the most direct statement of the need for an alternative perspective to what might be termed 'top person's history'. (1994:25)

Identifying the emergence of a scholarly tradition of "history from below" in the 1980s, Sharpe writes: "This perspective has had an immediate appeal to those historians anxious to broaden the boundaries of their discipline, to open up new areas of research, and, above all, to explore the social experiences of those men and women whose existence is so often ignored, taken for granted or mentioned in passing in mainstream history" (1994:25). As he goes on to suggest, many interventions into traditional history originate in storytelling and oral practices that are not "professional" or conventionally known as "historiography'. The tradition that Sharpe identifies has also developed in South Africa, especially in seminal work on oral history and the interdisciplinary research of critics like Isabel Hofmeyr (1995). Yet much of this work is explicitly academic. Head's historical writing, developing outside an academic mainstream, often echoes the practice of "history from below" in its emphasis on the subjectivity of represented figures and the writer's personal locations.

As *Serowe* and *The Collector of Treasures* indicate, she also registers a gendered approach to "history from below". Often sidelining male worlds of heroic action, Head highlights the "cadences of rural women's lives in a manner that challenges, with unprecedented force, many of the conventional silences in South African literature" (Nixon, 1994:121). Cherry Clayton suggests that a form of "herstory" is configured throughout *A Bewitched Crossroad.* For Clayton, Head's images, stories and characters celebrate cultural principles and a moral ethos that contest masculinity, even though she often focuses on male heroes. Clayton writes: "[Head's] gesture is that of the woman writer claiming her writer's territory" (1988:56), and concludes: "Her unique position as a black woman historian in Southern Africa leads her to overturn a dominant settler mythology and to correct the harshness of the frontier spirit in favour of what she calls in *The Collector of Treasures*, a 'compromise of tenderness'" (1988:65).

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Yet the themes, self-reflexivity and bottom-up perspectives that suggest "history from below and women's history in *A Bewitched Crossroad* are not systematic. Like *Serowe*, *A Bewitched Crossroad* is fissured in term of its ideology, its perception of what history constitutes and its array of philosophical influences. Most importantly, by foregrounding storytelling it evades the procedures of scholarly production and functions instead as a flagrantly imaginative casting of Head's creative and subjective views. Mobilizing the mythical apparatuses and insights of her previous fictions, Head's last novel is a joyous condensation of her vision. I shall also show how the novel destabilizes dominant currents in the ensemble of stories forming a crucial layer of the social imaginary. Writing productively, rather than reproductively, Head unsettles the narratives and images that configure recurring and familiar relationships.

### *A Bewitched Crossroad*

> I am trying to gather several threads together to create a feeling of continuity in my work...So this final work I am on will have the effect of rounding off my Southern African experience. I think I will then let it fall asleep in my mind.(Head quoted in Mackenzie, 1989:9)

Head drew extensively on Omer-Cooper's *Zulu Aftermath* in *A Bewitched Crossroad.* As she does in *Serowe*, she also acknowledges the Afro-centric interpretations of Monica Wilson and Neil Parsons. But she was acutely sensitive to the philosophical, political and figurative implications of writings on the nineteenth century. Her own interpretation covertly writes against a nationalist Afro-centric thesis and makes subversive excursions into historiographical practice in general and writings on southern Africa in particular. It also makes an intriguing intervention into fictional practices. Although it has become difficult to speak of the conventions of the typical historical novel,[6] Head's text idiosyncratically fuses the verifying conventions of history (extensive primary research, detailed references, long descriptions of political events, structures and figures) with overt fictionalizing about imagined characters and conflicts. Huma Ibrahim helps to explore the generic complexities of *A Bewitched Crossroad* by posing the following questions: "Where does this need, this longing for rewriting, for envisioning come from...Why does Head need to rewrite, or...envision history" (1996:201). By describing postcolonial responses to dominant fictions not simply as polemical refutations, but as "envisioning", Ibrahim stresses the psychic and imaginative resonances of textual

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resistance. As Kumkum Sangari shows, the figurative dimensions of protest often have profound political repercussions. Dealing with Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie, she draws attention to "figurative discourse", in which storytelling features both as a collective scaffold for memory, and for writers to explore the "insistent pressure of *freedom* as the *absent horizon*" (1990:235). In the light of these figurative meanings, we can begin to understand the tremendous experimentation and imaginative licence of Head's fusing of polemical and mythologizing functions in her "African saga". The generic definition favoured by Head, "saga" suggests a form that allows her flights of imagination and expansive accretion of fiction, memory, history and myth.

The inventive narrative centre of the novel is the story of the Sebina clan. Journeying northwards through southern Africa, the clan is reminiscent of the questing migrants and refugees in Head's other fictions. Like these, the Sebina, and particularly its clan leader, confront an array of social and spiritual trials. In search of a home, the clan also experiences internal conflicts, and in these Head traces her recurring explorations of morality and personal and collective freedom. Living under various forms of patronage, the clan eventually settles among the Tswana in what becomes known as the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Subverting a colonial model of historical agency from the outset, Head stresses the vision and resourcefulness of African leaders. She traces the "restless stirring and urge to migrate" (9)[7] to sources within the clan, and rejects the idea that indigenous southern Africans simply responded to external forces during the early phase of colonization. Head's emphasis on a small clan also reconstructs the projection of stasis, absence and "prehistory" in Afro-centric celebrations of mfecane. Turning to a small clan that repeatedly flees from others' nation-building, Head introduces a past without lauding the gladiatorial states and epic heroes of Omer-Cooper. Interspersed between the story of the Sebina are connected accounts of southern African between 1800 and the mid-1900s.

Although she isolates the events and figures central to assertive stories of agency, she avoids an aggressive and masculine view of African heroism. Like the colonizers, many African groups are shown to be militaristic and power hungry, and the writer draws attention to the similarities between white and black colonialisms. Head's historical frame is distinctive also in the way it reaches beyond homogenizing African nationalist perceptions of the "colonized". She draws attention to the distinctive locations of groups

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[6] Although the historical novel in the nineteenth century had a fairly distinct character, historical novels in the twentieth century have been very eclectic, and range from the "non-fictional" novels of Thomas Pynchon to the new journalism of Tom Wolfe.

like the Khoi-San and women, showing how colonialism intersects with indigenous forms of oppression and affects colonized groups in different ways. Her uncovering of suppressed voices is interestingly reflected in her use of epigraphs for each chapter. Often quoted as the words of characters dealt with in the chapter, or summaries of the general mood of a particular chapter, these epigraphs have a polyphonic effect. They represent the range of perceptions that the text seeks to uncover. I shall show that this chorus of voices is part of the novel's sustained emphasis on the collective, performative and manifold processes in the linking of memory, knowledge, storytelling and history.

Parallels can be drawn between Head's presentation of this nexus and its production by the South American writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. These continuities do not reveal corresponding textual details, but uncover what Francois Lionnet conceptualizes as the similar "ideological and cultural matrix that generates the works" (1993:136). Like Marquez, Head is fascinated by the history of colonized societies in relation to the performative and social functions of storytelling. Her strategies in *A Bewitched Crossroad* are often strikingly similar to those of Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* a passage from which forms the epigraph of her novel. For Marquez, the cultural subjection of Latin America generates the stereotype of "a man with a moustache, a guitar, and a revolver" (Minta, 1987:31). Resisting this subjection, he discovers alternative representations in what Sangari terms the "politics of the possible" (1990:216). The epigraph to *A Bewitched Crossroad* celebrates the balance between tranquil self-knowledge and determined exploration that the Buendia family at the centre of Marquez's novel searches for. As the members of a small clan, the Buendias' journeying and interactions are framed by colonialism in a similar way to the Sebina in Head's novel. The epigraph, part of the address of the clan's antecedent, Jose Arcadio Buendia, to his sons, is taken from the beginning of Marquez's novel. It is delivered at the height of his preoccupation with invention and education and captures the Buendias' optimistic faith in their quest.

### Colonial Dystopias

Head's essay, "A Definition of Imperialism', opens with the following explanation:

> Imperialism may be defined as the pride which goes before a fall and if we merely think of it for a short while as pride it would soon appear to be, not the exclusive property of the British or Americans but a common ailment of mankind. It may also be the central core of all conflicts on earth for it needs two actors on the stage at the same time – the man who has got and the man

[7] All page references for this novel are to *A Bewitched Crossroad,* Cape Town: David Philip, 1984.

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> who has apparently got nothing...Pride is terribly exclusive with an unending hunger for admiration. When it finds a victim or victims it won't let go. (KKMM457BHP9)

The definition seems to be extraordinarily simple, yet it broadly evokes Head's recurring excavations of power. As she suggests here and shows in *A Question of Power*, "colonialism" describes a range of destructive collective or interpersonal relationships. In all colonial encounters, power is motivated by a consuming need for egotistical gratification. It becomes a "pride" that leads certain groups or individuals to perceive others only as adjuncts to their self-esteem. This egoism is also self-destructive. Unable to acknowledge others' humanity or equality, the colonial subject relies on fictions of the "other" and of "self". As Dan's behaviour graphically illustrates in *A Question of Power*, the prototypical "colonizer" is trapped in an obsessive need to defend fictions of superiority. His eventual "fall" is not divine retribution or cosmic punishment for abusing power. It is a philosophical view of the social and psychological dynamics of subject-formation. As Head repeatedly demonstrates, those in positions of dominance compulsively invent inferior others, while blinding themselves to any notion of non-hierarchical or independent subjectivity. By explaining colonialisms as hierarchical forms of subjectification, *A Bewitched Crossroad* explores the "big pictures" of *A Question of Power*. Head expands her earlier treatment of processes suggested in images like those of Dan "opening [Elizabeth's] skull and talking into it in a harsh, grating voice" (1974:193).

The presentation of a dominating subject in *A Bewitched Crossroad* is introduced in Chapter Two's account of Ndebele[8] expansionism during the mfecane. Here the third-person narrator openly adopts the viewpoint of the victim of domination: "They called themselves, Ndebele, 'those-with-long-shields', in keeping with their new method of warfare. They were never accorded this honorary title by the tribes whom they harassed, raided and killed. They were called Matabele. It meant above all, non-people" (18). The origins of the word "Matabele" illustrate that those who were politically dominated by the Ndebele made them marginal to alternative ethical worlds. This re-visioning reflects the de-centring impulse of Head's own narrative. Reciprocal exchanges and respect for social differences prevail before the arrival of indigenous imperialists like Mzilikazi, leader of the Ndebele. Describing the rise of empire-builders in Chapter Three, Head establishes parallels between Mzilikazi's regime and the settler-colonial enterprise. The forging of subject positions through naming processes is an important focus of analysis in the text. Like the Ndebele, white settlers interpret social differences hierarchically, and Head

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explains their myth-making strategies for entrenching dominance: "[The Boers] had designated to themselves the title 'mensch' (people), and to servants and slaves, 'schepsel' (creatures)" (31). In this process of naming, Head "stresses the wording of the Great Trek manifesto" (Clayton, 1988:65), to demonstrate how the "man who has got" discursively establishes authority over the "man who has apparently got nothing".

Head's revisionist history often inverts the colonial gaze that generates oppressive classification. In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, history's tyrannical heroes are often subjected to the penetrating scrutiny that guaranteed their authority over others. The text consequently demystifies many of the icons and revered practices of colonialism and Afrikaner nationalism. One of these is Calvinism. As a religious and moral outlook in South Africa, Calvinism ritualized white authority by stressing the work ethic, sense of discipline and ethical code of white settlers. Debunking this view, Head writes: "The religion followed by the settlers was Calvinism. Its doctrine of predestination, that from and to all eternity, God predestined everything to happen as it does and must happen, even to the fixing of souls to be rewarded and punished, suited the life-style of the settlers. In relation to the indigenous inhabitants and imported slaves, the colonists were the elect, while the indigenous inhabitants and imported slaves were forever the outcast sons of Ham" (30). Here the use of satiric and ironic voices effects the cathartic humour often underplayed by an emphasis on didacticism and high moral serious in anti-colonial writing. The view that resistance can be adequately conveyed only through gravity, instruction and dogma has been particularly pronounced in a South African protest tradition, so that Head can be seen to experiment with a wider range of fictional modes for resistance.

While irony and satire exploit laughter for protest, the narrator's polemic against colonialism is often solemn and impassioned. Graphic images of marauding groups and power-crazed imperialists, both black and white, often suggest the central character's subjective visions of power in *A Question of Power*. In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, graphic imagery and the use of an emotive style convey an outrage that is emphatically collective. This kind of investigation reaches a climax in Chapter Thirteen. Focusing on the role of Cecil John Rhodes in southern African history, this chapter dwells on the injustice of his mass appropriation of land, the dreadful prospect of his attempted control over Bechuanaland and the requital of his collapse after the Jameson Raid. Rhodes and other colonialists exhibit a voracious craving for power, a craving that is continually sharpened

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[8] "Ndebele" and "Zulu" are often seen as synonymous.

as their expeditions lead them to new dominions. Journeying and migrancy are therefore ambiguously connoted in the novel. Previous chapters have shown how Head's tropes of migrancy and physical relocation convey visions of freedom. In her historical novel, the travels of hunter-explorers, Trekboers and colonizers connote their drives towards political and existential ascendancy. She highlights the aggressive invasiveness of certain kinds of migrations, and maps the moral authority of others.

As Clayton observes, Head "decentres the Great Trek from its position as overriding historical and literary myth. The Trek becomes one, and not the most significant, of a pattern of continental tribal migrations" (1988:64). In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, the journeying of the Trekboer, central to Afrikaner Nationalist mythology, becomes a ravaging invasion of the land, condemned from the perspective of those who are seen to have legitimate ties to it. Khama's dignified and solemn speech to his subjects in Chapter Seven offers a rousing indictment of Trekboer invasion. By deploring their treachery, plundering and violence, Head's character identifies the "inhumanity" that conventionally stereotypes Africans:

> "My people of the Bamangwato", he said, his quiet voice travelling clearly over the still morning air. News was brought to me yesterday by Mr. Anderson...'It now transpires,' he said, 'that the Boers have seized portions of Barolong and Batlhaping land and have two new states...' It is stated by the boers that they have this land from the spoils of war. Native chiefs are always at war with each other and the Boers say they have joined these wars to establish the peace. But the Boers are known for their treachery.
> "There has been nothing but wars for these past years and these wars were started by the Boers...
> You have long known that I prefer to have nothing to do with the Boers and that I prefer the ways of the English government. But I hear that the English have withdrawn from us and the Boers. I tell you these things because the Boers may come at any time into our country and seize our land." (88-90)

Through Khama's address, Head explores the opposition between what "*they* say" and what "*we* know" in a more forceful way than that allowed in third-person narration. The account of a nineteenth-century African leader allows her to textualize a collective countercolonial history based on memories that hegemonic settler myth-making has erased.

Colonial acts of domination are seen to generate manifold spiritual, moral and social evils. In her exploration of collective conflicts, Head emphasizes the existential processes conventionally associated with interpersonal relationships and individual's psychic experiences. Her treatment of annexation and boundary-making, often used as metaphors of enunciation and self-definition, are central here. The author's emphasis on territorial incorporation suggests the self-absorbed "monologues" of the Ndebele, Cecil

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John Rhodes and the Trekboers. Propelled by an unquenchable greed, empire-builders like Rhodes relentlessly extend their own boundaries and continually enclose the colonized within their domain:

> It was not long before the refugees and atrocity stories began to trickle southwards. The company, the victors in the war with no policy or constitution by which to govern the peoples of Masonaland and Matabeleland, lived by the crude, grasping dictum of their master, Cecil John Rhodes: 'If you want the black man's land, take it.' The company continued to parcel out the land freely to new settlers and business companies. The people, both in Mashonaland and Matabeleland, found themselves surrounded on all sides by European farms and businesses. Overnight, they became squatters on these farms. No longer could the people plough or graze their animals freely. (184)

The rhythm of the narrative describing settler invasion is often rapid, and contrasts with the serene pace of the novel's opening. The frenzied rhythm mirrors the insatiability of tyrannical leaders as well as their self-destructive failure to accept reciprocal social exchanges. The downfall of Rhodes after the Jameson Raid and the demise of the Ndebele are conflated in an apocalyptic prophecy of the ultimate rewards of despotism. As Sebina says: "'The dwellings of fierce men become ruins in ashes...Men are not meant to be beasts of prey...Life was always planned for peace because people are important'" (183). The dominating acts of the powerful, then, not only disinherit their victims, but also lead to their own annihilation. Oppressors turn their energies to reshaping others to construct a sense of self that is shown to be illusory and precarious.

While "colonialism" in the novel usually explains the Ndebele and white settlers, it is also associated with individuals who live in or among the peaceful Sebina clan. Head associates the compulsive drive towards both bigotry and self-annihilation with staunch traditionalists in much the same way that she probes the compulsions of indigenous and foreign conquerors. The symbolic deaths of two defenders of tradition in her novel suggest that they are consumed by a stifling pride. Sebina's fanatical son, whose memory of Ndebele brutality prejudices him against all outsiders, cannot accept the arrival of whites among the Tswana. He laments the way "we fled without looking back" (128) in a song of praise to the pre-colonial and pre-mfecane era before disappearing forever from the community. The pristine "identity" that he defends is seen as a delusory and suffocating fiction. Sekgoma, Khama's father, vehemently opposes his son's policy of interacting with whites, and dies surrounded by "die-hard traditionalists of the village, old men with fierce malevolent faces, intent on shutting out anything foreign and unfamiliar" (86). In his dying moments he frantically recalls "his life. Secrets of the rituals of circumcision, rain-making and many other sacred ceremonies" (86). The old man's rabid defense of tradition is also Head's comment on an Africanism that dogmatically refuses a monolithic "whiteness".

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Sekgoma's and Maruapula's imagining of "past" reflects their paralyzed suspension between "past" and "present", an inability to regain what is desired and refusal to engage with what is confronted.

**Ethical Visions**

In contrast with imperialism is reciprocity. Head's presentation of a pre-mfecane southern Africa often describes societies coexisting in ungraded relations of difference. Peace and self-knowledge are seen as given when there are no encounters and no clear idea of boundaries or difference exists: "The small clan-based tribe, peaceful self-sufficient and providing for all its needs, was the order of the day. The barriers were raised high. Who knew the names and affairs of a neighbouring clan" (19). Elsewhere she turns to these encounters to examine the growth of self-awareness in relation to others. During its many migrations, the Sebina clan retains its cultural autonomy despite interacting with other groups. When the clan leader requests permission from his first patron to continue the practice of circumcision, Mengwe expresses interest in the practice while "some of [his] people were asked to serve Sebina and attend to all of his needs" (12). The idealistic vision of a harmonious society here is an explicit textualizing of what is often glimpsed or hinted at in the imagined communities of Head's previous novels. It is as though the spirit of pastness in *A Bewitched Crossroad* does not limit the imagining of utopia in ways that the immediacy of presentness does, as though the remoteness of pastness becomes an ideal realm for imaginative projection.

As she does with the notions of monologue in relation to colonialism, Head turns metaphorically to dialogue in reciprocal exchanges. Symbolically, dialogues configure the social and physical encounters between individuals and societies open to exchange and fusion. Acts of migration like those of the Sebina, or of the Bamangwato's welcoming of strangers are diametrically opposed to the "monologic" defence of boundaries under colonialism. While colonialisms entrench barriers and invent frontiers, reciprocal societies constantly challenge and transcend these. The home discovered by refugees is therefore located in a vision of societies that blend and fuse, and that have no need to guard a fixed identity in relation to antagonistic "others". Dialogues are also seen to constitute the basis of human, rather than oppressive exchanges. This role for dialogue is affirmed when the narrator, adopting the solemnly didactic voice often evident in the novel, expounds the wisdom of past practices: "Nations, over many generations, hold within themselves, cultural dialogues about a specific passion or interest. This dialogue is like a wave that

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builds up towards a climax or peak then crumbles or disperses, while a new dialogue or interest takes its place. But before that dispersal or crumbling, a man or men in the society suddenly express the total perfection of that dialogue" (123).

While dialogue is often explored with reference to reciprocal communal exchanges, it also figures in a variety of other social processes. The range of Head's metaphoric explorations often suggests a "hybridization" that transcends essentialism and yet acknowledge the contours of liberating subject positions. These themes of hybridized dialogue and mutual co-existence recur in accounts of the Tswana and its leaders, who extend their boundaries without obliterating those that live amongst them. Khama, leader of the Tswana, applies to the British for protection when threatened by the Afrikaners, and appeals for the same process that he regulates, a process of accommodating and benevolent benefaction within which the integrity of all groupings is maintained.

One of the most compelling descriptions of hybridizing dialogue is Head's representation of Christian conversion. As the treatment of Khama's Christianizing indicates in *Serowe*, Head was fascinated by its symbolic meanings. In Chapter Four of *A Bewitched Crossroad*, the detailed exploration of Africans who convert to Christianity develops this symbolic preoccupation. On one level, the evangelist zeal of a missionary like Livingstone is openly condemned. He fervidly opposes other religious systems, so that his proselytizing becomes a form of monologue. In contrast to Livingstone, Mackenzie is "broad and generous, his Christianity flexible and adaptable to all situations" (48). For many indigenous southern Africans, Christianity promises liberation from the structures and values that oppress them: "The eternal message of Christianity unfolded as a daily drama around the mission houses. It was soon noted that the lame, the sick, the beggars, the outcasts and the refugees could appeal to the missionary and would be fed, clothed and administered to" (49). A woman whose nervous disorder leads to her persecution is eventually rescued by Christians, while Chapter Twelve deals with the attractions of Christianity and mission education to many women. The story of "the Sedimo woman" clearly explains these attractions. A figure who is clearly emblematic in the text, "the Sedimo" woman is converted to Christianity after an arranged marriage which obliterates her identity as "a thinking, feeling, human being and defined her position in the society as: 'A woman is sacred only if she knows her place which is in the yard, as mother of children and a housewife'" (165). After the death of her husband, she converts to Christianity. This conversion prompts a broad personal growth and leads her to "a relationship of love stimulated by the beginnings of dialogue between a man and a woman" (166). Head

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therefore illustrates the opportunity, denied in pre-colonial communities, that Christianity gives women to speak within "the world of the intellect, both political and spiritual" (166).

These accounts of Christian conversion suggest the predicament of Galethebege, the central woman character in Head's short story "Heaven is Not Closed". For many women, Christianity held out the promise of compassion and equality. Its messages were faithfully clung to in the way that the Galethebege adheres to hers despite her traditional husband's impatience and the intolerance of a white missionary. Yet the writer does not focus primarily on Christian teaching. She seems concerned mainly with exploring how certain ethical codes may offer self-liberating opportunities for victimized groups. Their conversions are consequently active and chosen appropriations of symbolic worlds. These appropriations allow them to fuse different positions and beliefs, rather than simply to assimilate a dominant world-view. That Head's primary aim in exploring Christian conversion is to explore a potent symbol of hybridization is evident in the way she describes ideal conversions. The following account of Khama's application of Christianity is a typical example: "Following a suggestion made to him by John Mackenzie...that the traditional ceremony of letsemma, or the beginning of the ploughing season, be conducted in a Christian way by a Christian chief and that the missionary would be willing to serve a traditional custom, all Khama's reforms were to observe this base – a harmonious blending of traditional custom and Christian worship. Large social courtesies surrounded each ritual and ceremony practiced by his people" (55).

The dialogue initiated by merging Christianity and traditional practices is extended to developmental processes opened up by a white presence in the region. Head consistently avoids defending the view of an unalloyed pre-colonial realm that has nothing to gain from a new world. Generally, then, what is often seen simply as "colonial penetration" is separated into two trajectories, only one of which, according to Head is "colonial". Head avoids a clear-cut defence of a pre-colonial era by grounding her vision of liberation in reciprocity, rather than in retreat. As she does elsewhere, she confronts the question of how, faced by new systems and languages, individuals and subjects can discover liberating subject positions, or, as Sangari puts it, experience assimilation "both as something that is *owned,* as well as something to be *resisted*" (1990:218). Many of the assimilative processes she describes in her novel are regenerative. At a stage when the Sebina find refuge both from the devastation of mfecane and from the threat of white settler-domination, they undergo tremendous development largely through western influences. For women especially, technological and attitudinal changes sparked off by

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industrialism and formal education are important avenues for their personal and social progress.

But it is mainly an exposure to education, reading and writing that is seen to regenerate the Sebina clan. Head often describes the passion and dedication of young southern Africans who first learn to read and write. Here she uncovers the existential resources discovered through the power of writing. The redemptive effects of literacy are alluded to when the Sebina clan learns biblical stories with transferable moral significance. Not only is the power of storytelling lauded here, but also the power of stories that can be preserved and repeated. Sebina articulates this when he says:

> We are a people accustomed only to speech, so the urge is to inquire about this new mode of communication. My people wish to say, wait! So you mean these are really the words of men? Is this what men are really saying? Is human thought now so preserved like the fresh greens of early summer? Always human thought has been like the flight of a bird that passed through the mind and was forgotten. Stay a moment, my people say. Repeat the speech that has been so preserved that we may really, really know it is true. These questions preoccupied my people day by day. (79)

It is this reverence towards the powers of the written word that leads many of the Bamangwato people to say to a young man who has learnt to read: "Cause the book to speak, child" (80). This veneration for "the book" is not the colonial stereotype of the bedazzlement of the native confronting modernity. It is a profound engagement with a medium that has enormously liberating imaginative and cultural implications. Storytelling, especially through written stories, allows cultures to preserve the fictional anchors of their identity. This is conveyed when members of the Sebina clan interpret their own sense of pasts and futures in resounding biblical stories. When a missionary reads the story of Exodus, describing "the persecution of the tribes of Israel under a Pharoah... the rise of Moses as a new leader; and the wars of miracles between Jehovah, the god of Moses, and Pharaoh", Sebina responds in the following way: "'The Jews...They are so much like us! We have listened to these stories in great wonder, astounded to hear things in the new learning that do not differ from our own customs" (78). The tremendous emotional and psychic implications of reading and writing are highlighted in the story of Tumediso, whose passion for the new learning contrasts with his father's inflexible commitment to traditional ways. Tumediso "slowly passes into death" (134) when denied access to learning. His psychic recovery is seen to rest on his interacting with what lies beyond the confines of clan, tribe and a rapidly disappearing pre-colonial world. It is also linked to his access to a medium without which knowledge and memory become "like the flight of a bird" (79).

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Head therefore makes the point that "literacy is not merely socially progressive" (Clayton, 1988:63), but a vital technological aid in the preservation of individual and collective memory and identity. In fact, the novel suggests that much of the authority of white settlers derived from their ability to marshal the power of the written word as a weapon. When Sebina and other members of the Bamangwato need to witness the sale of land, there is a description of their tortuous marking of documents whose mystery they cannot fathom. The implication is that they are cut off from a vital site of existential and cultural authority. We could also speculate that Head's own interest, evident especially in *Serowe*, in recording oral testimony and the unpublicized memories of village residents were perceived as crucial acts of preservation by the author. As Rob Nixon points out, this is not because her published writing captured a lost world. Quoting Walter Benjamin, he observes that Head does not perceive the past "'the way it really was'. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (1994:245). The importance of capturing threatened memories is interestingly conveyed in an unpublished essay titled "Some notes on the value of collecting oral history from local people and student papers". Here Head writes that, following her work on *Serowe*, she "permanently lived with a note book and continually recorded oral history" (KKMM457BHP49). She describes her indebtedness to a student paper for characters that become, in *A Bewitched Crossroad,* the representatives of a conflict between a pioneering crusade for education and an austere conservativism. At the end of her article, she writes :"I am indebted to the student, unknown to me, D M P Mulale, for a character in a novel who may one day be eternally loved by my readers for his contrary ways" (4). The allure of a world preserved for eternity, a world that can be returned to and "had not flown away like a bird and been lost" fascinates Head, and becomes one of the concerns that links her novel directly to that of Marquez.

The ethical vision of *A Bewitched Crossroad* is highlighted in dialogue which, for the Sebina clan leader, liberates "a broad peaceful river...where all thought and human experience floated with graceful ease" (74). The Sebina clan "exists", yet thrives in relations of interaction. Its leader is able to say: "I led my people into a foreign land with customs and practices unknown to Barolong. We could not stand apart and disdain the customs of our new land. We lost ourselves in the new culture so that today we know ourselves first as Bakalanga and scarcely remember that we were once Barolong. It has brought us no harm but was an enrichment of our lives" (71). This hybridized being is captured in Sebina's claim that "I can only be what I am" followed by his uncertainty about

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his identity: "And yet Sebina seemed not to understand Sebina. He was the glorious representative of the past and tradition yet he hungered for the new and unknown" (63). The Sebina clan survives and flourishes by eluding oppressive encounters and by living among groups who recognize their independence. This existence is defended by Khama, the leader who offers the Sebina refuge in the regions' largest ethnic group: "What we want is to go forward and improve, and I think we can do so if we are wisely connected". The novel's triumphant conclusion magnifies the clan's liberation as the emancipation of Bechuanaland, the enclave state which resists nineteenth-century mfecane as well as annexation by South Africa and Southern Rhodesia in the twentieth century: "What made the British Bechuanaland Protectorate a land of 'peace and rest'... Each day the sun rose on a hallowed land" (196). "Hallowed" spaces and acts that evade imperialism while celebrating cultural fusion appear throughout the novel. By celebrating interpersonal and collective exchanges, Head affirms ethical principles that range from the imagined communities in *When Rainclouds Gather* to village co-operatives in *Serowe*. Liberating reciprocal encounters therefore reverberate throughout Head's writing, although it is in *A Bewitched Crossroad* that she seems to develop her most sustained textualizing of it.

**Enigmatic worlds**

In her discussion of Marquez, Sangari deals with the way this writer engages the notion of enigma in relation to colonial stereotypes, revisionist storytelling and the complex presence of his characters. Her discussion helps to explain Head's presentation of epic heroism, her affirmation of the ordinary, and the force of her creation of narrative. Many of the leader figures in *A Bewitched Crossroad* are epic in an iconic and "oceanic" sense. We confront them not as characters, but as exemplars of ethical and social forces. One effect of this description is to counteract settler-colonial myth-making, which has generated a host of founding fathers: Bartholomew Diaz, navigator of the region, Jan van Riebeeck, discoverer of the region, Cecil John Rhodes, developer of the region. In the face of this inventory, Head is concerned with celebrating southern African "thinkers and leaders of towering granduer" (KKMM454BHP53). The effectiveness of her alternative record derives from her stepping outside of the context of the "static death theme of white minority domination" (KKMM457BHP53). She avoids telling a story of unending victimization and triumphantly celebrates forces of defiance, rebellion and intellectual authority. Her revisioning also turns to a context that, unlike South Africa, is not burdened by a legacy of

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hegemonic racist and settler-colonial myth-making. In contrast to South Africa, Botswana has not been overwhelmed by fictions of white authority, especially the systematic ideological domination buttressed by apartheid.

This situation is suggested in Head's claim that "I spent a whole portion of my life in a country where it was impossible for black people to dream...I spent another portion in a country where it is possible to dream" (1990:63-4). One indication of this scope to dream is her delineation of an autonomous black authority, rather than a heroism, connected to figures like Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko, defined largely as it reacts to white authority. Head's creation of an independent black heroism clearly emerges in her representation of Khama, the first leader of the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Head traces a form of black authority evolving independently of white mastery, rather than in response to it. Khama's self-sufficiency is captured in the following description of British "ignorance" in contrast to his wisdom: "The British knew nothing of the past history of the tribe, its cultural dialogue, passions and interests. Khama's life was to represent for them, the most perfect expression of this dialogue. They were to defer to him on all issues of national interest" (123).

The emphatic *mythologizing* is important here. Evidence, with which Head was undoubtedly familiar, of British duplicity, of continued imperial self-interest, and of Khama's marginality in the broader scheme of metropolitan interests discredits the view of his political authority in relation to the colonial administration. But what matters is the way she exploits the relative freedoms of British colonial policy in Botswana for her revisioning purposes. Giving a peripheral role to a white presence, she offers an alluring impression of autonomous and influential African heroism. Interestingly, Khama is often seen to make imperious demands from the colonial authorities. With the implementation of agreements for the protection of Bechuanaland, therefore, the leader gives a speech that dictates the terms for British involvement in the area. Within the logic of the text and its references to a body of storytelling beyond it, Khama acquires the status of an inspirational and independent hero. His exceptional wisdom is stressed in descriptions of his aloof and reflective manner. Sebina, frequently featuring as the first-hand witness of the leader, often remarks on Khama's magnificence, and reflects at one stage that he exemplifies the "calm thoughtful rule of the mind" (121). His independent yet publicly-directed leadership aligns him with leader figures like Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather* and with facets of Maru in a later novel.

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The description of epic heroism is related to a pervasive impression of magnificence about the world inhabited by Khama and other figures from the past. Using a lofty and elevated style, Head concentrates on the dignified civility of the life she describes. The following extract, describing Khama's summoning of his people to inform them of colonial encroachment, reveals this formal style:

> Large meetings at which the people were quietly informed of the most recent news, were a common feature of life in Shoshong...
> 'Men of Sebina, to the kgotla, at sunrise tomorrow.'
> 'What can the trouble be?' the old man asked anxiously.
> 'It's about the boers,' the messenger replied, hardly pausing on his hurried journey through the village.
> Dawn saw the old man with several of the leading men in the village hurrying to the chief's court. Streams of men were pouring in from all sides and settling themselves quietly in the densely crowded court. Soon a hush fell over the assembly as the chief rose and with bowed head, opened the proceeding with a short prayer. Then almost immediately he proceeded to the business at hand, outlining the news of the day in a clear, simple, precise way.
> 'My people of the Bamangwato,' he said, his quiet voice traveling clearly over the still morning air. (88)

Eilersen consider how this kind of writing, as seductive as it is contrived, outraged certain reviewers: "A Pretoria newspaper called [the novel] a failure. *A Bewitched Crossroad* purported to 'place oracular pearls of wisdom in the mouths of chiefs at a time long before the advent of the white man and the written word', it said and continued by noting that almost every white man was an 'arch fiend'; and that 'almost no white skin emerges un-braaid'. The review concluded: 'All that impressed me...was the beautiful photograph on the dust cover'" (1995:279). The extreme hostility described by Eilersen is a testimony of the effectiveness of Head's mythologizing. The reviewer appears to be affronted not by the contrivances of her writing, but by the collective and subjective truths invoked by her invention.

Khama's heroism is emphatically public, outwardly-directed and epic. In contrast, Sebina's is the heroism of an extraordinary ordinariness. As the leader of a small clan obliged to seek, rather than to give protection, Sebina possesses an authority very different from Khama's benevolent governing. Where we often confront Khama as a public figure and have little exposure to his private thoughts, we usually learn about Sebina through his personal struggles to confront massive epistemological, cultural and political changes. Head frequently uses narrated or interior monologue to fathom this character's consciousness, while she favours a detached narration of acts in relation to Khama. It is through the Sebina clan, and particularly Sebina himself, that Head explores the idea of the lost voice of the past. Sebina, a "witness of the close of an era" (140), is a figure who

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enigmatically emerges from the pastness that has eluded written histories of the early nineteenth century, and especially from its processes of migration and social formation. In a similar way to Beloved in Toni Morrison's novel, he is the enigmatic embodiment of a pastness erupting into the present with the force of being a tangible human presence. But he differs from staunch traditionalists who fixate on their past, despite the fact that he enjoys their confidence and is frequently associated with them. Sebina's memory, which links him to a traditionalist like Maruapula, prevents his sinking into a void without any past, although he is receptive to a present "filled with wonder" (140). While part of the enigma of Sebina is the way he embeds a pastness that the present can never access, his complexity also derives from the retrospective memory and visionary perception that Head explores through him. Sebina is often defined as the repository of intersection and transformation. Rather than simply illustrating the past, this character conveys how the past is remembered by confronting a confusing present and looking forward to the future. In Sebina, past, present and future are connected. He therefore becomes a character who personifies the very process that Head seeks to confront. The intricacies of this process are described at the centre of the novel when he reflectively broods about the era he has witnessed, the period he now confronts and a future still to be disclosed:

> The warm slanting rays of the late afternoon sunlight seemed to transfix that timeless moment in his memory like every other moment of happiness for him. The dwelling places of the tribes had been for ages and ages, just such small, self-contained worlds, busy with the everyday round of living. He turned and looked at the distant horizon, Beyond the last hut, beyond the perimeter of Shoshong, the land lay in an eternal peaceful sleep, the distant horizon lazy and shrouded in the mists of the earth. On one such day he had looked up and seen a billowing black cloud that heralded a new era. Anything could now appear on that horizon. (101)

A survivor and witness, Sebina is also receptive to what is new. While this leads to his role as a cipher for the author, Head carefully hints that her character's memory defies the present orientation of both the author and the reader. Like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, she often suggests unrepresentable knowledge in ellipses and silences. Sebina is especially reminiscent of Marquez's gypsy Melquiades, who presents a "mysterious breadth", his opening words in the novel, "Things have a life of their own" (1978:9) reflecting his own status in the author's text. The "mysterious breadth" of Head's historical figures is reflected in her use of point of view. Chapter Seven of this study described Head's concern with the autonomous subjects of her social history, a concern that surfaces in the oral testimonies of *Serowe*. The emphasis on diverse and elusive voices is frequently repeated in *A Bewitched Crossroad.* Within each chapter, Head shifts from one

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subject or theme to another, and these, as well as shifts in viewpoint from chapter to chapter contrast with the muting evident in exhaustive reconstruction. In many ways, the enigma of the text is the impression of its autonomy even in relation to its creator. The many stories and narrators have an "existence" that is made to appear independent of the author's construction. Seeking to convey the notion of a collective text, or of a collectivity of texts in which her own voice participates, Head conveys a sense of her peripheral role as author.

My previous chapter showed that Head's use of oral narratives sometimes signals her role as the mediator and participant in collective processes of memory and storytelling. Alluding to this in an unpublished essay titled "Why Do I Write?" she describes her sense of connection to circulating fictions. She launches into her discussion with: "I write because I have authority from life to do so", and goes on to claim: "My dream world is crowded with thousands and thousands of people...My books are rooted in this source and all commentary and communication from this source have been carefully recorded in my books" (KKMM457BHP53). In this announcement of a mediating position, she appears to jettison ideas about subjective creativity celebrated in earlier texts. Yet it is the insistent reference to her "dream world" that affirms an imaginative space for the artist. While Head's historical novel resolutely locates the collective functions of storytelling, it retains much of her characteristic faith in the writer's subjective reclamation of the worlds she confronts and interacts with.

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**Imagined Horizons**

Head was deeply opposed to the relegation of the imagination to a dismissed realm of "fantasy" - conventionally thought to have no meaningful role in collective and political struggles. In the face of a utilitarian and historicizing consciousness that limits notions of politics and social relevance, *A Bewitched Crossroad* insists on the continuities between history and storytelling. Head confronts head-on the crisis that Walter Benjamin describes: "Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a story properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us" (1973:83). Head's comments on South Africa often indicate her horror of contexts in which liberating storytelling is threatened by hegemonic myth-making. Sara Chetin describes her sense of potential and denied functions in "The Deep River". Chetin shows how the story reveals that language and myth "used

imaginatively...are capable of freeing and guiding individuals...in search of particular truths. The old men...'shake their heads' in despair when they could be rejoicing that they have been given the freedom 'to do': by reinterpreting their past, they could find the impetus to redefine their future" (1989:118). In her historical novel, Head returns to many of her previous narrative patterns, to stories of migrations and discovered homes, or to images of tyranny and of liberating dialogue. While these are sometimes equivocal or cautious in previous texts, they seem to soar in her final novel. It is noteworthy that the reappearance of the Exodus story in *A Bewitched Crossroad* explicitly confronts ways in which it works socially and imaginatively. At the same time that it is used as an organizing principle for historical storytelling, the text refers to its codes, its origins and to the tremendous scope for its adoption among the Bamangwato.

The force of Head's presentation of the past derives not from its faithful recovery, but from the way it is extravagantly opened up to fictional invention. While her freedoms, ethical ideals and epic heroes are obvious contrivances, they also gesture towards the immense possibilities for human experience, and to domains of perception, emotion and interaction inhibited by repressive beliefs, myths or religion. From this perspective, her storytelling is not simply ancillary, or a form of preparation for action. It bridges the gap between imaginative thought and action, so that action comes to reside in thought and vice versa. In her discussion of Marquez, Sangari uses the evocative phrase "the politics of the possible" to indicate that storytelling - through allusion, symbol and suggestion - configures "an absent freedom, but...not an abstract freedom" (1990:235). The deferral or withholding of referential meaning is often deplored from the contemporary perspective of anti-positivist pessimism. Marking the "crisis" of representation, the "limits" of storytelling or the "impasse" of historical representation, language and narrative, it is believed, can never reveal worlds. Yet the self-conscious charting of infinite signification within texts can summon forth a wealth of embedded and allusive worlds. Exploiting this boundless signification, Head claims deferral and the surfeit of signification as evidence not of the redundancy of representation, but of its abundant symbolizing power.

The expansive meanings configured within her texts are utopian responses that "challenge the consensus of tradition and point towards an 'elsewhere', a 'no-place', a society that is 'not yet'" (Kearney, 1998: 167). Distinguishing the utopian function of social subversion from ideology's role in social integration, Ricoeur discusses utopia's "nowhere" in ways that capture the social force of Head's imagined worlds:

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> What must be emphasized is the benefit of this kind of extraterritoriality for the social function of utopia. From this 'no place,' an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now opened beyond that of the actual, a field for alternative ways of living...The fantasy of an alternative society and its topographical figuration "nowhere" works as the most formidable contestation of what is. What some, for example, call cultural revolution proceeds from the possible to the real, from fantasy to reality. (1991:320)

*A Bewitched Crossroad* unsettles a cluster of integrative and reproductive images and narratives in the social imaginary that defines the present through the southern African past. Resisting the recuperating stories of imperial mastery, the icons and images of oppressive authority, or human encounters that assume insurmountable differences or conflicts, Head produces an idiosyncratic vision of the past that also configures an alternative present. In this way, she creates "the imaginary project of another kind of society, of another reality, another world" (Ricoeur, 1991:319).

Head's last novel points triumphantly to the collective, social and political implications of storytelling and imagined worlds. This raises the question of whether she abandons her earlier autobiographical concerns with the sources of individual artistic genius or spiritual freedom. I suggest that these concerns recur in the embedded autobiographical currents of her historical novel. Head began *A Bewitched Crossroad* by deciding to focus on Khama, leader of a newly-constituted country. She eventually chose the character of Sebina, based on memories of a chief whose life almost straddled the nineteenth century. She describes her discovery of the sources for her fictional character in the following way:

> I was working at various research centres in Gabarone...I was looking for a Kalanga chief who admired Khama... A Kalanga trading party was accidentally killed outside Shoshong in 1882. Khama sent an apology. The Kalanga chief responded by asking to live under Khama, with his people. I saw a way through this story to shape my novel. I could not create history through Khama III...I wanted that Kalanga chief as the hero of *A Bewitched Crossroad*. I talked to various historians in Gabarone. No one was sure who that Kalanga chief was but everyone referred me to "History of the Makalaka" by Peter Mazebe Sebina. From that essay I created the old man, Sebina. (KMM457BHP49)

The Kalanga chief's history of persecution, flight and quest for refuge suggest obvious autobiographical reasons for his appeal. But it is through the depth she invests in her fictional character that Head returns to previous writerly concerns. Sebina's reflective and retrospective consciousness often encodes the creative and reconstructive processes of the author. As a witness, Sebina confronts the baffling and changing world around him. His perspective is not that of one who egotistically seeks to transform or control it, but one whose serenity allows him to "watch the pool of his life", a phrase that repeatedly describes his perception in the novel. Through Sebina's tranquillity, the novel often defines

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heroism as the effect of meditative enlightenment. This is reinforced by the epigraph's image of "men so intelligent and peaceful that their only pastime was to sit and think" (8). The vision of a perceptiveness that is almost epiphanic is stressed when Sebina passes into death: "The sun was low on the horizon and just about to set. It wasn't an ordinary sun but the enormous, flaming, blood red sun of the drought years. The old man turned his face towards the sun. It was as though he had only waited for a last farewell from Mabeze, because he began to die ever so quietly and gently. Partly between death and partly between life he felt himself begin to float towards that blazing orb of light" (195). Mabeza, the young boy who has the power to write and read, says to Sebina at this point "'I'll see the run rise for you father'". Elsewhere, Mabeze's writing powers are associated with considerable visionary and spiritual power. Addressing Sebina at the moment of the old man's death, he refers to the "sight" of a heightened perception, to a "sun" that is an envisioned light of social and spiritual freedoms.

That Sebina's epiphanic perception is also that of the author is suggested in two connected images. One is an image of transformed and animated nature, of a landscape that appears to exude some vital force. This is announced in the epigraph of the first chapter: "the stars swung down low in the sky at night and glowed with pure blue lights between the dark, black bushes" (9). The other is an image suggesting total serenity. This bottomless peace allows the perceiver to subdue worldly and conscious thought and apprehend the wealth of a surrounding environment. Eluding ordinary perception, this pantheist cognition is what sometimes leads Maru, in a previous novel, to "communicate freely with all the beauty inside him" (1987:7). In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, this cognition is consistently linked to the quiet wisdom of Sebina. It is therefore emphasized in the cluster of images that follows the text's introduction to this character: "Life was peaceful. The land which surrounded the people lay in a majestic sleep and stillness and the stars swung down low in the sky at night and glowed with pure blue lights between the dark black bushes" (11). Like *Serowe*, *A Bewitched Crossroad* frequently describes the liberating restfulness of a physical environment. But the "peace" in *Serowe* could be seen to stem from the harmony of the village life described in the text. With its emphasis on political upheaval and disruptive change, *A Bewitched Crossroad* explains this mood somewhat differently. Through Sebina, Head suggests that the mind can be attuned to a restfulness that lies beyond apprehending the injustice and terror that structure everyday life. The cognition exemplified by Sebina is an esoteric power that can transform his surrounding world.

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The liberating connection of mind and environment is a theme that Head repeatedly configures in the visionary awareness of her central characters. When the apprehension of a world that is conceived as separate from self is abandoned, the mind is liberated both from a cultural obsession with codifying it, and from the discordant outlook that alienates an apprehending self from the world that is apprehended. This supreme awareness of the nexus of observer and observed is attained with Hinduism's stage of Moksha. For Head, this supreme enlightenment is celebrated in relation to the bewitched crossroad of her adopted country. By linking thinker and thought in relation to this world, Head was able to realize her claim: "in the steadiness and peace of my own world, I could dream dreams a little ahead of the somewhat vicious clamour of revolution and the horrible stench of evil social systems" (1990: 28). Throughout her writing, Head explores the destructive effects of processes and states that assume schisms, division and duality. She repeatedly deals with forms of ineffective communication or misunderstanding, with the cultural binaries that victimize groups or force individuals into constricting social categories, or with the fictions of difference that allow tyrants to oppress their victims. Her last novel develops a panoramic view of this range of separations by identifying the syntheses that can structure new relations and perceptions. Dwelling on the merging of past and present, the unity of subject and object and the nexus of mind and environment, she stresses the serenity and freedom that derives from integration.

The conclusion of the novel powerfully signals this cohesion: "What made the British Bechuanaland Protectorate a land of 'peace and rest' under direct rule from London? It remained so throughout its history...The land eluded the colonial era. The forces of the scramble for Africa passed through it like a huge and destructive storm that passed on to other lands. It remained black man's country. It was a bewitched crossroad. Each day the sun rose on a hallowed land" (196). The claim that "the scramble for Africa" avoided the "land of 'peace and rest'", and "passed on to other lands" becomes tenuous in view of Bechuanaland's colonial partitioning, the Batswana's subjugation under colonialism and neo-colonialism, and, most importantly, Head's great disillusionment with the nationalism, xenophobia and many injustices she associated with her country of exile. The meanings she associates with her reconstruction blatantly contradict conventional evidencing, and these meanings are substantiated only in relation to her complex representational strategies and the liberating visioning of her text. The ending of Marquez's novel offers a suggestive comparison. One of the Buendias deciphers a manuscript of the history of the family and realizes that its history lasts only as long as his

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reading: "Before reaching the final line...he had already understood that he would never leave that room, for it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatable" (1978:422). Focusing on writing or reading practices that become the locus of meaning, both *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *A Bewitched Crossroad* concede that the writer's construction of pasts can only be the struggle for expression of a present desire.

Exploiting the nexus of interpretation and its object, Head consistently eludes a territory of separations and concealments. Her "bewitched crossroad" marks the juncture of paths that are conventionally separated. It also identifies the possibilities for different directions. Most importantly, it invests juncture and multiple orientations with what can fascinate, compel and transform. It is improbable that Head consciously set out to unravel her myriad concerns with spiritual, artistic and social liberation in her historical novel. The figuring of abiding concerns in *A Bewitched Crossroad* seems an inevitable outcome of a writer's determined probing for utopian imagining. Importantly, the shift from fiction to history occurred at a time of conflicting and demoralizing responses to *A Question of Power*. While working on oral history and *Serowe*, Head appears to have grown increasingly aware of the figurative potential of historiographical modes. Paradoxically, it is in history that she discovers abundant symbolic modes for her "forceful creation", "firm truths" and "elegant pathways".

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