

DEDICATION

For my grandmother, Mphephu, whose drumbeat stopped in mid-throb, just before the break of dawn:

But by all souls not by corruption
choked
Let in high raised notes that power
be invoked,
Calm the rough seas, by which [she]
sails to rest,
From sorrows here, to a kingdom
ever blest.
And teach this hymn ... with joy,
and sing,
The grave no conquest gets; Death
hath no sting!

(John Donne)

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The values my parents fostered have been a persistent presence in my adulthood. The love of my grandmothers, Mphephu and Tsatsawani, has been seminal. My brother, Elvis, has been a valuable discussant. My children, Ofentse and Rhulani, provided an "enabling environment". My wife, Dipuo, recognized the meaning of this project for my life and lovingly provided the perfect "holding environment". Thank you for the myriad of identities you have constructed for me: "darling, sweet-heart, love, husband, anchor of my life, Georgie, dearie, father of my children, bastard, son of a bitch" – and what else?

ABSTRACT

This study probes selected stories from Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* (1977) in order to elicit instances of contiguity and disjuncture between orality and literacy, to establish Head's complex identity configurations which are often manifested in the interactions between aesthetic form and content, authorial consciousness, character delineation, and narrative voice. At the same time, the dissertation explores her portrayal of the proscribed condition of women, the subversive consciousness that undercuts women's subjugation by patriarchy, and her vision for the liberatory possibilities for women from the exigencies of patriarchal domination. I also examine Head's (re-)vision of culture within the framework of hybridity and creolity and determine how some of these perspectives are crystallized in discourses such as *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973). I juxtapose my reading of Head with other African writers such as Bâ, Emecheta and Nwapa to draw references in instances where the context permits. The dominant critical approach adopted in this thesis is a contextual approach. I consider this approach useful for my purposes because of its flexibility, the attention it pays to the formal properties of literary texts and, its cognizance of the socio-historical genesis of texts and its demonstration of literature's timeless value.

KEY TERMS

Bessie Head, Identity, Orality, Literacy, condition of women, traditional culture, modern culture, subversive consciousness, hybridity, creolity, patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

No form of literature can flourish without the nourishment of informed critical analysis. (Balogun 1991:5)

Head's ... literary achievement is ripe for another critical examination which would take the form of a tribute to her works and life. (Ola 1994:65)

Head's novels, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973), engender such lavish and disparate attention from literary critics, scholars and leisure readers that her collection of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures* (1977),¹ is infrequently read, rarely prescribed by University English departments and never taught, at least not in South African schools. Extant critical material on *The Collector of Treasures* is abysmally miniscule when compared to the compendium of critical discourse on Head's novels. Commenting on Head's collection of stories, Ojo-Ade writes:

Critics have written at length on the late Bessie Head's novels, but not nearly enough attention has been paid to her short stories However, a study of Head's stories reveals that they are – to adopt her title – a collection of treasures complementary to the novels in content, contemporaneity and commitment to Head's life-long cause in the name of the common beings of her community. (1990:79)

The aim of my dissertation is to break the long silence on *The Collector of Treasures* and to re-establish this text's niche in the African literary hall of fame. With characteristic panache, Head refers to her collection of stories as *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana village tales* and explains its provenance thus:

What I could say about *The Collector of Treasures* is that it was like a kind of résumé of 13 years of living entirely in village life. And village life is particularly enchanting. In actual fact, all of the stories are based on real life happenings. The village is like this: it's very peaceful One day is just the same as another, but human beings are so similar all over the world. Suddenly, a great drama explodes. Now you wake up and take your shopping basket and walk down the road and people say: Oh, have you heard' And then, because it surrounds a dramatic death, a murder, or a very painful court case, in my you get to

know all the details. In a village, it's so vivid (in Matuz *et al* 1992:96)

Head articulates this résumé with an exactness of feeling, in accessible language which is enchanting in its simplicity of breadth. But it is not simplistic in its depths. This is why Ojo-Ade writes:

[T]he style, simple and down-to-earth finds its characters with ease, the down-trodden, the desolate, the defeated, all non-heroic due to their estate but heroic as the centre of concern of the writer and, in several cases as courageous commoners. (in Ola 1994:50)

My choice of Head for critical appraisal is largely informed by her unique status in African literature as a hybrid writer and by my personal fascination with how she managed to transcend the intractable circumstances of her birth, her social experience as a 'coloured' South African – neither White nor Black, a resident in Botswana, but not of Botswana, and a woman at that. The circumstances of her birth, her early life, and the harsh realities of life as an exile in Botswana are too well-known to require any lengthy recapitulation. Only a cursory glance at her background suffices here. Head's family member, Stanley Birch, depicts her peculiar position thus:

On the 6th of July 1937 Bessie Amelia "Emery" was born to Bessie Amelia "Toby" Emery Mrs Birch, then in Pietermaritzburg, arranged with her solicitor to put in train an adoption procedure How the naming of the baby came about nobody knows. 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 a 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... . When young Bessie was pronounced coloured by the first foster parents and rejected, the shock was even greater, and more bewildering (1995:10-11)²

Ola (1994:72) writes of Head: "She was the underdog among underdogs, but refused to stay under; born a victim but lived as a survivor." Of her own personal situation, Head reveals:

I could say that I have the stamina to survive the sort of situations only wild alley cats encounter, but I would not like to take on another birth in South Africa and end up in Botswana ...

. No one cares. Why the hell did you come here in the first place, they say? We don't want you. And behind you is such hell and calamity that one simply asks: Oh God why was I born? What other effort do I make to survive? Where do I go? Or on which day do I die? (in Ola 1994:66)

Here is the enigma of Head – tenacious, temperamental, tempestuous – and I am fascinated and inspired by her spirit of resilience against adversity. This toughness, the curious condition of her background and her difficult stay in her adoptive village of Serowe shape Head's vision as a short story writer and are brought to bear in her creative output as a novelist. Head gives some of her fictive characters a similar spirit of resilience.

Whereas this study draws critical attention to *The Collector of Treasures*, it also takes cognizance of the fact that Head not only wrote beautiful slice-of-life stories but laudable novels as well. In my reading of *The Collector of Treasures*, I juxtapose the short stories with the novels: *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973). In this way, I demonstrate that the stories are complementary to the novels in content, contemporaneity and context. Some of Head's writings, such as her letters, her collection of essays – *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical writings* (1990), her historical chronicles *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981), *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* (1984) and a posthumous publication of short stories – *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989), do not form part of my investigation. I do not suggest here, that the aforementioned works cannot be admired for the universal relevance of their generalized social observations, neither do I claim that nuanced aspects of hybridity, nor creolity, may not be manifest in any of these texts. I am confining myself to Head's selected writings in the interests of brevity.

Given the thematic affinities between Head, Emecheta, Bâ and Nwapa, I refer, in my reading of *The Collector of Treasures*, to these women writers in instances where the con/text calls for such reference. Consequently, I also investigate texts such as *The Joys of Motherhood* (1980), *So Long a Letter* (1981) and *One is Enough* (1981).³ My selection of these texts for examination is informed by their thematic relevance to *The Collector of*

Treasures and Head's novels. Predominant themes occurring in Head's writing which also appear in the writings of Bâ, Emecheta and Nwapa are those of polygamy, the condition of a childless woman in a patriarchal society, the feminisation of poverty, the circumscription of a woman within the household and the general elision of women through archaic stereotyping. I treat my chosen texts by way of illustrative samples in terms of their relevance to, and links with, the focal points of my research. Some of the stories that constitute *The Collector of Treasures* are explored in greater detail to uncover their consonance with chapter headings of my dissertation. Other stories are treated less comprehensively or omitted. Similarly, some of the novels are explored in greater detail than others.

Given the large corpus of literary theories and approaches, each placing emphases and relevance on one particular aspect of the literary artifact, I consider it inappropriate to compartmentalise my assessment of *The Collector of Treasures* within the fixity of a single theory. Inasmuch as a literary text cannot eschew the formal properties of its language, neither can it deny the compulsion of its genesis from the cultural, historical, political and economic matrix. Hence, I use the contextual approach as a critical tool to guide my reading of Head's selected stories. I consider this approach useful predominantly because of its value in illuminating the interaction between the formalistic, intrinsic qualities of a literary text and the humanistic, historical perspective which often inspires literary aesthetics. According to Selden:

Our attempts to understand a work will depend on the questions which our own cultural environment allows us to raise. At the same time, we seek to discover the questions which the work itself was trying to answer in its own dialogue with history (1989:123)

I discern, in Selden's analysis, a convergence between textuality, culture, historicity and contemporaneity. It is this convergence that my dissertation seeks to tease out through the contextual approach. I apply these general principles to the specific examples of Head's work.

Ola writes:

Bessie Head's works provide a compendium of themes and forms already attempted by various African writers, but now stamped with her very original vision in a style marked by intensity and profundity. Her talent can be approached from various angles, all equally valid ... (1994:65)

Chapter One of my dissertation explores Head's stories with the view to examining identity, orality and literacy. In this chapter, I demonstrate that Head combines the age-old storytelling ethos with narrative techniques informed by a literary culture. In their village settings, the narrative pieces that constitute *The Collector of Treasures* evoke the familiar morphologies of oral storytelling: the fire-side setting, the old and wise narrator, an intimate audience and an ending which is characterised by a didactic slant. In its didacticism the text re-visits the time-honoured values of sharing, honesty and regard for one another's plight. Of the oral drift of *The Collector of Treasures*, Thomas notes:

Turning to the oral sources of these stories, we find Head signalling us from the beginning of the collection that much of the material in her stories is derived from oral sources ... All the marks of the folktale are present: an omniscient narrator, copious summary, reduction of motives to a few primary ones, as well as a moral ... (1990:96)

As I shall show, other features of orality that emerge from the text are the use of repetition, not only for purposes of auditory delight, but as a mnemonic tether as well; the appropriation of sayings and aphorisms; the use of seasonal activities, such as harvesting and hunting, as time markers; the embellishment of events with historical significance, such as tribal migrations and various chiefs' terms of office as points of narrative departure and mnemonic aids; and the figure of the storyteller who plays a prominent role in oral societies. Notwithstanding the stylistic interpolation of oral storytelling conventions, *The Collector of Treasures* is decidedly a modern written text. By embellishing features of the traditional oral tale within the text of a modern short story, Head works, as Mackenzie (1989a) notes, "in a double-edged way" to draw critical attention to oral narrative tales and to the short story

genre. The 'many-voicedness' inherent in the stories reveals the multiple play of meanings available in language. These plural layers of discourse potentially open the text to at least two interpretations: that of the speaker/writer and that of the listener/reader. Bakhtin refers to this range of meanings as heteroglossia or dialogism.⁶ He writes:

[W]e acutely sense two levels at each moment in [a story], one, the level of the narrator, a belief system filled with his objects, meanings and emotional expressions, and the other, the level of the author, who speaks (albeit in a refracted way) by means of [the story] and through [the story]. The narrator himself, with his own discourse, enters into this authorial belief system along with what is actually being told ... (1981:314)

The passage cited above implies that there is always more than one voice/meaning inherent in a story or any other literary genre. In another essay, Bakhtin refers to this polysemy of voices as heteroglossia. I briefly explicate the heteroglossic and the dialogic elements of *The Collector of Treasures* in the concluding chapter of my dissertation.

In my investigation into the area(s) of disjuncture and contiguity between orality and literacy as manifested in Head's collection of short stories, I draw critical nourishment not only from *The Collector of Treasures*, but from the short story genre in general. In my exploration of orality and literacy, I also establish Head's approach to identity formation through her fictional characters and, where appropriate, I draw out the interaction between orality and literacy in her own life.

Head's identity configurations stem from two main sources. The first is her character delineations. Next is her constant alternation of expository points of view between narrator's and authorial consciousness. As Olaussen (1997:18-19) reminds us, "Head often writes autobiographically." In this way, the boundary between author and character is permeable. This boundary fissure permits Head, as I shall demonstrate, to configure for herself a nexus of identities as an oral tale-teller *par excellence*, a griot in her traditional role as a social commentator and custodian of communal folklore and mores, an

anthropologist, a researcher, a gossip-monger in a useful way, a raconteur, a laudable short story writer and an historian. Head's oral inspiration and her scribal enunciation point to the connection between oral and printed literature.

The purview of Chapter Two of my dissertation, entitled, "The condition of women: identity and subversive consciousness," is an exploration of Head's nuanced confrontation with the male orientation of society, which persistently marginalises women. In this chapter, I sketch a broad canvas of the constraints women, in particular African women, have to confront. I identify the various manifestations of the subordination of women. Issues such as polygamy, marriage, the status of a childless woman, violence against women, the feminisation of poverty and the violation of a woman's sense of self-identity, are analysed in order to demonstrate Head's concern with men's predatory dominion over women and her sociological vision of the liberatory possibilities for women. In an interview in Serowe on 05 January 1983, with honours students from the University of the Witwatersrand together with their lecturer, Susan Gardner, Head revealed:

[B]lack women have a certain history of oppression within African culture. Women have always had a second position to men. In a society like Botswana, some of women's problems are rooted in custom and tradition. What is certainly very dominant here is that the male had a superior position to the female. (In Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:15)

My dissertation argues that, as a result of cultural proscription, Head's women characters can be viewed in terms of three distinct identity formations, namely, traditional women, transitional and transformative women.⁷ I demonstrate that traditional women draw their identity formation from the patriarchal view of women as baby-making machines, consigned to the domestic space of cooking, collecting firewood or water for the well-being of the household.⁸ Transitional women are characterized by their capacity for role flexibility. They show elements of traditional maternal identity, but they position themselves on the threshold of change. On the other hand, transformative women can be identified by their knack of undermining the

status quo and their forays into the centre – a male preserve. As I shall demonstrate, the power differential between men and women is not primordially given, but culture-bound and man-made. In a narrative piece entitled 'The Collector of Treasures,' Head offers a contrastive exposition of two kinds of men:

There were really only two kinds of men in the society. The one kind created such misery and chaos that he could be broadly damned as evil He was responsible for the complete breakdown of family life There was another kind of man in the society with the power to create himself anew. He turned all his resources, both emotional and material, towards his family life and he went on and on with his own quiet rhythm, like a river. He was a poem of tenderness (1977:91-3)

This is the centre of Head's concerns in her conception of the condition of women. Her ire is directed at the kind of man who "created such misery and chaos" (1977:91). The crucial point here is that Head does not only dwell on the disparaging aspects of women's condition or the tragedies in relationships between men and women. She looks to the future and projects her vision of a redeemed society in her "poems of tenderness" – prototypical figures such as Thebolo, Tholo and Sebembele.⁹ But, my reading of *The Collector of Treasures* points to the salience and pervasiveness of patriarchal domination, which limits the emancipatory possibilities for women.

Given the reciprocal concerns which subtend literary works, I also draw intertextual affinities between Head and three other African women writers, Bâ, Emecheta and Nwapa. *So Long a Letter* (Bâ 1981), *The Joys of Motherhood* (Emecheta 1980) and *One is Enough* (Nwapa 1981) are mentioned because they also explore forms of women's oppression in Africa, such as the essentialisation of motherhood, the vagaries of polygamy, the struggle for economic emancipation, the fickleness of husbands and the proscription of women's self-identity formation.

Chapter Three of my dissertation, entitled, "(Re-)vision of culture: hybridity and creolity," focuses on the hybrid and syncretic dimensions of Head's short stories. In this chapter, I investigate Head's use of eclectic allusions, ranging

through canonical literatures, the iconographies of diverse religious movements, and her re-workings of African and Greek mythology. I demonstrate that Head's aesthetic vision suggests an understanding of culture as changing and changeable, always open to cross-cultural influences. I demonstrate that stories such as 'Witchcraft', 'Hunting', 'Looking for a Rain God', 'Heaven is not Closed' and 'Kgotla' lend insight into such aspects of cultural life as judicial institutions, marriage, medical lore, religion, and the position of women within a cultural matrix. Head's judicious blending of international standard English, Setswana and ecclesiastical Hebrew serves to universalize the thematic concerns of her literary artifact and to suggest a creole language that articulates the hybrid positionality of all humanity.

My concluding chapter glances back through this thesis and serves not only as a summative evaluation of the major arguments of the preceding chapters, but also as a re-evaluation of Head's consummate artistry as manifested in *The Collector of Treasures*. In its totality, my dissertation aims to show that Head:

had the capacity to live with the conflicts of life ... like all women, she was involved in village gossip and disputes. She knew everything, but the richness of her communication lay in her gift to sift and sort out all the calamities of everyday life with the unerring heart of a good storyteller. (1977:108-9)

This character delineation, ascribed to one of Head's fictive characters, Thato, in the short story entitled 'Hunting', aptly encapsulates the travails and the triumphs of Head's life and succinctly crystallizes her skills as a short story writer, oral tale-teller, griot, social commentator, and an artist of the large canvas, irked by the proscribed condition of women, inspired by women's subversive consciousness, informed by the hybrid positionality of all humanity and enunciating within the matrix of orality and literacy. This is the lasting legacy of Bessie Head.

ENDNOTES

¹ All references in my dissertation are to these editions.

² For a vivid account of Head's circumstances of birth, her childhood, adult life, writings and life as an exile, see Eilersen, G.S. (1995).

³ All references in my dissertation are to these editions.

For an accessible exploration of the major developments in literary criticism and theory of literature, see for example, Eagleton, T (1988).

See also, Propp, V. (1968), and Mackenzie C. (1989(a)).

⁶ Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia and dialogism is fully expounded in *The dialogic imagination* (1982) Bakhtin, M.M. (1981).

⁷ In conceptualizing these three identities, I draw upon the insights of Ireland (1993), who uses these identifications from a different perspective, as organizing principles for the condition of women relative to the social expectation of motherhood. For a detailed discussion, see also Ireland, M.S. (1993).

⁸ For a discussion of the link between marginality, boundaries, power and the space occupied by women, see Memissi, F. (1987).

⁹ I draw insight from Mackenzie (1989 (a) : 41) who writes of Head's idealised characters : "The power to redeem society is vested in idealised saviour – figures "

CHAPTER ONE

Identity, Orality and Literacy

Not even the most rigorously literate society today is completely devoid of features of orality. (Biakolo 1994:48)

[A]ny writing that has been born out of an identity must as a consequence carry the characteristics of that identity which it has emerged out of. (Vera in Baaz and Palmberg 2001:91)

Le Guin, in her collection of talks, essays and reviews titled *Dancing at the edge of the world* (1989), asks a series of rhetorical questions:

Why have we replaced oral text with written? Isn't there room for both? Spoken text doesn't even take storage room, it's self-recycling and does not require wood pulp. Why have we abandoned and despised the interesting things that happen when the word behaves like music and the author is not just "a writer" but the player of the instrument of language ... ? (1989:184)

The inference drawn from Le Guin's polemic is that oral and written literature are complementary to each other and that there is room for both oral and literary studies. Although Le Guin writes from a Western epistemology, her argument bears relevance to my examination of the areas of disjuncture, continuity and contiguity between orality and literacy as manifested in Head's collection of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures* (1977). Here, it is pertinent to note that *The Collector of Treasures* derives its inspirational provenance from the milieu of African oral poetics. According to Mackenzie (1999:62), Head's "stories of Botswana are set in a rural context and successfully employ many techniques and devices germane to an African oral milieu."

I have chosen to read *The Collector of Treasures* within the paradigm of identity, orality and literacy because I find aspects of identity, orality and literacy significantly imbricated and linked in the short stories in a manner which is not the case in any of Head's novels.

I employ the term orality to evince a unique connection between a narrative conveyed by word of mouth, the physiological properties of hearing and the spatial/temporal connections between narrative performance and information storage in memory. Related to orality are other contingencies of narrative performance, such as proximity between the addressor and the addressee, narrative content and the audience's verbal and gestural responses to the narration. The result is that orality becomes intimate, immediate and even evanescent.

In my use of the notion of literacy, I draw upon the insights of Ong (1982:11) and Derrida (1991:86), to refer to the representative character of orality through the alphabetic mode of notation. The verbal utterances of narrative performance cease to be evanescent in the fixity of writing or print technology and immediacy is lost, of course.

Linked to orality and literacy, I also tease out how the question of identity is shaped by and emerges through Head's autobiographical gestures, the provenance of her aesthetic, the narratological protocol she adopts, her elaborations on village histories and authorial commentary on specific narrative episodes or subtexts. I use the term identity in order to construe, without being essentialist, a sense of the attributes and features which denote a specified person, belonging to a specified group with similar qualities and even idiosyncrasies. My kaleidoscopic configuration of this term throughout my dissertation points to the complexity inherent in the construction of identity.

Although Huma (1996:20) tells us that "Head was terrified of labels of any sort and assiduously avoided them ... ," in the context of *The Collector of Treasures*, Head is, as I shall prove, manifestly a social commentator, an oral

storyteller, a gossip-monger in a useful way, a sage and a griot. Sunkuli and Miruka (1990) write:

[T]he word, [griot] widely used in French West Africa, originates from Fulani Gaoulou and originally in Senegambia meant a poet belonging to a special low caste in the society. They were masters of eloquence, music and archaisms from which art they derived their living. Some of the functions of the griot were: being King's counsellors, being repositories of constitutions of kingdoms by memory, being repositories of traditions (1990:37)

This definition of a griot is in consonance with the one provided by Jones, Palmer and Jones (1988). These writers refer to a griot as a figure who:

was, and still is, observer, commentator or counsellor on the past and passing scenes. He happily still survives in some parts of Africa, not only rehandling traditional material ... keeping the heroic feats of historical figures alive, but also commenting in traditional style on contemporary matters. (1988:1)¹

In *The Collector of Treasures* Head is, as I shall show, a village counsellor, a tutor, a repository of village traditions and archaisms, and an eloquent narrator. She is the collector of treasures, of odds and bits. These dimensions in their totality either achieve clarity of meaning between orality and literacy or provide the suggestion of a multifarious identity, depending on one's interpretation of the stories that constitute the text.

The Collector of Treasures's subtitle: "*and other Botswana village tales,*" evinces a predilection for the oral tradition. Of the subtitle, Mackenzie (1989a:17) observes that "[it] is an early signal that the stories that follow bear, or purport to bear, some relation to a village oral tradition". Thorpe (1983:414) authenticates the relationship of Bessie Head to the village oral storyteller thus: "hers are rooted, folkloristic tales woven from the fabric of village life intended to entertain and enlighten, not to engage the modern close critic". I argue, by contrast, that the correlatives between the oral tradition and literary tradition inherent in these folkloristic tales do invite both the close reading attention of the modern critic and a contextual engagement

with these tales. As Guy (1994:8) reminds us, "... orality and literacy are not isolated phenomena, they are relational, interacting with one another, co-existing". Notwithstanding their symbiotic relationship, the two traditions are not the same and Head straddles both tenderly. Her method of presentation and, of course, of reaching a wider audience, lies chiefly in the printed word. But, her mode of enunciation literally mimics the age-long tradition of story - telling.

Head's project draws copiously on what Ong (1982:11) refers to as primary oral culture – "a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print". Of such a culture, Ong explains further:

[I]t is 'primary' by contrast with the 'secondary' orality of present-day high technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by ... other electronic devices that depend on ... writing and print (1982:11)²

I do not, here, suggest that Ong's polemic on primary and secondary orality is the only legitimate one. Elsewhere, Derrida (1991) explodes Ong's notion of verbal communication as superior to orality. He writes:

[R]epresentative thought precedes and governs communication which transports the "idea", the signified content ... because men are already capable of communication and of communicating their thoughts to each other when, in continuous fashion, they invent the means of communication that is writing (1991:86)

Here Derrida adumbrates the notion of thinking as the primary stage in the communication process. It is only later on that similar content, previously thought of in the primary stage, is mediated through verbal/gestural language and "successively by different modes of notation, from pictographic writing, passing through the hieroglyphic writing of the Egyptians and the ideographic writing of the Chinese ... " (Derrida 1991:86). Although Derrida makes a good case for representative thought as primary to the communication process, his deconstructive argument tends to be esoteric and limited by boundaries of the text, unlike the sociological pragmatics of Ong, "pragmatics being the name

that contemporary linguistics has given to the study of language in context” (Dentith 1995:28). My preferred perspective, therefore, is a humanistic inclination proffered by Ong since it is in consonance with my contextual approach to *The Collector of Treasures*.

In an interview in Serowe on 5 February 1983, with Honours students from the university of the Witwatersrand together with their lecturer, Susan Gardner, Head made a revealing statement on the provenance of *The Collector of Treasures*: “The collection of short stories is very related to things I had experienced in the village” (in Mackenzie, C. and Clayton, C. 1989:13). Although Head draws copiously on Botswanan primary oral traditions and her own experience in that community in order to construct social contexts that illuminate her aesthetic, her stories diverge from the flow of a folktale by their dependence on the chirographic (writing) and typographic (printing) principles of a modern technological culture. Schipper avers that:

an oral text does not exist without the performance itself; the very *presence of the performer*, story teller, singer, without whom oral literature cannot even exist, is a fundamental characteristic (1989:64, my emphasis)

Guy (1991:410) adds: “a transcribed text can only give the faintest indication of verbal pace, emphasis, inflection, tone, physical movement, gesture and facial expression” Both Schipper and Guy explicate an essential feature of oral literature as distinct from written literature.³ Oral literature is an art form that is created and performed in the warm presence of an audience or a cogent group of participants. In print, the aural, kinesic and visual elements transfer poorly and are difficult to capture and express in “the narrow channel capacity of print” (Finnegan 1991:13).

Head’s new context of enunciation implies shifts in audience and message. Her literary culture, formal educational background and the audience for whose edification she writes involve a peculiar distance, for it is not for the ancient, pre-industrial audience described in the collection that she writes, but for a literate, more technologically advanced audience. Yet this distance is a

dynamic one, for in collecting these stories she has to enter into an oral, dialogic relationship whose basis is the matrix of the collection.

Mackenzie (1989a:16) propounds that “Head transcribes oral sources into literature, reshapes the spoken to suit the new medium of the written” This assertion holds true of the opening story of the collection, “The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration”. In this story, Head adverts to the oral culture from which her aesthetics draw inspiration. In a footnote to the story, she explains: “ some historical data was given to me by the old men of the tribe ... ” (1977:6). Before writing this story, Head had to engage village elders in oral dialogue. Eilersen describes Head’s experience while researching the story:

[S]he had many rich experiences, as for example when she was interviewing the very first teacher in Serowe, aged about eighty. He spoke English and was proud of it. ‘But’, he added with an engaging smile, ‘my English may not sound quite proper to you ... the words don’t come out so well, as I have no teeth.’ Sometimes she could hardly make sense of the stories she was told and felt that she was not meant to. *One old man had a wealth of ancient knowledge* because he was frail and semi-senile and for three months Bessie and Bosele would visit him periodically in the hopes of catching him in the right frame of mind The next time they came, Bessie always began by recapitulating what he said last time. This would provoke ... indignation and he and his equally senile cronies would deny everything: ‘I never told this woman anything like that. Now is that our history, brothers?’ In this way she got six different ... versions of the way their clan, the Talaote originated (1995:159, my emphasis)

Demonstrating that ‘The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration’ has its roots deeply submerged far in the indeterminate temporal span of an oral culture, Head begins her account thus:

Long ago when the land was only cattle tracks and footpaths, the people lived together like a deep river. In this deep river ... the people lived without faces, except for their chief, whose face was the face of all the people The Talaote tribe have forgotten their origins Before a conflict ruffled their deep river, they were all the people of Monemappee (1977:6)

Recounted in this fashion, the opening episode of the story recalls Le Guin's comment:

When the storyteller by the hearth starts out, "Once upon a time, a long way from here, lived a king who had three sons," that story will be telling us that things change, that events have consequences, that choices are to be made, that the king does not live forever (1989:39)

Le Guin makes this comment apropos of the prototype of 'conflict' narrative. But the comment also bears relevance for 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration' for, in this story, things change dramatically. Chief Monemapee does not live forever: after his death choices are made with far-reaching consequences. After the death of his father, chief Monemapee, Sebembele – a pretender to the tribal chieftaincy – makes a public declaration of the love he shares with his father's junior wife, Rankwana, and acknowledges the product of that affair: their love child, Makobi. This public declaration throws the kingdom into confusion and creates succession problems:

[T]he challenge came from the two junior brothers, Ntema and Mosemme. If Sebembele were claiming the child, Makobi, as his son, they said it meant that the young child displaced them in seniority. That they could not allow. The pressure on Sebembele by his junior brothers and the councillors was that he should renounce Rankwana and the child and all would be well (1977:3)

Out of his deep love for Rankwana and Makobi, Sebembele relinquishes his right to the tribal throne and migrates with Rankwana, Makobi and their loyal legion to establish a new settlement in the south of the "Deep river" paradisaal village.

The major shaping stylistic convention of the introductory images of the story is repetition, and as Rassner (1990:235) reminds us, "repetition is a characteristic of oral narrative performance" In terms of its semantic structure, the story is based on two juxtaposed tropes: "a river" and "a face".

[T]he people lived together like a deep river. In this deep river ... the people lived without faces, except for their chief, whose face was the face of all people, that is; if their chief's name was Monemapee, then they were all the people of Monemapee They remembered that Monemapee ruled the tribe (1977:1)

The repetitive deployment of the adjectival phrase, "deep river" and the associated nouns, "face" and "people", recalls Okpewho's postulation that:

the oral performer cultivates repetition both as a means of achieving auditory delight in the listeners and as a convenient framework for holding the distinct elements of the composition together (1992:78)

The repeated images in 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration' serve as mnemonic aids, lend profundity to the message of the story and create narrative rhythms. Rassner (1990:235) claims that "rhythm falls into two broad categories, ... the rhythmic organization of syntagmatic units (micro-rhythms) [and] the rhythmic organization of paradigmatic units (macro-rhythms)". In "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration", micro-rhythms occur in the repetition of shorter images at the word level: "deep river" and "face". These micro-rhythms suggest conflict and tension in the story and they also push forward sequential actions in an orderly manner. Macro-rhythms are suggested by narrative consistencies, multiple incidents, specific conflict or contact between characters and recurrent micro-rhythms. Macro-rhythms frequently produce and resolve conflict. In this case, Sebembele's love for Rankwana throws the kingdom into confusion. His two brothers, Ntema and Mosemme, capitalize on the *mêlée* and threaten communal cohesion. The conflict is resolved when Sebembele renounces his right to the tribal throne and establishes a new settlement elsewhere. Macro-rhythms are more complex narrative units than the example cited here would suggest. The interplay between micro-and macro-rhythms together help generate the narrative thrust of the story and consolidate Head's predilection for orality. Whilst orality might make repetition particularly explicit in formulaic specificities such as refrains, songs or audience responses, in *The Collector of Treasures* this manifests itself through phrasal recurrences and repeated motifs. In "The Deep River: A story of Ancient Tribal Migration" the motif of

water is recurrent: “the newly-wed Mary carrying a water bucket ...” (1977:19), “He placed a jug of fresh, clean water near the candlestick ...” (1977:26), “They appeared to be dancers in slow motion, with fluid watery forms” (1977:76) and “The other women ... entered her yard with baskets of earth and buckets of water” (1977:38) The limpidity of *The Collector of Treasures* with tropes and motifs of water points to the critical importance of this substance in Botswana – an arid country whence Head’s collection of short stories derives its compositional origin. In Botswana, water is significantly a signifier for life. The narrator in Head’s *A Question of Power* (1973) reveals:

[D]uring the rainy season, Motabeng was subjected to a type of desert rain. It rained in the sky, in long streaky sheets, but rain dried up before (1973:20)

Sekoni writes of conflict:

[It] is the major source of tension *in oral narrative performance* just as it is in most other forms of fiction. The substance of any oral piece of fiction lies in the movement of images or episodes from the conception of conflict to the resolution of the conflict conceived at the initial part of the story (1990:143, my emphasis)

Although conflict is manifestly present in ‘The Deep River, A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration’, the narrative does not dwell on the conflict between characters, but also narrates tribal history and, as Le Guin would have it:

[T]o assert the dependence of narrative on conflict is to uphold social Darwinism in all its glory ... existence as struggle, life as battle, everything in terms of defeat and victory: Man versus nature, man versus woman, Black versus White, Good versus Evil, God versus Devil (1989:190)

There are other aspects of existence besides conflict, which the story celebrates: the filial love between Sebembe and his bve child, Makobi, triumphant love between Rankwana and Sebembe and loyalty, as demonstrated by a section of the community who follow Sebembe to a new settlement in the south of the erstwhile “Deep River” paradise.

The opening phrase of the story, “Long ago ..,” is a familiar trope for the opening of folktales extant in Africa and the West. Commenting on this formulaic opening, Msimang notes:

[T]he two most popular phrases for setting the folktale in the remote past tense are ... Once upon a time, and this is followed by, there once was ... There once lived (1986:1)

This formula often establishes instant silence and “defines that the narrator wants to do nothing else but tell a story. From this, the audience is then transposed and plunged into the fictional world ...” (Sunkuli and Miruka 1990:114). This is ideal for the oral credibility of the stories and authenticates Head's credence as a griot. In the words of Thomas (1990:95), “the griot recounts in an historical fashion” In writing *The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration*, Head re-visioned and re-tells the cultural history of the Talaote tribe, recording and recoding their attitudes and their vicissitudes. Although the formulaic expression, “Long ago”, is imprecise, it connects events in time and attests to the inexorable passage of time in oral cultures. Following the oral style of periodisation, Head also deploys chieftaincy as an organising narrative principle. Ngwenya (1999:116) notes that, whereas literate historiography employs a linear progression of events as measured by calendar days, pre-literate societies mark periods according to: “the various chiefs’ terms of office, and important historical events such as large-scale wars” In *The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration*, the term of office of chief Monemapee and the migration of the Talaote southwards become readily recognizable period markers embellished in the tribe's communal, oral history. Although fragmentary, the oral testimonies of the old men of the tribe are revelatory insofar as they (the testimonies) illustrate some sense of the Batalaote polity and a coherent political map of present-day Botswana: “To this day there is a separate Batalaote ward in the capital village of the Bamangwato, and the people refer to themselves still as the people of Talaote” (1977:6) These are the collective revelations of a people who are (in)directly affected by the social and political schemes of their

rulers. In preserving their memories on paper, Head contributes to the creation of collective history through story-telling.

The reference to landscape in 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration' is pertinent. The parabola of love, birth, communal fissures and the subsequent migration that is described in the story takes place against the backdrop of a quotidian landscape characterized by cattle tracks and footpaths: "Long ago, when the land was only cattle tracks and footpaths, the people lived together ..." (1977:1). Hofmeyr notes the potential of the landscape as a mnemonic tether in oral narration of history:

Oral memory has a close mnemonic relationship with place and location, ... in a variety of societies people often 'bank' information in the landscape (1993:160)

Seen from this perspective, that is, the use of landscape as a system of mnemonic ordering and the disposition to an oral style of periodization, Head is well-versed in the art of historical narration and comes closest to the identity of an oral historian. Not only is Head an historian, but she is also a researcher. Her graphic descriptions of the harvest thanksgiving ceremony which appear in the story are tellingly well-researched:

On the day on which thanksgiving was to be held, the women all followed one another in single file to the chief's place. Large vessels had been prepared at the chief's place, so that when the women came they poured the beer into them. Then there was a gathering of all the people to celebrate thanksgiving for the harvest time (1977:2)

This vivid description of the thanksgiving ceremony has a 'documentary' flavour that can only stem from personal research, Head's own experience of thirteen years of village life and the cultural history of the Batswana. Here, Head becomes, as Huma (1996:216) notes elsewhere: "a researcher of what is academically called folklore, anthropology, sociology, as well as history" To this extent, her identity is, by happenstance, also akin to what Field (2001:254) refers to as "the crafty collector of bits and pieces".

An authorial footnote to the 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration', is significant. It points to the ambivalent literary space that the story, and, by extension, the better part of *The Collector of Treasures* occupies. Having derived from a calabash of oral and print sources, the footnote reads as follows:

The story is an entirely romanticized and fictionalized version of the history of the Batalaote tribe. Some historical data was given to me by the old men of the tribe, but it was unreliable as their memories had tended to fail them. A re-construction was made therefore in my own imagination. I am also partly indebted to the London Missionary society's '*Livingstone Tswana Readers Padiso 111*, school textbook' (1977:6)

We have here a conjunction of imagination, fragmented memories and documented records, and as Kaschula (1991:121) would have it, "when an oral culture comes into contact with a literate culture ... then some changes will occur" In this story, changes occur in the re-construction of a history that possibly happened and the written re-working of an oral mnemonic as provided by the old men of the tribe. The resultant effect is that the story occupies a slippery generic juncture between an oral tale of antiquity and a modern short story. This interface between oral and literate genres makes Head both a storyteller and a short story writer. In addition to her predilection for orature, Head also draws upon a literate epistemology. For instance, the story, 'Life', begins this way: "In 1963, when the borders were first set up between Botswana and South Africa, pending Botswana's independence in 1966 ..." (1977:37). Here the reference to linear calendar days lends Head the stature of an historian in the sense of a writer of history as distinct from a teller of oral history.

Mackenzie marks out an oral-style story as:

[A story which] is characterized by its formal affinity with an oral storytelling milieu, and typically features a fictional narrator, a storyteller figure and his or her speaking voice (1999a:48)

Mackenzie's description holds true of *The Collector of Treasures'* s second story, 'Heaven is not Closed.' In this story, an ambience of orality is created through narrative techniques. The story goes in swoops and loops, it diverges from the main thrust and joins it again. This technique is reminiscent of Rushdie's (1985) observation:

[A]n oral narrative does not go from the beginning to the middle to the end of the story. It goes in swoops, .. . [in] spirals or in loops. It every so often reiterates something that happened earlier to remind you (in Ashcroft *et al* 1989:183)

Head amplifies the oral quality of this story through the fireside setting, the figure of the storyteller and a closely acquainted audience. In a typical storytelling milieu, the grandfather, old Modise, tells his family a story around the flickering flames of an outdoor hearth:

Later that evening, as he sat with his children near the outdoor fire for the evening meal, a smile again flickered over his face ... and they all turned towards their grandfather, sensing that he had a story to tell (1977:8)

The story narrates the relationship of contest and concert between the Batswana indigenous mores and the norms held by the missionaries. At the end of the mourning period for his first wife, Ralokae – an averred traditionalist – marries Galethebege, a Christian convert, and tells her resolutely: "I took my first wife according to old custom. I am going to take my second wife according to the old customs too ..." (1977:9). When Galethebege informs the missionary about her fiancé's Setswana customs and her desire to be married under the aegis of both Christian and Setswana tradition, the priest excommunicates her and condemns the two: " 'My dear' ", he said persuasively, " 'heaven is closed to the unbeliever ...' " (1977:11). Here, the bigoted priest assumes the self-constructed identity of heaven's vassal. In his blind prejudice he fails to appreciate that it is not Galethebege who is the unbeliever, but Ralokae, Galethebege's betrothed partner. However, the priest's obdurate response to Galethebege's request is undercut by the title of the story: 'Heaven is not Closed'.

Analysing the roles of performer and audience in African culture, Okpewho points out that:

[I]n the traditional setting, most public performances of songs and tales are done in such a way that there is no physical separation between performer and audience members ... this intimate contact inevitably encourages them [the audience] to express their feelings ... in sounds and gestures which the performer hardly misses (1992:63)

In 'Heaven is not Closed' this atmosphere is evoked through the ways in which the audience/readers respond to the narrative and the conversational nature of the narrative. The primary narrator, old Modise, claims:

"As you all know ... Ralokae was my brother. But none of you present knows the story of Galethebege's life, but I know it"

...

"I was never like Ralokae, an unbeliever. But that man, my brother, draws out my heart" (1977:8)

The conversational nature of this narrative transforms the reader from a distant, cold stranger who privately ingests a printed page into a participant, a member of the oral community, privy to the dilemmas that confront the characters who people the story. Such acquaintanceship is also established in the story, 'Jacob: The story of a Faith-Healing Priest'. The immanent narrator says:

[T]here is a point in his story when you begin to doubt Jacob's sanity and that of his God. Somehow you don't doubt his adult experiences and his conversations with God, but you doubt cruelty and stress placed on a young and helpless child You lean forward eagerly towards the now old man; his God seems very dubious, so you ask (1977:25)

This conversational style of narration, established by the use of 'you', evokes a sense of immediacy, adverts to the presence of a 'warm body' as well as intimacy between narrator and the reader, and as Achufusi (1991:373) claims, the reader discerns "the voice of a speaking story-teller rather than that of a distance [sic] and impersonal writer" This style of narration affiliates Head with an oral tale-teller reminiscent of antiquity.

Obiechina writes of the role of an oral storyteller:

[T]he duty of the traditional storyteller is to enunciate it [the story] in the clearest way possible and to leave each individual to reach his own solution if he can (in Schipper 1989:72)

Head's kinship with the village storyteller in the oral tradition is evident in the ending of the story, 'Heaven is not Closed'. The story concludes:

The old man leaned forward and stirred the dying fire with a partially burnt out log of wood. His listeners sighed the way people do when they have heard a particularly good story. As they stared at the fire they found themselves debating the matter in their minds (1977:12)

This ending draws forth reflection as each listener/reader attempts to reach their own solutions to the questions: "Was heaven really closed to the unbeliever? ... had Christian custom been so intolerant of Setswana custom that it could not hear the holiness of Setswana custom ... ?" (1977:12). Although Head subtly steers the reader away from religious dogmatism, she does not prescribe directives for the listener/reader. This is in consonance with Obiechina's conception of the role of an oral artist.

Another notable feature of an oral tale translocated into, and operating in 'Heaven is not Closed', is scanty description. Commenting on this oral convention, Schipper (1989:73) propounds that "if we get to know characters, it is through their actions: the personages are hardly described, even their names are often not mentioned" This economy of depiction is typical of 'Heaven is not Closed'. The unnamed first wife of Ralokae functions as the point of departure. Her untold story hinges on a single clue, her death, which came "*when the crops of the season were being harvested ...* ." (1977:8, my emphasis), It is relevant to note here that reference to crops and harvesting is a very oral way of marking the passage of time. In this story, settings and personages are described only to the extent required for the development of the plot. Even though some stylistic qualities of oral narration are embellished in this story, it remains incongruous with a traditional oral story because its context of enunciation is determined by the print contingencies of an industrial

era. The transience of old Modise's narrative tale in an oral culture becomes the permanence of narrative as writing in print culture.

In Okpewho's definitive study of African oral literature (*African Oral Literature: backgrounds, character and continuity* 1992), he writes of the relevance of proverbs: "[the] overriding value of proverbs is that they may be considered the storehouse of the wisdom of the society ... " (1992:233). This assertion holds true of *The Collector of Treasures*, particularly in the narrative piece entitled: 'Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest', in which proverbs are translocated not only to add gloss to the narrative, but also to impart pieces of folk wisdom. Some of the proverbs that appear in this narrative are: "The children of a real woman cannot fall into the fire" (1977:30), "The children of a real woman do not get lean or die" (1977:30) and "the foot cannot always find its way home" (1977:31). The examples cited here are terse sayings, embodying ancient wisdom and the personal experiences of the fictive characters who people the story. They are integral to, and veritable constituents of, communal experience that gives voice to loric values. The pithy sayings: "The children of a real woman cannot fall into the fire" (1977:30) and "The children of a real woman do not get lean or die" (1977:30), are, respectively, suggestive of mother as an anchor and a survivalist streak that comes with wisdom and resilience in the face of adversity. The proverb: "The foot cannot always find its way home" (1977:31), is indicative of the spirit of *Ubuntu* or communalism. *Ubuntu* is a well-known African communal philosophy. Mbiti (1977) explicates the cardinal aspects of communalism in Africa:

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generation and his contemporaries. He is simply part of a whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual; for the individual depends on corporate group... . Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people The individual can only say: 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am ' (1977:108-9)

The South African Government White Paper on Welfare (1996) defines the essence of *Ubuntu* as:

The principle of caring for each other's well-being and a spirit of mutual support ... each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual's humanity. *Ubuntu* means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being (Government Gazette no 16943, 1996:18)⁶

In the context of the story under discussion, the aphorism "The foot cannot always find its way home" (1977:31) aptly captures the spirit of *Ubuntu* insofar as it articulates the spirit of generosity and compassion for others. Collectively, the proverbs cited in the story are a summation of oral sayings and their total effect in the instances in which they are transfused is to reinforce traditional norms and their appropriate use, commensurate to the occasion, echo Balogun's postulation (1991:92) that "the proverb is a proud heritage, highly respected among the Ibo and all African people, and its use ought to be commensurate to the occasion" In their use as formulaic expressions, the proverbs, according to Ong (1982:35), help to "implement rhythmic discourse and also act as mnemonic aids in their own right, as set expressions circulating through the mouths and ears of all" The appropriate deployment of proverbs in *The Collector of Treasures* re-establishes Head's identity with the figures of the oral story-teller *par excellence* and that of a griot. This specific identity configuration is further given impetus by the judicious interpolation of oral stylistic conventions such as repetition and the conversational use of the second person pronoun, "You". On the other hand, in explicating village gossip in the narrative piece entitled 'The Special One', Head assumes, through the narrative voice, the identity of a gossip-monger in a useful way insofar as she sheds light on a glib cultural view of menstruation:

"Don't you ever know what's going on in this village?" the gossipy neighbour persisted. "No one will talk to her. She's a wash-out! Everyone knows about her private life. She had a terrible divorce case. She was driving the husband mad. She pestered him day and night for the blankets, and even wanted

him to do it during the time she was having her monthly bleeding. Many women have killed men by sleeping with them during that time. It's a dangerous thing and against our custom”(1977:84)

Here, the association of menstruation with danger and contagion produce a taboo object – woman. This aspect of *The Collector of Treasures* is discussed in detail in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

Taken together, the narrative pieces that constitute *The Collector of Treasures* show Bessie Head to have, like Thato in ‘Hunting’, the storyteller’s gift of sifting and sorting:

Like all women, she was involved in village gossip and disputes. She knew everything, but the richness of her communication lay in her gift to sift and sort out all the calamities of everyday life with the unerring heart of a good story-teller. (1977:108-9)

But the craft of sifting and sorting and the embellishment of narrative and stylistic conventions that are germane to an oral milieu do not, on their own, render *The Collector of Treasures* a faithful transcription of oral tales in the mode of J.P. Clark’s edition of the thoroughgoing oral mimetic, *The Ozidi Saga* (1977), which meticulously documents audience experience of an oral narrative performance. Unlike Clark, Head brings to bear on her collection of short stories an individual and imaginative impetus that creates a hybrid form in its cross-pollination of oral and printed literature.

Scheub defines a folktale as:

Performing art which has, as its mainspring, a core- cliché (a song, chant or saying) which is during a performance developed, expanded and *dramatized before an audience*. (1975:3, my emphasis)

Here, Scheub explicates a disjuncture between orality and literacy. Wright makes a similar remark:

[T]he oral tale is *designed to be said, not read* – to be engaged with in a process of public interaction and exchange, not privately ingested on the printed page (1997:139, my emphasis)

As printed text, *The Collector of Treasures* is firmly rooted within the domain of literacy and therefore compromises the performative qualities of a folktale. In other words, the timbre of the spoken word, the kinesics of an oral performance, the 'warm-body' interaction between addressor and auditor as well as a hoard of other contingencies, such as recapitulations and audience responses, preponderant in a performed folktale, are atrophied.

Whereas a storyteller dramatizes before an intimate audience, Head, on the other hand, writes for a readership. This is in spite of the vestiges of elements extant in an oral culture, which I have examined. Whilst Head's unconventional narrative techniques situate her collection of stories within an ambivalent space with relation to genre conventions, the confluence between orality and literacy subtly unites these two ontological modes of enunciation insofar as they both use words not only to convey messages, but also to signify mental pictures upon the retina of the reader's or the audience's mind.

Overall, *The Collector of Treasures* puts Head at a juncture of:

negotiating the interstices between two entirely different ontological modes, ... from live audience to absent reader, from reciprocity and interaction to a process of private interpretation removed ... in time and place. (Mackenzie 1997:61–62)

Skilled negotiator that she is, Head selects and reshapes each story that constitutes *The Collector of Treasures* with the combined skills of an oral historian, a raconteur, a griot and a storyteller *par excellence* so that one often imagines the cadences of the speaking voice of an oral storyteller in such throwaway lines as “ ...You lean forward eagerly towards the now old man, his God seems very dubious, so you ask ...” (1977:25). However, as one imagines the remnants of the charm of words that Head listened to as she collected her fine treasures, the reality of printed pages before a reader's eyes reminds one that Head is a refined short story writer, inspired by orality but enunciating through literacy.

ENDNOTES

¹ See also Hale , T. (1990).

² The characteristics associated with oral ontology are inventoried in Ong, W. (1982:68-69).

³ See also Propp, V. (1984).

In a footnote to this story, Head confesses: "some historical data was given to me by the old men of the tribe, but it was unreliable as their memories had tended to fail them. A reconstruction was made therefore in my own imagination ... " (1977:6).

Head's revelation recalls Propp's remark: "It can be established that the creator of a tale rarely invents, he receives his material from his surroundings or from current realities and adopts them to a tale" (1984:113).

⁶ *Ubuntu's* respect for individuality differs from conventional Western concepts of individuality as expressed in the popular Cartesian maxim, "I think, therefore I am". The individual in African *Ubuntu* is not a solitary figure, but defined in relation to others.

See also Edet, R.N (1992) and Scrambler & Scrambler (1993).

CHAPTER TWO

THE CONDITION OF WOMEN: Identity and subversive consciousness

What type of women is Africa producing? (Emecheta in *Destination Biafra* 1983:191)

Long ago there were no women. There were only two men who lived on honey. (Saramo myth of creation, Tanzania, cited in Schipper 1987:38)

The short stories that constitute Head's *The Collector of Treasures* (1977) thematically evince Head's concern with the proscribed position of women in a patriarchal society. She perceives her work as reflecting the subjugated condition of women and she confesses:

[T]he ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things is that they relegated [sic] to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life (1977:92)

This observation enables Head to use her stories as reflections on the "mind-forged manacles" (Beeton *et al* 1984:141) reminiscent of Blake, that bind women in Africa and other regions of the world. In this chapter, I explore some of the social conditions and emotional problems that are experienced by the women characters. I begin by sketching a broad canvas of the constraints that women, particularly African women, have to confront. I also postulate that the power differential between women and male characters is undercut by a subversive consciousness that often emerges at a juncture of women's identity (re-)formation. Here, once again, *The Collector of Treasures* enables me to trace and identify the various manifestations of patriarchal subordination of women and to give due attention to Head's concern with men's dominion over women and her vision of the emancipatory possibilities for women.

In view of the reciprocal concerns which subtend literatures, I draw out intertextual affinities with other African writers such as Emecheta, Nwapa and

Bâ. Texts such as *The Joys of Motherhood* (Emecheta 1980), *One is Enough* (Nwapa 1981) and *So Long a Letter* (B 1981) are discussed because the issues that they explore are similar to Head's concerns. Immanent in the aesthetics of these writers are aspects such as the oppression of women, polygamy, the conflation of woman with motherhood and cultural suppositions that perpetuate the suppression of women. Taken together, these texts create a pervasive picture of the caustic condition of being an African woman.

I use the term "patriarchy" to refer to the social system in which authority is vested in the male head/s of the household – the patriarch and other male elders within the kinship group. Patriarchy literally means "the rule of the fathers". In the context of *The Collector of Treasures*, the term is employed to evoke the general situation of men's dominance over women, as in discourse about gender in general.

I refer to the "condition of women" to denote a generalized situation where men as a group or individuals have more social and economic power than women, including power over women. I apply the term "polygamy" with its popular meaning as signifier of a matrimonial situation in which there is one husband but more than one wife, although anthropologists would define such a situation as polygyny.¹ Related to patriarchy, the subordination of women and polygamy is the notion of the phallus. The Phallus signifies the symbolic status of the penis (as in Lacan's writing).² The phallic, in the context of *The Collector of Treasures*, is an aspect of patriarchal power and privilege that encompasses men's relation to women. I employ the concept of subversive consciousness to evoke women's awareness of their proscribed condition, their intentional endeavours to upset the status quo and their efforts to cauterize their "man-made" emotional keloids.

In this chapter, I distinguish three positions in relation to the condition of women and women's identity formation, namely, traditional women, transitional and transformative women. In conceptualizing these three positions, I draw upon the insights of Ireland (1993), who uses these identifications from a different perspective, as organizing principles for the

condition of women relative to the social expectation of motherhood. Ireland describes these roles as follows:

[T]he traditional woman has tried to fulfill the traditional maternal role but could not because of infertility or health problems The transitional woman became childless because of delay. These women delay making a decision until it seems too late to have a child The transformative woman consciously chooses not to become a mother. These women actively decide not to have children, but the decision may or may not be made later, in their 30's (1993:15)

In my dissertation, these dimensions are presented from another perspective : The traditional woman draws on cultural stereotypes regarding womanhood. She fulfils the traditional African conception of a nurturing mother who is consigned to the hearth, doing household chores such as cooking, collecting firewood or water for the household and producing children for a man's clan and claim to prosperity. The transitional woman occupies a juncture somewhere between the traditional and the transformative identities. She exhibits elements of traditional maternal identity, but she positions herself on the threshold of change. She is characterised by her capacity for flexibility of identity. The transformative woman, on the other hand, consciously inverts the edifice of settled orthodoxy and occasionally bolts out of the structures and strictures of patriarchy to weave for herself a subversive identity. Head treats these dimensions of being an African woman in a sociological context, which locates the origin of women's problems within human society.

Nwachuku writes:

Most human societies are patriarchal. Consequently, societal norms and sex-role functions are prescribed by the dominant, male sex. Since societal cohesiveness is maintained by strict adherence to social roles, appropriate role performance usually earns approval while inappropriate performance usually brings disapproval, rejection, role sanction, and, in extreme cases, social ostracism. Consequently, the subordinate female in transformed or transitional societies, when faced with matters of choice or preference, is bound to come into conflict with the mainstream cultural norm in question. When they lead to a so-

called deviation from the norm, such cultural conflicts are normally unwelcome (1992:54-5)

According to Nwachuku there is, then, a marked cleavage between women and men, with women designated as having subordinate status. This gender schism is especially forceful in a patrilineal organization of society as found in many African countries and traditions. Seeking to describe the condition of an African woman, Head says:

[B]lack women have a certain history of oppression within African culture. Women have always had a second position to men. In a society like Botswana, some of women's problems are rooted in custom and tradition. What is certainly very dominant here is that the male had a superior position to the female Some of women's problems are due to their hereditary position in African culture and society (in Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:15)

Women and men occupy separate domains. Within these domains, men are preponderantly public figures, assuming a public stance as the voice and conscience of society – “the salt of the earth” – whereas women are assigned the domestic space of the hearth and its allied roles of child-bearer, child-rearer, mother and wife.³ According to Frank (1987:14-5), “by and large women are defined ... by their relations to men: they are someone's daughter or wife or mother, shadowy figures who hover on the fringes ... suckling infants, cooking, plaiting their hair” Various, women are stereotyped as secretaries or businesswomen of ill-repute and there is the incorrigible figure of a harlot and a witch. These stereotypes lead to the proscription of women's potential in society and their perpetual circumscription. At a biological level, women must also bear the cultural burdens of menstruation, menopause, childbirth and childlessness. Of the ominous significance of menstrual blood, Edet writes:

[A]mong most ethnic groups in Africa, menstrual blood is regarded as impure. Menstruating women are segregated from the community and forbidden to touch objects of ceremonial usage, sometimes even their own food, for risk of contamination.

They are forbidden to enter certain ceremonial shrines during the period (1992:27-8)

In general, taboos on menstruating women are extant in cultures across the world. Fanusie (1992:144) observes that “the Mende believe that a woman will transmit bad luck to a male if coitus occurs when a woman is having her menses” It is peculiar that a woman is regarded as tarnished during her menses. Yet, with the cessation of menstruation and the onset of the climacteric she is likely to be caricatured as a malicious outcast. According to Greer (1991:19), “Men see menopause as the cancellation of the only important female functions, namely attracting, stimulating, gratifying and nurturing men and/or children” Weideger adds:

In our culture [patriarchal culture] woman is sexually desirable only as long as her sexuality can also inspire fear. Once she no longer menstruates, she is assumed to have lost her sexuality, ... our cultural inheritance has dictated that woman is valuable and only valuable only as long as she can reproduce (in Mankowitz 1984:23)

Here, patriarchal dicta adjudge women’s biological functions as social misdemeanours. This is in keeping with a widespread association of women with the body – and a patriarchal dislike of both. Apart from the stigmatization of their biological functions, women also fulfil reproductive tasks. Cornwell notes:

[W]omen in sub-Saharan Africa are likely to produce at least six children in their lifetimes. Childbirth in Africa is a dangerous business because of the lack of trained medical and paramedical staff. Health services are seldom available to those who need it most: pregnant women and young children. African women are 22 times more likely to die in childbirth than their counterparts in industrial states (2000:5)

The foregoing quotation points to the gloomy prospect of childbirth in Africa and the contradictory, risky perception of motherhood as sacrosanct. Africa places a primary value on woman’s self-definition in motherhood, to such an

extent that “one wonders if there are no women who hate childbirth or have undeveloped maternal instincts ... ” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1987:6).

The gender differential between women and men is also manifested at an economic level. Coward describes the situation thus:

[W]omen are never individuals in their own right in social policy. They are not entitled to benefits in their own right as individuals, but only as dependants of men, or as women who have lost the support of men. This plays into other social practices, such as those which determine economic forms. Women are constantly consigned and consign themselves to low-paid ghettoised employment because of ideologies about the role played by a woman's wage in the family's income, or woman's labour within the home ... women's subordination is secured because identity is constructed as sexual identity, and sexual identity is the mechanism by which men and women combine in a unit which subordinates women (in Clayton 1989:3-4)

Coward's argument is that patriarchy is also embedded in the economic paradigm to produce what Cornwell (2000) refers to as “the feminisation of poverty”. Cornwell encapsulates the economic disparities between the two sexes with specific reference to an African context:

[T]hose who can be classified as living in conditions of absolute poverty are female. The feminisation of poverty means, in very simple terms, that not only can more women than men be classified as poor, but even poor women are actually worse off than their male counterparts. Whether women are dependent members of households, earning members or heads of households, they are poorer than men in the same categories (2000:7)

The feminisation of poverty means that women are subjugated on account of their gender, irrespective of their skills and educational qualifications. Women who work in low-paid jobs become dependent on their partners to contribute to household costs. Without men's earnings, many women live at or below the poverty line. Overall, men's dominion over women is increased through their greater earning capacity.

At a cultural level, women are burdened by mores and customs, in combination with patriarchal interpretations of various religious precepts. Nasimiyu-Wasike (1992:112) explicates the situation as follows: “women are vulnerable and powerless in patriarchal societies. They are unable to attack the power of customs, traditions, and men that subjugate them to men and keep them in inferior and subordinate positions” The implication here is that a woman in patriarchal society often wavers helplessly between her allegiance to her cultural mores and her aspiration to self-fulfillment and self-identity. As Frank (1987:17) puts it, “to flout the ideas not merely of one’s society but also of one’s own mother is a very difficult and sometimes heartbreaking task” For example, even given their education and a transformative urban environment, women also have to contend with the institution of polygamy. Nasimiyu-Wasike articulates the warped particularities of polygamy:

[In] patriarchal traditional Africa, it was every man’s ideal to increase the number of his wives and thus recapture and expand his immortality As a result of having many wives and many children, males enjoyed privileged and respectable positions in society. In the patriarchal system, women were valued only in relation to men. A woman’s procreative power was important not for her own sake, but for strengthening the husband’s power or immortality and for giving him a privileged and prestigious status in society. The woman was looked upon as the vessel of life or a fertile field in which a man planted his seeds (1992:102)

It emerges here that polygamy favours men by boosting their egos at the expense of women, who continue to be discriminated against, in the family, in the institutions, in society and even in some works of literature. As Schipper (1987:48) notes, “[I]n African literature as a whole woman hardly has a mouth yet. The image of women in the novel is also very much a male writer’s business, and often sadly stereotyped”

The short stories that constitute Head’s *The Collector of Treasures* are apprehended from a trajectory of women’s circumscribed position in society, as adumbrated above. The suppression of women is often traceable in the

dimness of time through aetiological myths and legends. Aetiological myths seek to trace the genesis of life and the origin of such natural phenomena as mountains. Legends dwell more on subjects such as wars, migration, the effect of these events on society and society's response to them. By and large, legends record, not always objectively, the history of a community. As a case in point, the opening story of *The Collector of Treasures*, 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration' puts a woman, Rankwana, in the centre of the activities which eventually lead to the migration of a section of the Monemapee kingdom to the South. In this aetiological tale, a woman is portrayed as a source of perdition and a contemptuous creature to behold and begrudge:

[T]he old men there keep on giving confused and contradictory accounts of their origins, but they say they lost their place of birth over a woman. They shake their heads and say that women have always caused a lot of trouble in the world. They say that the child of their chief was named Talaote, to commemorate their expulsion from the kingdom of Monemapee (1977:6, my emphasis)

Chetin (1989:115) reviews 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration' as "an archetypal variation of man's Biblical expulsion from paradise where women are held responsible for the exile state of the human race" Just as Eve, the prototype of woman, is branded for man's expulsion from the paradisaal garden of Eden in the Bible, the old men of the erstwhile 'Deep River' paradise bemoan their perdition on account of Rankwana's infamy. Fanusie (1992) gives similar accounts within African contexts:

[T]wo Yomba accounts refer to the greed and disrespect of a woman that deprived humankind of the unrestricted bliss of heaven. The oral traditions say that heaven was so near the earth that people could touch it. On one occasion, a greedy woman took a large quantity of food from heaven and could not finish it; as a result, heaven was removed from the reach of humankind; and the task of searching for food began. Another account tells that a woman with dirty hands touched the unsoiled face of heaven, and this led to our loss of heavenly bliss (1992:138)

Here, a woman is mythologically discriminated against and branded as disobedient and vainly egotistical.⁹ There is also a vexing link with the Judaeo-Christian story of 'Genesis' where women are regarded as scapegoats. As the Bible does not blame Adam for the fall, 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration' does not blame Sebembe. In fact, at the first opportunity, Adam put the blame on Eve:

God asked, "Did you eat the fruit that I told you not to eat?" The man answered, "The woman you put here with me gave me the fruit, and I ate it" (*Genesis* 3:11-12)

In 'The Deep River: 'A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration', Rankwana, Monemapée's junior wife, falls in love with Sebembe – the son of a senior wife - and begets a love child by him. Their relationship is almost incestuous because it is more passionate than filial or platonic. From an African perspective, Sebembe is Rankwana's son. However, Rankwana insists on the legitimacy of the relationship: "You doubt my love for you, Sebembe", she said. "I would kill myself if I lose you. If you leave me, I would kill myself" (1977:4) Here, Rankwana subverts tradition and thereby assumes the semblance of a transformative identity. However, she still has to grapple with phallogocentric prescriptions embodied in the characters of Ntema and Mosemme, Sebembe's brothers, who capitalise on the situation by emphasising what they consider Sebembe's weakness for a woman. In an attempt to save the kingdom from a schism, Rankwana's father sets her up with an unknown husband and tells her, almost tearfully:

You have put me in great difficulties, my child, ... *women never know their own minds* and once this has passed away and *you have many children* you will wonder what all the fuss was about (1977:4, my emphasis)

In his association of women with shallow-mindedness; his conflation of womanhood with childishness; his perception of women as vessels which are perpetually pregnant with many children; and the idea that all a woman needs to fulfil her is children, Rankwana's father serves as the substratum of

phallocentrism. Rankwana's involuntary removal from Sebembele's household to an unknown husband embodies the notion of women as chattels bartered for patriarchal convenience and recalls Irigaray's description of women as exchange value: "for woman is traditionally use-value for man, exchange-value among men. Merchandise, then. This makes her the guardian of matter whose price will be determined by subjects ... " (in Olausson 1997:201). Women are therefore conceptualised as commodities whose value is determined by men's needs and desires.

In 'The Deep River : A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration', it is paradoxical that, "in a world where women were of no account" (1977:3), it is Sebembele – a male figure – who subverts the phallonnormative agenda of his brothers and publicly declares his love for his father's junior wife. He claims: "The love between Rankwana and I is great" (1977:3). Sebembele shows his deep affection for Rankwana by renouncing his hereditary claim to the throne and leaving with her and some loyalists to establish a new settlement in the South: "To this day there is a separate Botlaote ward in the capital village of the Bamangwato, and the people refer to themselves still as people of Talaote ..." (1977:6).

The tendency to use women as scapegoats is also evident in the story entitled 'Kgotsla'. The male elders at the *kgotsla* defend themselves against Rose's blustering accusations of xenophobia. They lay the blame on women in the community and analyse the situation thus:

[T]he men found virtue in the foreigners, and they were even commenting about it. This drove the women wild. They said: "well now what has Gobosamang's wife got that we haven't got?". So they decided to poison this happy marriage because they were wild with jealousy ... (1977:66)

Here, stereotypes regarding women's place in society still mean that women are inclined to petty jealousy, whereas men are, as always, seen as beyond reproach. The context of this story, however, mitigates this assumption. Rose's wayward husband, Gobosamang, is, in fact, to blame for the

degeneration of their matrimonial alliance. During Rose's visit to her home village, Gobosamang moves in with a widow, Tsietso, and squanders her money. Ironically, it is the women who solve this case. Rose offers to pay back the money her husband squandered and Tsietso agrees to receive it in installments. In this story, both Rose and Tsietso are used as cash cows by the enfeebled Gobosamang, who even though unemployed, is in charge of spending the family money on account of his privileged gender.

De Lauretis writes of:

[T]he non-being of woman: the paradox of a being that is ... constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible or inexpressible, displayed as spectacle and still unrepresentable and ... a being whose existence and specificity are simultaneously asserted and denied, negated and controlled (1990:115)

This (dis)elaboration of woman as an ambiguous absent/present dichotomy is exemplified in the story, 'Heaven is not Closed', with Ralokae's unnamed first wife as an exemplar. The text neither names nor characterises her. This is in keeping with her societal inscription and conformism as a non-entity, nothing in herself but only valuable for what she can produce. Her story hinges on a single piece of evidence – her death, which came "when the crops of the season were being harvested" (1977:8). Her presence is mediated by the words of other characters who gesture towards her absence. Her non-being is further compounded by the fact that she died childless. According to Mbiti (1969):

[T]he failure to bear children is for an African woman worse than committing genocide. She has not only become the dead end for the genealogical line, but also for herself. When she dies, nobody of her own immediate blood will be there to "remember" her, to keep her in the state of personal immortality: She will simply be "forgotten" (in Van Dyk 2001:63)

Of Ralokae's first wife, Harrow writes:

[S]he died in childbirth, and left no other visible trace than her absence, her death, the time of her dying. *Without children* and

name she faced the worst of fates customarily reserved for the *childless* and dispossessed, oblivion (1993:171, my emphasis)

This implies that, without a child, Ralokae's first wife's potential for the symbolic perpetuation of her image throughout generations is lost and, with it, she has also lost her identity. She is neither a traditional, a transitional nor a transformative woman, but a non-person. That her self-representation is eclipsed is illustrative of the condition of a childless woman. Bahemuka (1992) further encapsulates the sacrosanct status of parenthood in an African marriage:

Every African marriage called for procreation. There was no marriage in the African sense unless the fruit of that marriage could be seen. It was the duty of every married couple to reproduce and to contribute to society by giving it new members. The parents were biologically reproduced in their children; they contributed to perpetuating the chain of humanity. Marriage and procreation were therefore seen as unity, a unity which attempted to recapture, even if partly, humanity's lost gift of immortality (1992:120)

Bahemuka's observation shows how deeply ingrained the ideology of motherhood is in Africa. Patriarchy dictates that it is nearly impossible to think about an adult woman who, by choice or happenstance, remains childless without the spectre of absence, blame or negative identity. Yet, "male reproductive functioning and fatherhood are not the centerpieces for adult male [identity], but female reproductive capacity has become central and definitive for normative female development ..." (Ireland 1993:7). The reason why male childlessness is left unspoken of has its theoretical basis in Freud's psychoanalytic theory regarding women's development and reification of the penis.^{1 0} Freud hypothesised that boys and girls develop similarly prior to the oedipal stage. He believed that in infancy and through early childhood a girl is unaware of her vagina, but aware of her possession of a clitoris – an analogue of the penis. Later he argues that with the onset of curiosity regarding sexual difference, and the realization that boys possess a penis, girls become disappointed with their 'lack' and blame mothers for not

providing them with the penis, or they think that they had one but it was removed. Essentially, psychoanalysis uses maleness as the benchmark for female identity, and since sexual libido is perceived as being 'male', men's childlessness is implausible and 'impossible'.

In the story 'Heaven is not Closed', gender interfaces with contingencies of race, culture and the hegemonic structures of patriarchy to produce a subjugated, traditional identity – Galethebege, Ralokae's second wife. Her propensity for a traditional identity is delineated through her characterization: "Galethebege knew what she would do. She would do all that Ralokae commanded as a good wife should ..." (1977:10). Galethebege cannot imagine a destiny for herself other than the one endured by countless women before her, a destiny portentously expressed by the narrator of the story, "The Collector of Treasures":

[T]he ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things is that they relegated [sic] to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life (1977:92)

Patriarchy's stranglehold over women is so pervasive and perverse that the quotation above bears salient repetition in this dissertation.

In 'Heaven is not Closed' Galethebege accepts the patriarchal attitude that women are inferior. When Ralokae gets betrothed to her, he informs her incisively: "I took my first wife according to old custom. I am going to take my second wife according to the customs too ..." (1977:9). Here, Ralokae asserts his ancestor-given superior status and Galethebege seeks help from another superior – a priest. She says: "I shall tell the priest about this matter because his command is that I marry in Church ..." (1977:11). However, the racist priest jettisons her:

[S]he was a complete non-entity, a part of the vague black blur which was his congregation They [the priests] always knew the superficial stories about 'heathen customs' and an expression of disgust crept into his face. Sexual malpractices

were associated with the traditional marriage ceremony
'That we cannot allow!' he said sharply (1977:10)

In this context, not only does the priest show a 'conservative' predisposition for male superiority over women, but he also exhibits an obstinate and intolerant attitude towards the traditional customs of the congregation to whom he should minister the gospel of love and tolerance. This aspect is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three of my dissertation.

Galethebege dies carrying the patriarchal burdens of gender, marriage, religion and colonialist attitudes as embodied in the settler-priest. Hers is a double blow; she dies emotionally when the church rejects her and later on, she dies physically. Head's point here is that women are destroyed by male power structures.

In the story entitled 'Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest', a traditional identity emerges with the entrance of Johannah into the text and in prophet Jacob's life. With Johannah's entrance, Jacob "soon found that his home was run peacefully with clockwork precision, by a woman full of the traditions and customs of the country ... and it was as though he was transported back into a childhood he might have had had his mother lived ..." (1977:34). Johannah's posturing evokes the stereotypical notion of woman as a housekeeper, child-rearer, nurturer and mother: "Jacob pondered on all these things shown him by his new wife, and also the customs which she followed so strictly to teach her children the correct way of living with others" (1977:35). Although the narrator approves of Johannah's posture, her inclination for homekeeping inscribes her as a conduit for the perpetuation of female stereotypes.

Harrow (1993:169) asserts that "caught in a network of social custom and constraint, the women in Head's stories experience moments of transition ... violence and death" This assertion holds true of the narrative piece entitled 'Life'. The name of the title character, 'Life', is connotative of her penchant for hedonism, her disarmingly bohemian disposition and her sexual

licentiousness. The dalliance she revels in is revealed in the injunction: “Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking – corpse” (1977:40). After a stint in neighbouring South Africa as “a singer, beauty queen, advertising model and prostitute ...” (1977:39), Life resettles in the central part of the village of her birth: “On mentioning that her name was Life Morapedi, the villagers immediately and obligingly took her to the Morapedi yard in the central part of the village ...” (1977:37). Her resettlement in the central part of the village assumes added significance when applied to subversive consciousness and the structuring of space/place as a metaphor for the power differential between men and women. Huma (1996:6) claims that “an identity is called ... subversive when it defies or challenges its prior definition – a definition that usually emerges from the center [sic] or metropole” Once she is settled in the centre, Life unsettles the village culture of social intercourse in which men could obtain sex gratuitously, for she is “the first and the only woman in the village to make a business out of selling herself. The men were paying for services ...” (1977:39). Intrigued by this new development, men of the village keep going to her yard in search of a new kind of excitement:

None of the men questioned their behaviour, nor how such an unnatural situation had been allowed to develop - they could get all the sex they needed for free in the village, but it seemed to fascinate them that they should pay for it for the first time
(1977:40)

In her rapacious promiscuity, Life retains a degree of agency but she cannot repossess her body. One thing redeems her, though: she selects her exploiters and determines the time for each encounter: “[Men] had quickly got to the stage where they communicated with Life in short-hand language: ‘When?’ And she would reply: ‘Ten o’clock ...’ and so on ...” (1977:40-1). Here, it is a transformative woman who is in control of both men’s carnal desires and their purse strings. She acquires power by actively soliciting men for economic and sexual gratification and thereby subverts the gendered economy of the village. In the village, “for the illiterate women there was farming and housework; for the literate, teaching, nursing and clerical work ...” (1977:39). Life’s subversion of gendered professions of the village recalls

Precious Ramotswe, the heroine of McCall Smith's *The No. 1 Ladies' detective agency* (2003 [Sound recording]). In contemporary Botswana, sleuth Precious Ramotswe decides to go against tradition and establishes her own business – a detective agency. Soon she is in the thick of several perplexing cases. In *The Collector of Treasures*, Life attracts to her centre an emerging group of transformative subjectivities, namely the beer-brewing brigade:

[T]he beer-brewing women were a gay and lovable crowd who emancipated themselves some time ago. They were drunk everyday ... and had developed a language all their own: "... Boyfriends, Yes. Husbands, uh, no. Do this! Do that! We want to rule ourselves" (1977:41)

Although Life embodies transformative possibilities for the subjugated position of women, her incursion into the centre of patriarchy demonstrates at once the dangers lurking in the fold of this space. This danger is manifested in the laconic command Lesego issues to Life when he first encounters her in the bar: "Come here" (1977:41). That Life is attracted to Lesego's sense of power and control indicates that her own sense of power and control is limited by patriarchal demands for a woman to be subservient. Also, her debauchery and self – commodification keeps her dependent on men for her financial upkeep. Even though the text elides the reason for Life's acquiescence to Lesego's marriage proposal, Nasimiyu-Wasike, in her analysis of polygamy in Africa (1992:106-7), gestures to the possible reasons: "*unmarried or childless women were considered incomplete ...* . A woman was considered weak, vulnerable and defenseless, and thus needed a man for security, survival and *guidance ...*" (my emphasis). After her marriage, Life boasts to her beer-brewing friends: "my old ways are over ... I have become a woman ..." (1977:42). In this instance, Life panders to the patriarchal script of marriage as a condition of fulfilled womanhood and thereby inclines towards a transitional identity.

Lesego makes three tyrannous pronouncements about the household:

[H]e took control of all the money. She had to ask him for it and state what it was to be used for. Then he didn't like the transistor radio blaring the whole day (1977:43)

Life must now forgo her self-emancipation and, as Sample postulates:

[H]er space must [now] accommodate male conditions for her survival: Male control of all the money, male control of her socializing ... and male control of her sexuality (1991:5)

That Lesego looks down at Life "from a great height" (1977:43) is indicative of his phallocratic dominance and recalls Stroud's observation that "phallic sexuality is characterised by a display of power through domination and control ... " (1996:145). Lesego entrenches his phallic power through an ominous decree: "If you go with those men again, I'll kill you ..." (1977:43). This is direct locution with a ring of finality about it. Any transgression thereof is an invitation to death. Here Lesego asserts his ancestor - given rights to possess his wife. However, Life knows about transgressions. She soon realises the constrictive nature of her marriage and the emotional strain it places on her taboo-free disposition. Metaphorically, she is still in power; one morning she confesses her agony to her beer-brewing friends: "I think I have made a mistake. Married life doesn't suit me ..." (1977:44). Here, Life's discernment recalls Amaka, the heroine of Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981), who tells Mclaid, her Roman Catholic priest boyfriend:

I don't want to be a wife ... there is something in that word that does not suit me. As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife, I am almost impotent, I am in prison, unable to advance in body or soul (1981:132)

Just like Amaka, Life now views the institution of marriage as a prison and she determines to re-claim her transformative identity : "the old, reckless wild woman awakened from a state near death with a huge sigh of relief. The transistor blared ... she told one of the men she'd see him at six o'clock ..." (1977:44). By reclaiming her sexuality, apart from her husband's control, Life subverts the cultural border between power and sexual relations and, as

Mernissi warns, “any transgression of the boundaries is a danger to the social order because it is an attack on the acknowledged allocation of power ...” (in Harrow 1993:170). For her transgression of the boundary, the pendulum of life (no pun intended) swings tragically and the name, Life, assumes an ironic undertone when Lesego fulfills his inauspicious warning: “I’ll kill you ...” (1977:43), and in an act of rampant machismo, butchers Life with “one of the large [knives] he used for slaughtering cattle ...” (1977:45). That he murders her with a large knife used for slaughtering cattle reduces Life to the status of an animal to be butchered. Life is dealt a double blow: her life is symbolically taken away when she loses her freedom within the patriarchal institution of marriage and when she is physically killed by Lesego and the name, Life, takes on an ironic spin. The murder of Life embodies the emotional and physical signposts attendant on the problematics of being a woman. Women live under the lingering shadow of spousal abuse, harassment and the forever gathering, ominous cloud of wife-slaying.¹¹

Ojo-Ade [1990:81] claims that “Bessie Head takes sides with the woman, the silent partner whose story must be told” This claim is tellingly demonstrated in the story entitled ‘The Special One’. In this story, a woman, embodied by the characters of Mrs Maleboge and Gaenametse, is negatively defined. Gaenametse is variously described as “a terrible woman”, “a wash-out” and “that one” (1977:84-5). These are contemptible epithets and, as the narrator points out “it was the height of insult to refer to someone as that one ...” (1977:84). It is paradoxical that such derisive nomenclatures are employed by a gossipy woman neighbour against a fellow “sister”. Here, a woman suffers insult and verbal abuse at the hands of another woman, and in this way, the gossipy neighbour sanctions the negative identity of woman as the scum of society and thereby appropriates unto herself the identity of a daughter of patriarchy. Gaenametse’s attacker points to the enmity between women, and this inimical attitude undermines women’s solidarity against patriarchy. Apart from verbal abuse, women are also ill-treated on account of their gender. For instance, Mrs Maleboge is cheated out of her inheritance by their brother-in-law “because women are just dogs in this society ...”

(1977:81). Mrs Maleboge is a woman and therefore seen as dispensable because power resides in the domain of males.

The condition of women is further circumscribed by their biological functions. For an example, at menstruation, a woman is apprehended as contaminated and as a harbinger of death. In 'The Special One', the gossip-monger claims:

[M]any women have killed men by sleeping with them during that time [of menstruation]. It's a dangerous thing and against our custom. The woman will remain alive and the man will die ...
 . (1977:84)

The neighbour's apprehensive assessment of menstruation not only puts the whole experience into a sexual context, but also renders women culpable for a natural process. However, the narrator gives short shrift to this sordid notion of menses: "I simply told her quite seriously, without knowing anything definite about it, that where I came from the men usually slept with the women when they were menstruating ..." (1977:85).

Edet (1992) gives one reason for the menstrual taboo:

Sexuality and violence have been associated over the course of several centuries. It is this association that lends an impure aspect to menstrual blood, which is seen as a physical representation of sexual violence. This process of symbolization is a response to some half-suppressed desire by men to place the blame for all forms of violence on women (1992:28-9)

Steinem (1984) echoes Edet and contends that it is demonstrably the salience and pervasiveness of a patriarchal ideology that underpins the ubiquitous stereotyping of menses as an embarrassing intrusion into wo/men's lives. In a polemical piece, Steinem speculates about what would happen if suddenly men could menstruate and women could not:

Clearly, menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event: Men would brag about how long and how much. Young boys would talk about it as the envied beginning of manhood. Gifts, religious ceremonies, family dinners and stag parties would mark the day. To prevent monthly work loss among the powerful, congress would fund a National Institute of Dysmenorrhea. Doctors would research little about heart attacks ... but everything about cramps. Sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free (in Scrambler and Scrambler 1993:69)

Although Steinem's piece is amusing, it posits a challenge to the cultural stereotyping of menstruation and calls for the acceptance of menstruation as part of the process of life. In this way, Steinem gestures towards a subversive reconceptualization of menses.

In 'The Special One', a transformative identity emerges through the character of Gaenametse. In a society where female sexuality is taboo, particularly in menopausal women, she reveals a secret:

I can tell you a secret. Even old women like Mrs Maleboge are quite happy. They still make love When you are old, that's the time you make love, more than when you are young. You make love because you are no longer afraid of making babies. You make love with young boys. They all do it but it is done very secretly. No one suspects, that's why they look so respectable in the day time (1977:84)

Gaenametse's revelation of women's sexual gratification and the attendant social duplicity is analogous to her subversive consciousness and self-identity as a transformative woman. Her increased sexual libido is reminiscent of Kaplan's observation:

During and after menopause, an interesting sexual change often occurs: women become more erotic. Some older women have more sexual fantasies, masturbate more frequently, and want sex more than when they were young. Rather than fading away with the decline of estrogen, their sexual desire increases ... for many women, inhibitions have now worn off. [They] ... enjoy sex more especially now that [they are] freed from the burden of birth control and fear of pregnancy (1977:112-3)

Here, Kaplan reconceptualizes a patriarchal notion that purports that at the climacteric women are no longer sexually desirous, and that the loss of youthful nubility and fertility signifies loss of femininity. In her carnal indulgences with young boys, Gaenametse rejects the male construction of menopause and mitigates phallic views of the condition. According to Greer, “men see menopause as the cancellation of the only important female functions, namely attracting, stimulating [and] gratifying ...” (1991:19). Gaenametse is as attractive as she is gratifying. Hence, young men hanker for the anchorage of her body. That she has the gumption to confront her young lover who saunters casually with his nubile girlfriend during daylight and only visits her under the cloak of night, is in accord with Greer’s claim:

Middle-aged women, having perforce cast off the narcissism of younger women, are quite likely to be more direct in their sexual advances and to make quite clear what it is they are after, especially if, for the first time in their lives, what they are seeking is not love but a fuck (1991:323)

Although no word is exchanged between Gaenametse and her younger lover during their encounter in broad daylight, the picture of a broody, moody menopausal woman accepting her lot is replaced by that of a woman who is conscious of the duplicity of the phallic system, and who, in the ugly stares exchanged, asserts herself as a full human being with carnal desires and longings no less cardinal than those of her male counterpart. It then becomes, as Ohaeto (1990:130) asserts, “clear that Head does not believe that womanhood should be regimented by the hypocritical eyes of society” Gaenametse’s chutzpah brings to mind the sexual escapades of Isadora Wing, the heroine of Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973). Compulsive daydreamer Isadora Wing, flies across two continents in pursuit of the perfect, guiltless, ‘zipless fuck’. In her shameless audacity, Isadora reveals:

We slept with guys who sold wallets outside the Uffizi, with two black musicians who lived in a *pensione* across the Piazza, with Alitalia ticket clerks, with mail clerks from American Express. I

had a sexual week-long affair with that married Italian named Allesandro who liked me to whisper “shit fuck cunt” in his ear while we screwed Then another week-long affair with a middle-aged American professor of art history whose name was Michael Karlinsky He wanted to eat orange segments out of my cunt (1973:108)

...

Ah travel, adventure, romance! I was glowing with health and well-being, as a woman will glow when she's been fucked four times in one day by two different men (1973:140)

However, Isadora soon discovers just how hard it can be to make one's dreams come true, and she goes back to her long-suffering husband, Bennet:

[I]t wasn't until I was finally settled, facing a nice little family group – mother, daddy, baby – that it dawned on me how funny that episode had been. My zipless fuck! My stranger on a train! Here I'd been offered my very own fantasy. The fantasy that had riveted me to the vibrating seat of the train ... *instead of turning me on, it had revolted me!* (1973:331, my emphasis)

Jong's uninhibited novel is set in the pre-HIV/AIDS era and had a profound effect on the way its readers (mainly in the United States of America) thought about marriage and sex. Gaenametse enjoys sex with numerous partners outside marriage in the same way as Isadora Wing.

'The Special One' ends with the narrator proclaiming that “the old days of polygamy are gone and done with but the men haven't yet accepted that women want them to be monogamists” (1977:86). The topos of polygamy articulated in this story has intertextual resonances with Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) and Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1980). In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego endures the polygamous behaviours of both her father and her husband, Nnaife. From the powers conferred on him by leviratic practice,¹² “[Nnaife] acquires his brother's wives, since women, once married, become family heirlooms” (in Ogunyemi 1996:260). Nnu Ego's father had at his disposal and pleasure seven wives and two mistresses. He flaunted his partiality for Nnu Ego's mother by noisily making love to her in the courtyard so all his other neglected wives could hear. This obdurate behaviour causes

his voyeuristic first wife to have a seizure and die (1980:22). Nnu Ego's education in the ways of the patriarch continues through her experiences with her first husband. When she fails to conceive, she apportions the blame: "I am sure the fault is on my side. You do everything right ... " (1980:31). Her husband soon takes a second wife who falls pregnant within a month. The husband tells Nnu Ego: "I will do my duty by you. I will come to your hut when my wife starts nursing her child. But now, if you can't produce sons, at least you can help harvest yams ... " (1980:33). Here, Nnu Ego is reduced to the status of a farm labourer. If she cannot produce a son, she must at least produce food for the family. In taking the blame for her childless state, she assumes a traditional identity. Yet she retains a subversive consciousness:

[T]he men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband ... until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build (1980:187)

Nnu Ego calls for solidarity between women if the edifice of patriarchy is to be imploded decisively. Other than the humiliation of a polygamous marriage, Nnu Ego must also endure destitution and misery: "in her poverty, in her nail-biting agony, in her churning stomach, in her rags, in her cramped room ... " (1980:167). When Nnaife gives her very little money, she realizes the limitations of the marriage institution:

[S]he was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children [she eventually bore three sons], imprisoned in her role as the senior wife. She was not expected to demand more money for her family; that was considered below the standard expected of a woman in her position. It was not fair, the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her (1980:137)

Here, Nnu Ego's condition recalls of Cornwell's "feminisation of poverty". Cornwell explains:

[T]hose who can be classified as living in conditions of absolute poverty – are female. The feminisation of poverty means, in very simple terms, that not only can more women than men be classified as poor, but even poor women are actually worse off than their male counterparts. Whether women are dependent members of households, earning members, or heads of households, they are poorer than men in the same categories (2000:7)

Cornwell aptly captures the condition of women around the world and mirrors Nnu Ego's position within the family's economics and power hierarchy. In her desperation, Nnu Ego asks: "When will I be free?" (1980:189).

A classical Senegalese text, Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) gives another perspective on the problematics of polygamy. The novel takes the form of a long epistle from Ramatoulaye to Aissatou. Both women are married to men who practise polygamy. Ramatoulaye starts off as a traditional woman when she acquiesces to her husband's marriage to a younger wife, Binetou. On the other hand, her confidante, Aissatou, rejects her husband's proclivity for polygamous marriage. She asserts: "I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way ... " (1981:31-2). In this way, Aissatou assumes a transformative identity: a *femme sole* informed by a subversion of patriarchal scripts that permit a man to have multiple partners. Yet they deny a woman the same privilege. A feminist critic, Frank (1989:18), avers of polygamy: "[it] is the most glaringly inequitable and sexist feature of traditional African society" Head, Bâ, Nwapa and Emecheta problematize the patriarchal enchantment with polygamy as a sexist encumbrance for women.

In *The Collector of Treasures*, once again, as in the condition of Gaenametse, the situation of Rankwana and the circumstances of Life's life story, a woman is subjugated. Mma-Mabele's husband, in the story entitled 'Witchcraft', forsakes her upon discovering that she is pregnant. Thereafter, she is subjected to sexual harassment by men of the village who view her as a free-

for-all phallic receptacle. For her refusal to assent to male immanence she is castigated and pilloried by men:

Mma-Mabele had acquired an unpleasant nickname in her surroundings. She was called 'he-man' and it was meant to imply that something was not quite right with *her genitals*, they were mixed up, a combination of male and female. The rumour had been spread by a number of men who had made approaches to her and whom she had turned down with quiet finality: 'I don't want to show myself any more', she'd said (1977:49, my emphasis)

Mma-Mabele becomes a pariah because of her supposedly defective genitalia. The narrator adds:

[T]he men never looked up as far as a quiet, sensitive face that might have suffered insult or injury. The only value women were given in that society was their ability to have sex; there was nothing beyond that (1977:49)

However, a single example of subversion: "I don't want to show myself any more" (1977:49), challenges the whole system. In the assertive protection of her celibacy, Mma-Mabele challenges deep-rooted assumptions about the position of women in African society and thereby assumes a transformative identity.

The title story of the collection, 'The Collector of Treasures', like most of the other stories, encapsulates the insufferable condition of women. The picture which emerges is that of a long-suffering woman, Dikeledi. Her name tells a tale of tears. Dikeledi is a Setswana name which translates into 'tears' in English. Dikeledi is married to Garesego, an odious and irresponsible man who forsakes his family and squanders his salary in an obnoxious cycle of bar and bed with different women. He takes full advantage of the situation which "relegated [sic] to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life" (1977:92). The adjective "congenital" denotes a defect existing from birth. This means that being born as a woman connotes a social deformity (as in other cultures and countries, such as China, where girl babies are left to die).

'The Collector of Treasures' serves as the medium through which Head reveals, explores and comments on the untenable condition of women – a condition rendered even more poignant by Kebonye's musings in her prison encounter with Dikeledi:

Our men do not think that we need tenderness and care. You know my husband used to kick me between the legs when he wanted that. I once aborted with a child, due to this treatment. I could see that there was no way to appeal to him if I felt ill, so I once said to him that if he liked he could keep some other women as well because I couldn't manage to satisfy all his needs. Well, he was an education-officer and each year he used to suspend about seventeen male teachers for making school girls pregnant, but he used to do the same (1977:89-90)

Garesego Mokopi, Dikeledi's husband, belongs to an exclusive club of men and "like the dogs and bulls and donkeys, ... he accepted no responsibility for the young he procreated ... " (1977:91). When he suddenly returns to Dikeledi's hut after a prolonged absence, it is not because of a change of heart, but to demand sex and lord it over her. Devoid of cathartic outlets for her disillusionment and trauma, Dikeledi resorts to a gory denouement:

[W]ith 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 She stood and watched his death anguish with an intent and brooding look, missing not one detail (1977:103)

This description is as vivid as fresh blood; Dikeledi takes the Setswana idiomatic expression '*Mma-ngoana o tsoara thipa ka bogaleng*' (The child's mother grabs the sharp end of the knife) to extreme applications and derives a paroxysm of cathartic release. Her castration of her husband is not only brave, but brazen as well. Whereas men are emasculated by her resolution, women are emancipated by it: "It made all the men shudder with horror. It was

some weeks before they could find the courage to go to bed with women; they preferred to do something else ... ” (1977:102).

Crous sees the dismembering of Garesego's member as a deconstruction of phallocratic society. He writes:

Garesego's anguished bellows are signifiers of his loss of phallic supremacy and the end of male rule. The beastlike cry substitutes language. He is no longer the supreme representative of the Law-of-the Father and the language of patriarchal dominance (1996:138)

By severing her husband's penis, Dikeledi renders him (sex-)less, inverts the elaboration of the phallus as a symbol of the power differential between women and men and subverts the idea of women as lacking a phallus. Whereas the knife that butchers Life in the story of the same title signifies a consolidation of phallocratic dominance, in Dikeledi's "soft hands of strange power" (1977:90), the kitchen knife embodies a woman's taking control of the substitute phallus, rendered more bizarre by the bleeding appendage in Dikeledi's hands. In the context of her bravery, Dikeledi approximates a transformative identity and becomes, in the process, both the provider and the providing (con)text for the amelioration of women's condition. Dikeledi's sadistic action has a familiar ring to it. On June 23, 1991, Lorena Bobbit, after enduring years of spousal abuse, drunken beatings, verbal abuse and the infidelity of a spouse, took the penis of her sleeping husband, John Wayne Bobbit, and cut it off with one quick slash of a carving knife.¹³

Although *The Collector of Treasures*, *One is Enough*, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *So Long a Letter* are stylistically at variance and end in different ways, the subordination of women provides the dominant matrix within which these works explore socio-historical phenomena. As I have maintained throughout this chapter, Head, Nwapa, Emecheta and Bâ frequently use African cultural belief systems – especially as they relate to the status of women – to account for the condition of women and the subversive consciousness that often

emerges to counteract oppression. In an interview published at the end of the Dutch edition of her novel, *So Long a Letter*, Bâ says:

[T]here is still so much injustice. In spite of the fact that for a decade the United Nations have paid special attention to women's problems, in spite of beautiful speeches and praiseworthy intentions, women continue to be discriminated [sic]. In the family, in the institutions, in society, in the street, in political organizations, discrimination reigns supreme. Social pressure shamelessly suffocates individual attempts at change. The woman is heavily burdened by mores and customs in combination with mistaken and egoistic interpretations of different religions (in Jones *et al* 1987:46-7)

More than twenty years have passed since this interview. But, patriarchy is so entrenched that, to this day, women still face the ubiquitous stereotyping of menstruation and menopause, destitution as a result of the feminisation of poverty, wife-slayings, honour murders in some parts of Pakistan, dowry killings in some parts of rural India, denial of their sexuality, double standards, polygamy, domestic violence, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, gender discrimination in the work place and discrimination in religious hierarchies. Women still have to grapple with exacting productive and reproductive tasks and the patriarchal use of motherhood and childlessness as instruments of suppression. In *The Collector of Treasures*, *One is Enough*, *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, some of these themes are aptly encapsulated and revealed through the interaction of plot, setting, character delineation, narrative voices and direct exposition by the authors. Head's short stories are entrancing and interesting in their nuanced resonances as counternarratives to the different forms and loci of women's oppression: polygamy, feminised poverty, sexual harassment, marriage, and power clashes that plague gender relationships. The stories are neither singularly adversarial, nor are they a confrontational haranguing of men. Head subtly negotiates the muddle and

puzzle of gender relations and although women populate her world, hers is not an exclusively women's world. In her integrative approach, she seeks and finds her "gold amidst the ash" in male characters such as Sebembele, Tholo and Paul Thebolo. This is the authorial balance that engages my attention.

ENDNOTES

¹ According to Kanyoro (1992:88), "polygamy refers to the marrying of many wives or husbands simulataneously or marrying many times However, the practice of *marrying many husbands*, a form of polygamy known specifically as "polyandry", is uncommon today Polygyny ... signifies a matrimonial situation in which there is one husband but two or more wives". See Kanyoro, M.R.A. (1992).

² Although Lacan is, at times, impenetrably esoteric, for an assessment of his notion of the phallus, see, for example, Lacan, J. (1977).

³ It is pertinent to note for example, that Soyinka's work evinces no preoccupation with women's domestic roles as wives and mothers. His drama and novels contain scarcely any domestic scenes. Soyinka carves a niche for the public role for women as catalysts in socio-political change. This is evident, for instance, in the portrayals of Iriyise in *Season of Anomy* (1973).

See also Ogundipe-Leslie, M. (1987).

In some African cultures, the opposite applies. For example, Ogunyemi (1996:89) notes of the Nigerian cultures: "... Power ultimately lies in postmenopausal women, the salt of the earth. These are usually seasoned veterans, respected out of fear for their mystical power or the spiritual agency that enabled them to survive the hardships of life as a woman".

⁶ See for example, Ammah, R. (1992) and Owakin, R.M. (1992). These two essays review [with a didactic approach and in the context of the traditions and cultures of the Nigerian people] the subordinate status accorded to women in the Christian hierarchy and the Muslim exegesis. These cogent essays are found in Oduyoye, M.A and Konyoro, M.R.A (eds), (1992).

⁷ Although Nasimiyu-Wasike depicts polygamy as retrogressive and anachronistic for modern times, Steady (1981:6) plays down the negative aspects of polygamy. She argues: "Polygamy... facilitated the shared mothering of children and guaranteed women some autonomy, personal freedom, and greater mobility than would be possible in a monogamous, nuclear family. Women had more time to themselves, developed and experienced a more limited, rather than absolute form of patriarchy". See Steady, F.C. (1981).

⁸ See *Good News Bible. Today's English Version*, especially *Genesis* 3:12.

⁹ Looking at most African creation myths, woman, in comparison with man, has often had to put up with subordinate status. For other African creation myths, see Schipper, M. (1987).

¹⁰ For a helpful reading of Freud and psychoanalytic theory, see Wright, E. (1984) and Rimmos-Kenan, S. (1987). See also Ireland, M. (1993).

¹¹ Wife-slaying has become a common malady today. See for example the following headlines and reports from a popular daily tabloids "Give yourself up, my son. Sobbing mother's plea after killing of woman". (The *Daily Sun*, 23 August 2004), "lover kills girlfriend and himself". The *Daily Sun* (19 August 2004), "Prison warder kills lover, child". The *Daily Sun*, 16 August 2004; "... Sarah Monisi was shot dead by her boyfriend early on Tuesday night. The suspect then turned the gun on himself..." The *Daily Sun* (12 August 2004), "God alone saved the life of a woman who survived being shot seven times..." The *Daily Sun*. (29 September 2004). It is pertinent to note that most of these incidents happened in August – a month designated as women's month in South Africa.

¹² Leviratic practice refers to a patriarchal custom by which a man is obliged to marry his brother's widow. This practice is still extant in some parts of rural Venda (in the Limpopo Province).

¹³ See also, The *Daily Sun* (9 April 2003): "A Taiwanese woman, suspecting her husband was having an affair cut off his penis while he was sleeping and flushed it down the toilet".

CHAPTER THREE

(RE-)VISION OF CULTURE : hybridity and creolity

Despite the illusion of boundedness, cultures evolve historically through unreflective borrowings, mimetic appropriations, exchanges and inventions There is no culture in and of itself (Werbner 2004)

We lived at the cross-roads of cultures We still do today. (Achebe in Ashcroft *et al* 1986:80)

In this chapter, I postulate that cultures may be apprehended as porous, borrowing symbiotically from each other, unable to retain any specificities of cultural purity and thereby becoming uncertain and ambivalent in these boundary criss-crossings. For my purposes here, I have chosen to refer to some of the short stories in Head's *The Collector of Treasures* (1977). I also refer to her trilogy of novels: *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971), and *A Question of Power* (1973). In these texts, I find aspects of creolity, traditional culture and modern culture significantly entwined on a continuum, due to the catalytic and interactive effect of hybridity. Other concerns besides questions of culture and creolity, which might be pivotal to the novels and the short stories, are only hinted at and not discussed in any greater detail. I also argue that, instead of dichotomizing the human world into "Us" and "Others", White or Black, Christian or Islam, Head expounds a recognition of the commonality of all humanity, understood in terms of syncretic hybridity.

I apply the term creolity, in its broadest sense, to refer both to a language derived from linguistic contact and commingling between a first language and a foreign language and to a "discursive framework that valorize[s] the pluralisms and discontinuities of language and ethnicity ..." (Murdoch 1999:315-7). I use syncretism as a relational concept to evoke Head's attempts at unifying or reconciling different cultures in her fictive works. My notion of hybridity is resonant of Bhabha's assertion (1994:37) that "Cultural statements and systems are constructed in a contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation" Here Bhabha articulates an understanding of cultural distinctiveness as uncertain and refutable.¹ On the other hand, the

notion of hybridity can be understood as an ongoing condition of all cultures, inimical to purity, pervious to change and changeable.

According to Allen, defining culture is no easy task because:

A straightforward definition is impossible. If you ask most British people what they think culture is, they might tell you that it is literature, art, music and they would perhaps be thinking particularly of Victorian novels, paintings by Turner and music by Elgar. These are the things 'cultured' people enjoy. Those who are not cultured eat fish and chips, go to football matches or bingo, drink beer, watch soap operas on television and read the tabloid newspapers. On the other hand, and here is where everything starts to become muddled, these 'uncultured' folk might be classified as enjoying 'popular culture', something that may be thought of as better than the 'high – brow' culture of those who go to the opera. Additional complications arise if you ask a question like: "What is the difference between French culture and English culture?" Your answer might then include some of the following: International languages, frogs' legs, snails, garlic, making love, sense of humour, the Royal family, tweed jackets, tea, [and] stiff upper lips (1992:331)

Ronge adds other dimensions to the construct of culture:

[W]e have corporate cultures, management cultures and the cultures you find in yoghurt, so I have to ask: what exactly is ... culture? The ritual circumcision of young men, which so often results in death or genital mutilation, is defended as a cultural event at the same time that the funding of a national symphony orchestra is justified as a cultural enterprise We live in a country [South Africa] where sangomas and lobola are counted as part of our cultural heritage, alongside the novels of Nadine Gordimer and Zakes Mda, but so is slam poetry (albeit recently imported from the US) and township jazz (2004:2)

The shades of difference in definition demonstrate that "culture" is an elusive concept, which cannot be defined with precision. In this dissertation, I draw on a working definition of culture as a sense of shared customs, values, norms and knowledge systems extant in a particular community. These shared values are often amenable to cross – cultural influences and are negotiable. I conceive of traditional culture as a body of customs, habits, beliefs and

knowledge systems of a community, which is handed down through generations. In Head's fictive world, such a culture is exemplified in *The Collector of Treasures*, in stories such as, 'The Deep River: A story of Ancient Tribal Migration', 'Hunting', 'Heaven is not Closed', 'Witchcraft' and 'Kgotsa'.

I invoke the concept of modern culture in contradistinction to traditional culture in terms of the inexorable encroachment of modern technology, cosmopolitan patterns of behaviour and changes in antiquated life styles. These changes are markedly noticeable in the fictive village of Golema-Mmidi in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. In this chapter, I also argue that the narrative form of *The Collector of Treasures* gestures towards hybridity, both in its narration of the village tales of Botswana and their compositional origin in orality, and in the scribal enunciation of these tales. Throughout this chapter I shall show the imbrication of some elements of hybridity, creolity, traditional and modern culture and genre form.

According to Olausson, drawing on Bhabha's notion of hybridity:

Bessie Head's novels need to be studied as part of the way of conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multi-culturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity (1997:31)

Olausson's comment is apposite because the cultural "border-crossings" and the hybridity she envisages for a reading of Head's novels vicariously recall the curious circumstances of Head's birth as a "Coloured" South African, neither white nor black,² a resident in Botswana, but not of Botswana, an African but unable to speak any of the African languages. These circumstances place Head in a liminal space: "a state of limbo where [she] is no longer ... a member of a culturally-defined social position or class" (Samuel in King 2001:9).

Mackenzie (1989a:17) propounds that "[Bessie Head] is writing from within a culture with no written history, where storytelling and the oral tradition

generally are the means whereby the community explains itself.” Although *The Collector of Treasures* is apprehended in such an environment, its means of expression is the print technology of a literate culture, and accordingly, the oral word is rendered textual and supplemented by various literary contingencies, such as footnotes, written narrative commentary, journalistic reportage, recorded history and the stylistic manipulation of oral conventions to suit a literary epistemology. The result is a creative eclecticism that pulls together the oral and the written to enact the hybridity of literary discourse. This hybridity is rendered more pertinent by the knowledge that a literary text can be mass-produced, re-produced, translated into other languages,³ adapted for performance and even sold across the globe by publishing houses to reach and interact with other cultures. In this instance, Head’s texts are accessible to cultures far removed from the Botswanan compositional origin of *The Collector of Treasures*. As a result, *The Collector of Treasures* is not (re-)viewed as a body of unadulterated oral tales, but rather as a hybrid literary genre adapted to technological advancement and a catholic appeal across cultures. *The Collector of Treasures* also expounds, at the level of narrative content, hybrid religious and socio-cultural belief systems as well as creolity that stem from the interaction between and in-between colonial, African, traditional and modern cultures. In *The Collector of Treasures* all these cultures are apposite to a synthesis of the diversity of humanity.

According to Hubert:

[E]ven if it were desirable, post-colonial societies cannot return to their pre-colonial existence. Contact with colonial and other influences necessarily results in hybridized cultural practices. At the same time the traditions of colonized peoples can also affect the cultural practices of the Colonists (2004)

This distillation of contacts and permutation of cultures is evident in, for example, the story “Heaven is not Closed”. In this story, a Christian woman, Galethebege, tacitly accepts a traditional African marriage to a non-Christian husband, Ralokae. Traditional culture is explicated through the rituals

attendant on marriage, such as the symbolic importance of a cow in African traditional culture. As the narrator tells us:

[T]he cow was a part of the people's life and customs. We took our clothes from the cow and our food from the cow. So the cow was a holy thing in our lives. The elders then cut the intestinal bag of the cow in two and one portion was placed around the neck of Galethebege and one portion around the neck of Ralokae to indicate the wealth and good luck they would find together in married life (1977:12)

The repetition of "the cow" in the above citation serves, not only as a mnemonic aid, but also to link orality with traditional culture. In this story, colonial contact is established through the interaction between Galethebege and the local missionary. The point of contact is Galethebege's Christian faith and her desire to be married under the aegis of both traditional culture and Christian rituals. However, the missionary is unable to "hear the holiness of Setswana custom" (1977:12), and dismisses Galethebege with a curt response: "heaven is closed to the unbeliever ..." (1977:11). In spite of the haughty contempt expressed by the priest regarding Galethebege's choice as discussed in chapter two of this dissertation and even despite her excommunication from the church:

Galethebege could never forsake the custom in which she had been brought up. All through her married life she would find a corner in which to pray. Sometimes Ralokae would find her so and ask: "What are you doing, Mother?" And she would reply: "I am praying to God". Ralokae would only smile (1977:12)

What Galethebege accomplishes here is the subversion of Christian orthodoxy of organised church-going. She takes possession of the temple, relocates it in the corner of her house and prays within an environment akin to syncretism. As defined by Muzorewa, religious syncretism is "reconciling Christian beliefs with African beliefs" (in Ekechi 1992:129). Of course, syncretism is equivalent to reconciling any group of faiths. Muzorewa applies it to the African context. In contradistinction to the missionary's cultural essentialism, cloaked as religious purity, Galethebege advocates religious syncretism, particularly as it relates to the Christian virtue of tolerance and the

traditional African cultural values of accommodation and communalism and she appears more sincere than the missionary. In her inversion of the holier-than-thou attitude of the missionary, she emerges as a prototype of Bhabha's theory of hybridity.

In 'Heaven is not Closed', Head gestures more explicitly to the 'borrowings' and 'lendings' across cultures by predicating the story on a creolised base. Creolity is inscribed at the level of language transpositions and thereby interrogates an essentialist idea of cultural purity. By way of illustration: "Then the porridge and meat were dished up in our *mogopo* bowls which we had used from old times" (1977:12, my emphasis). Discernible here is not only a sense of old traditional kitchen utensils, but also the cultural provenance of the story. It is a metonym of the Batswana cultural experience which lies beyond the lexical item, "*mogopo*"; the faithful retention of the Setswana word, "*mogopo*", locates it within interacting vernaculars and cultures, namely, Setswana and English. This gives rise to subsequent cross-cultural conversations that transcend cultural and linguistic specificities. In the next example, Setswana traditional culture once more enters into a primarily English text to produce a creolised contact within the framework of a hybridized genre:

Ralokae had been married for nearly a year when his wife died in childbirth ... and for a year Ralokae imposed on himself the traditional restraints and disciplines of *boswagadi* or mourning for the deceased. A year later, again at harvest time, he underwent the cleansing ceremony demanded by custom (1977:8-9, my emphasis)

Here, Head deploys "*boswagadi*" as a culturally significant unit of discourse amongst the Batswana, while simultaneously embracing the wide audience of international standard English. The international standard English audience is embraced through the ostensibly simple matching of "*boswagadi*" and "mourning", and, as Ashcroft *et al*/propound in a similar context:

[S]uch language use seems to be keeping faith with the local culture and transporting it into the new medium. Thus the untranslated words, the sounds and the textures of the language can be held to have the power and presence of the culture they signify (1989:52)

Creolity appears once more at the level of language usage in 'Heaven is not Closed'. The following examples are useful in this regard: "We have come to the church, *Maruti*" the children said (1977:27, my emphasis), and "*You must say: Dumelang! Alleluja*" (1977:27). In these examples, Setswana, as in the words, "*Maruti*" (Priest) and "*Dumelang*" (greetings), intersects with standard English and ecclesiastical Hebrew (*Alleluja*) to produce creolised language. These creolised expressions are a metonym for the confluence of cultures and in this way:

Bessie Head successfully carves a way for overcoming the narrow and confining ideas of ... nation and language, which help us to define ourselves within a particular context (Huma 1988 :93)

In some of the narrative pieces that constitute *The Collector of Treasures*, language does a little more than the conventional task of carrying the exposition forward. But it also always serves as a reservoir of culture. In Fanon's words:

[T]o speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture (1967a:17–18)

The implication of Fanon's comment is that to speak a particular language is not only to acknowledge its formal linguistic properties, but also to accept the culture implied by it. In 'Heaven is not Closed' language use is not a simplistic act of communication, but also an acknowledgement of the socio- cultural underpinnings that make creolity and cultural hybridity possible. The notion of linguistic creolisation, undermining, as it does, essentialist notions of pure vernaculars, is also exemplified in the story, 'Jacob: The Story of a Faith - Healing Priest'. Here, creolity is manifested in the form of translated and

translocated Setswana proverbs in the English text, as in the following examples:

The foot cannot always find its way home (1977:31)
The children of a real woman do not get lean or die
(1977:30)

The proverbs cited above are discussed as sites of orality in Chapter One of this dissertation, but they are also pertinent and worth exploring as examples of cultural hybridity and creolity.

These creolised expressions are Setswana in character, but English in enunciation and serve, to appropriate Murdock (1994: 92), “ ... not only as a sign of *créolité* [sic], an inscription of the oral trace of an indigenous collective memory, but also as a hybrid site” This hybridity also finds expression in the novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, when Gilbert creolises Makhaya's traditional Zulu name into an anglicised version, Mack:

[T]he old man [Dinorego] said “Today I was meant to acquire a new son. His name is Makhaya” Gilbert held out his hand and smiled wisely, easily. “Hullo, Mack ...” he stumbled as he had not really grasped the sound of it. “It's just a tribal name,” Makhaya said, smiling at his embarrassment. “You can call me Mack if you like” (1968:29)

The protagonist, Makhaya, is introduced as a South African political refugee fleeing across the border to Botswana. The barbed - wire fence through which Makhaya crosses over into Botswana is emblematic of a crossing over into another culture: the traditional culture of the Batswana. His first encounter is with an old woman and a girl temptress, and the old woman manifests a propensity for patriarchy: “[It was] some sort of clinging, ancestral, tribal belief that a man was nothing more than a grovelling sex organ” (1968:15). The old spinster refracts patriarchy's view of women as phallic receptacles. She acts as a brothel - keeper and (mis)uses the child for sexual services with men in return for profit. In spurning the child's attentions, Makhaya emerges as a man

who embodies transformative possibilities for the circumscribed condition of women.

The village of Golema-Mmidi, in which Makhaya finds refuge, is delineated not so much as a rural utopia as a metonym for cultural hybridity. As Olausen (1997:107) purports, “the village is, in fact, a village of strangers in the sense that the most important people, those who most crucially influence village life, initially came from another place” Dinoroge, Mma-Millipede and Paulina come from the Northern part of Botswana. Gilbert Balfour is an agronomist of British descent and Makhaya is a South African of Zulu extraction. These “strangers” bring with them residues of cultures from their respective locales and in turn imbibe the culture of their adoptive village. For instance, although a White man, Gilbert acquires a taste for goat meat and sour-milk porridge (1968:27). Mma-Millipede is “able to grasp the religion of the missionaries and use its message to adorn and enrich her own originality of thought” (1968:68), and Makhaya “saw Gilbert’s culture as one that had catalogued every single detail on earth with curiosity, and it revealed to him great gaping holes in his own culture and how impossible it would be for Africa to stand alone” (1968:135). As for Maria:

One day she was looking at pictures in a book which Gilbert gave her. There was a kitchen with shelves. So she *carved the shelves in the mud wall*. Then, too she *cooks goat meat with curry powder* and this improves its taste. Now all the women round about have shelves in their kitchens and cook the meat with curry powder (1968:27, my emphasis)

The spontaneous replication of Maria's ideas by “all the women” is also an example of the way that simple innovations can lead to extensive cultural hybridity. Maria's actions shift from being a personal idiosyncrasy to being a well-established alternative reminiscent of Keyes’s “Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon”.⁶ The Hundredth Monkey theory is, according to Myers (2004):

[B]ased on research with monkeys on northern Japanese Islands, and its central idea is that when enough individuals in a population adopt a new idea or behaviour, there occurs an

ideological breakthrough that allows this new awareness to be communicated directly from mind to mind without the connection of external experience and then all individuals in the population spontaneously adopt it (2004)

The “Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon” also recalls Dawkins's notion of “memes”. Dawkins (2004) writes of memes:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leading from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain (2004)

In Head's fictive world, the propagation of “memes” inspires wonder and progress in the drought-stricken village of Golema-Mmidi. The agricultural cooperative which Gilbert and Makhaya initiate in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is an endeavour to confront an abysmal economic situation brought about by drought and the selfish ambitions of chief Matenge. Matenge scoffs at the idea of fencing off tribal land for cooperative farming because it compromises his ambitions to increase his wealth through a cattle speculation business. Here, agriculture is also embedded in culture. Head's descriptions of the introduction of new cash crops in Golema-Mmidi, women's tobacco-growing co-operatives and Gilbert's fencing off the tribal land hints at the encroachment of a new culture on traditional beliefs. In order for Gilbert to achieve his goal of making a profit for the community out of cattle farming, he has, as Olausson (1997:261) notes, “to confront one of the most important beliefs held by the Motswana, namely that land cannot be fenced because it is communally owned”. Commenting on this old traditional practice, Huma (1988:65) propounds that “[o]wning land collectively has been common practice in large parts of Africa through the centuries”. In his fencing of tribal land, Gilbert subverts the traditional African practice of land ownership. Yet, he is still within the African cultural paradigm insofar as he retains the

cooperative elements of communal farming and communal land ownership. Although the land is fenced off, it is not appropriated for private ownership. Another challenge that Gilbert has to confront is tribal prejudice, expressed even in the community's refusal to farm a drought-resistant crop:

[T]he discovery [of millet] had made no impact on Botswana ... because certain minority tribes, traditionally considered inferior, had long had a liking for millet and had always grown it as part of the season's crop. Therefore, other tribes who considered themselves superior would not grow it nor eat it (1977: 41)

However, that the Paramount Chief Sekoto – an embodiment of traditional cultures – is persuaded to agree to Gilbert's grand agricultural schemes not only points to a need to ward off starvation, but also to a synthesis of modern and traditional cultures. In allowing Gilbert to fence off tribal land and to introduce new crops such as tobacco and millet, not only does the Chief break precedent, but he also re-conceives of culture as malleable. By winning over Chief Sekoto, Gilbert defeats the malevolent forces of traditional culture embodied in Chief Matenge. The proactive collaborations expounded in *When Rain Clouds Gather* are an inscription of the confluence of different cultures, rendered more poignant when Makhaya resolves to “combine ... the good in Gilbert with the good in his own society” (1968:135).

In fictional incidents such as this, Head is involved in:

[A] deliberate and calculated process of syncretism: One which emphasizes valuable continuities with precolonial culture, welcomes vitalizing contributions from other cultures, and exercises inventive genius in making a healthy and distinguished synthesis from them all (Chinweizu *et al*, in Olausen 1997:58)

Valuable continuity with precolonial culture is established through a recognition of collective farming, referred to as “*letsema*” in Setswana, and through a recognition of communal land ownership. Vitalizing contributions from other cultures result in the introduction of cash crops, profitable farming

methods and a progressive farming community at Golema-Mmidi. This is the positive side of hybridity and cultural syncretism.

Cultural cross-fertilization is at its most intense in a marital relationship. The marriages between Makhaya and Paulina and Gilbert and Maria result in a calculated syncretism, with its attendant challenges. For instance, Gilbert is unable to communicate in Setswana. Likewise, Maria is unable to speak fluent English. The textual flaw is that there is no suggestion in the text that this linguistic angst is ever resolved. However, the marriage between a Motswana woman and an English man hints at the possibility of harmonious inter-racial marriages with the communication problems resolved through the creation of a trans-ethnic, creole language.

The disastrous drought at Golema-Mmidi with its relentless decimation of cattle, the attendant misery and subsequent death of Paulina Sebeso's son, Isaac, is reminiscent of the calamitous drought which ravages a village in 'Looking for a Rain God' in *The Collector of Treasures*. In an endeavour to stave off nature's caprices, the Makgobja family, driven to desperation by drought and the attendant misery of hunger, remember old rituals performed to appease the Rain God. They ritually sacrifice their two little girls, Neo and Boseyong, in order to invoke rainfall. Still no rain falls and old Makgobja and his accomplice son, Ramadi, are sentenced to death by a modern court of law. The execution of old Makgobja and his son compounds the sorrow of surviving family members and the women members must endure haunting memories of a human sacrifice and the tragedy of losing two more family members.

'Looking for a Rain God' evokes traditional culture in its reference to ritual murder and a belief in the illusive and elusive Rain God. In this story, hybridity is manifest in the juxtaposition of ritual murders, one traditional and the other modern. The ritual murder of the two girls by the Makgobja family epitomizes traditional culture and the hanging of old Makgobja and his son is another form of ritual murder by a modern court. The story is an example of Head's

questioning of traditional culture. However, she does not pass direct judgment.

The meeting of traditional and modern cultures is also suggested in the short story 'Kgotla'. The *Kgotla* is the main prop of traditional justice system and politics in most African tribal societies. According to Achufusi (1991:190), it "is the assembly within which the adult males within the village constitute themselves in a parliament-cum-court to deal with issues affecting the village and adjudicates inter - personal conflicts". The institution of the *Kgotla* is therefore an integral part of traditional society and it ensures communal consensus on matters of justice. The commingling of cultures is suggested in the juxtaposition of the *kgotla* with a structure of modern political and judicial bureaucracy:

Behind the kgotla, an administrative block had been set up to modernize village life. It fussed about schools, boreholes, roads, development and progress, energetic young clerks dashed from one department to another, their hands filled with bureaucratic paperwork. They had no time to listen to the twitter of birds in the ancient shady trees that surrounded the Kgotla but the two worlds daily traveled [sic] side by side and the bureaucratic world was fast devouring up the activities of the ancient, rambling, kgotla world (1977:61-2)

The case at the Kgotla involves Rose's attempts to reclaim her husband, Gobosamang, from the recently widowed Tsietso. The traditional court rules that Tsietso should vacate Gobosamang's house and orders Gobosamang to repay the three hundred rands he got from Tsietso. The story portrays the conception of justice in a traditional society wherein village elders deal with and adjudicate issues affecting the village at the communal level and also handles inter-personal conflicts to minimize family break-downs. The *Kgotla* system of justice is underpinned by principles of consensus similar to the Western jury system.

The short story entitled 'Hunting' also explicates a meeting of traditional and modern culture. The context is that of a prosperous village farmer, Tholo, who uses his tractor to facilitate hunting:

Tholo was the only man in the village ward who owned a tractor with a trailer, and because of this, every man wanted to go hunting with Tholo. When they went out on Tholo's tractor, it only meant one or two days of roughing it up in the bush, then they returned with wet meat and dried it at their leisure in their own yards.

...

[T]he men drew lots as to whom should go hunting with him each season, so that the good fortune of hunting wild animals with a tractor could be experienced by every man in the village ... (1977:104-5)

The hunting expedition itself is an age-old traditional practice across cultures. This practice has also been poignantly captured in the movie *The Deer Hunter* (1978), where hunting and killing a deer "maketh a man". The encroachment of modern culture is suggested in the use of modern weapons, such as rifles, instead of the implements of the past, such as assegais or traditional bows and arrows. The tractor itself is a product of modernity and its attendant technology. The tractor facilitates both hunting and farming and suggests a symbiotic encounter between traditional and modern culture, or, as Achufusi (1991:183) would have it, "a movement from a culturally unadulterated past to a culturally heterogeneous present".

The story entitled 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration' provides a glimpse of a society steeped in traditional culture:

[A]lthough the people were given their own ploughing lands, they had no authority to plough without the chief's orders. When the people left home to go to plough, the chief sent out the proclamation for the beginning of the ploughing season. When harvest time came, the chief perceived that the corn was ripe. He gathered the people together and said: 'Reap now, and come home'. When the people brought home their crops, the chief called the thanksgiving for harvest ... (1977:1)

Here, society is organized along the lines of benevolent feudalism and communalism. This societal organization (though not limited to traditional Africa) ensures communal identity, promotes communal welfare and the sustainability of subsistence farming through the sharing of skills and directives proclaimed by the chief.

Olaussen (1997:14) propounds that “Head describes the villagers’ traditional practices as something which ultimately harms them”. This assertion betrays the notion of traditional culture as primordially ennobling and holds true of *The Collector of Treasures*, particularly in the stories, Looking for a Rain God’, ‘Witchcraft’ and ‘Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest’. Manifest in these narrative pieces are the old traditional beliefs in witchcraft, ritual murder and human sacrifice.

Traditional and modern culture is revisioned in the story, ‘Witchcraft’. The protagonist, Mma-Mabele, claims: “I know I can be poisoned and so meet my end ... but I cannot be bewitched. I don’t believe in it” (1977:48). Yet the mysterious circumstances of her debilitating illness betray her assertion. The narrative voice is presented in terms which suggest that the ‘*baloyi*’ (witches) are at play: “From then onwards Mma-Mabele was to find that it was a deep unhappiness to be afflicted by things that dwelt on the dark side of human life” (1977:53). Reference to “the dark side of human life” hints at the phenomenon of *boloyi* (witchcraft) which is often referred to as black magic. There is a semantic parallel between “dark” and “black” magic. Hybridity is manifest in Mma-Mabele’s belief in indigenous supernatural forces, inscribed as witchcraft, and her initial confidence in allopathic medicine. Gilbert *et al* (1996) define allopathic medicine as:

the medical system which is dominant in most Western societies. It includes physicians of all specialities and types along with recognised allied medical disciplines, such as nurses, physiotherapists etc. It is characterised by medical knowledge and technology to health and healing [Its] main institutional structure is the hospital (1996 : 50)

Although Mma-Mabele seeks curative recourse in allopathic medicine, her way of perceiving and explaining her ailment and physical discomfort is rooted in witchcraft – a traditional belief system preponderant in traditional societies. Van Dyk makes an illuminating comment on the subject of witchcraft:

Witches or sorcerers are usually blamed for illness and misfortune in traditional societies. Although many traditional Africans do not distinguish between witches and sorcerers, witches are believed to have supernatural abilities and they commit evil deeds and cast spells with the help of mythical animals and supernatural creatures. Sorcerers, on the other hand, cause harm to people by misusing their natural ability or medicine for non-healing purposes (2001:61)

The attribution of misfortune to external, supernatural beings or powers implies that, in traditional societies,

the traditional healer is consulted to diagnose the personal cause of the condition (e.g. bewitchment) or to prevent a recurrence (e.g. by performing a ritual), a Western doctor is consulted for medication to treat that condition symptomatically (Van Dyk 2001:61)

Head's preoccupation with witchcraft within the framework of traditional culture is also apparent in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. In this novel, Mma-Baloyi, a village woman from Bodibeng, is charged with practising witchcraft:

[O]ver a certain period, a number of the children of the village had died sudden deaths, and each time a mother stood up to describe these sudden deaths, the crowd roared in fury because the deaths of the children and the evil practices of Mma-Baloyi were one and the same thing in their minds (1968:50)

Mma-Baloyi is spared lynching by Chief Sekoto's finesse of judgement, inspired by his respect for old-world remedies. The name Mma-Baloyi literally translates into 'Mother of witches' or a dabbler in witchcraft. A belief in witchcraft is still common in most contemporary African societies. A case in

point occurred when Rahab Tjale, in the rural village of Sengatane, near Polokwane, told *The Daily Sun*:

My poor daughter ... was bewitched when she was eight by a female relative because she was intelligent at school. One day this woman came and gave her sweets. That night she came to my house with her tokoloshes and called my daughter's name (*Daily Sun*, 19 April 2004:1–2)

In 'Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest', Head takes up a similar theme in describing a false prophet and witch-doctors who are apprehended for dealing in children's body parts to make lucky potions.⁹ The story distinguishes between the orientations of prophet Lebojang and prophet Jacob. Lebojang's brand of Christianity is undergirded by a malignant sediment of traditional culture – witchcraft and ritual murder – and he is motivated by a nefarious hunger for money and power:

[H]e would come out with names and dates and prophecies. His charges for these services were very high. It did not matter to him that people were secretly poisoned or driven mad by his prophecies; he simply took his money and that was that (1977:28)

Lebojang's identity is characterised by a cleft between a self that is recognisably ancient African, participating in ritual murder and witchcraft, and a Christian prophet preaching the sanctity of human life. In this way, he occupies a hybrid juncture between African traditional beliefs and Christian practices of prayer. Lebojang's character delineation demonstrates that this confluence is often not healthy. This, then, becomes an example of hybridity at its worst and shows that Head is not a cultural relativist. Relativism refers to the doctrine that morality, truth and knowledge are relative and not absolute. Lebojang's ignominious demise at the end of the story points not only to poetic justice, but Head's condemnation of ritual murders as well.

According to Smith:

Bessie Head writes hybrid spiritual (re-)visions of Christianity, but these (re-)visions are not pure invention. They reflect the syncretic nature of African Christianity, long noted and either decried or celebrated ... (1999:77)

Syncretism is noted and celebrated in the character delineation of prophet Jacob:

[I]t was never quite clear to those who loved prophet Jacob just who his God was. At times he would refer to him as Jesus. At times his God, in moments of inspiration, appeared to be the width and depth of his own experience and suffering ... (1977:21)

Here, an identification of God or Jesus with “the width and depth of [Jacob’s] own experience and suffering” subverts conventional comprehensions of Christ-centred theology in which Christ is separate from humanity. Jacob approximates the ineffable Christ-figure to the point of blending with him:

[I]t took great simplicity of heart to approach a church such as the one conducted by Prophet Jacob. Prophet Jacob had no shoes, so he conducted his services in his bare feet ... [T]hen too, the church really belonged to the children ... (1977:26–29)

This description of Jacob, bare-footed, emaciated, in tattered rags and a friend of children, not only identifies him with Jesus Christ, but also recalls the figure of the peripatetic Mahatma Gandhi. Embracing poverty and befriending the innocent (such as children) are marks of holiness in many faiths. It is this spiritual indeterminacy and the orientation of Prophet Lebojang that render this story both hybrid and syncretic.

Smith (1999:76) asserts that “Bessie Head’s interest in Christianity is entangled with an interest in spiritual issues that transcend any one religion.” This assertion is evident in *A Question of Power*. The protagonist, Elizabeth, re-visions the apparently axiomatic signficatory religious systems:

[I]f there were any revelations whatsoever in her own suffering, its seemed to be quite the reverse of Mohammed's dramatic statement. He had said: There is only one God and his name is Allah and Mohammed is his prophet. She said: There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet (1973:205-6)

Playing again with hybridity and syncretism, here the narrator evinces an iconoclastic re-visioning of Koranic precepts:

There is none worthy of worship besides Allah: Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. (From *Kalimah Tayyibah* - [The Kalima of Purity])

Elizabeth's sublimation of mankind subverts notions of inviolable transcendence in any one religion. Similarly, in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Makhaya, in a conversation with Paulina, claims "I think I am God" (1968:143). From a dualistic point of view, Head's attribution of Godhead to humans borders on sacrilege. The theology of an infallible, invisible and invincible supreme Being has its antithesis in the syncretism of exalted pagan deities and in the mysticism of Oriental religions and philosophies, whose definition of the quintessence of divinity finds expression in many deities and several mystics.¹¹ In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth's hybrid status also finds expression in Judaeo-Christian allusions. In the lofty serenity of her soul:

David's song arose in her heart once more, but this time infinitely more powerful and secure: "I have been through the valley of the shadow of death, but I fear no evil. I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (1973:202)

This is an invocation of the familiar Psalm 23 in the biblical book of *Psalms*. There is also reference to a Christmas carol sung by a choir of women: "Glory be to God on high, on earth, peace, goodwill towards man" (1973:109). The

God on high is at variance with Head's understanding of a democratic Godhead:

God is the totality of all great souls and their achievements, the achievements are not that of one single individual soul but of many souls who all worked to make up the soul of God (1973:54)

In this context, God descends from the heavenly pedestal and dwells in human beings. Other Judaeo-Christian allusions manifest in the novel are: the biblical story of King David who contrived the murder of his loyal soldier, Uriah, in order to lay a lusty claim to Uriah's wife Bathseba (1973:34), the story of David and Goliath, Adam and Eve, Sodom and Gomorrah, to mention only a few.

Apart from Judaeo-Christian and Islamic allusions, Head also draws on Roman Catholicism, Eastern religions and philosophies. In Elizabeth's repetitive cycles of hallucinatory nervous breakdown, Sello variously reveals himself to Elizabeth as "the Father who takes up residence in Elizabeth's house near the top of the bed" (1973:118); the monk who dons "the soft white flowing robes" (1973:22), "the originator of the caste system" or one who "has accomplished a billion cycles in destiny" (1973:32). This reference to reincarnation draws on a canonical Hindu view of the transmigration of the soul at death, which results in a cycle of rebirth and regeneration.¹² Likewise, the caste system is a reference to the organization of Hindu society. Sello's cycles of reincarnation are brought into proximity with African mythology through the association of the title character in *Maru* with Tladi, a monster bird associated with lightning and rain:

A terror slowly built up around the name Maru In their conversations at night they [the villagers] discussed the impossible, that he was the reincarnation of Tladi, a monstrous ancestral African witch-doctor who had been a performer of horrific magic (1971:36)

Maru is not only a traditional African Prince; he now becomes a reincarnated horrific monster. The allusion to Sello as “the originator of the caste system” and the reference to “the poor of India” (1973:32), echoes the Botswanan caste system, powerfully explicated in the closing pages of *Maru*:

When the people of Dilepe village heard about the marriage of Maru, they began to talk about him as if had died. A Dilepe diseased prostitute explained their attitude: “Fancy”, she said. “He married a *Masarwa*. They *have no standards*;... .” (1971:126, my emphasis)

The intertext between the two works of fiction, that is, *A Question of Power* and *Maru*, demonstrates cultural confluences and the hybridity of Head’s aesthetics. This is in consonance with Ola’s observation (1997:21) that “Bessie Head takes a comprehensive imaginative sweep through world religions, cultures, and myths from Osiris, Medusa, Buddha and even Christ”. Trails of Greek mythology come to light during Elizabeth’s paroxysm of dementia in *A Question of Power*:

[S]he [Elizabeth] reflected on those times, almost lost in myth; where vague memories had lingered of the wars of the Gods. A warrior like Perseus had appeared to cut off the head of the terrible gorgon ... perhaps at some dim time Medusa had encountered Perseus and, out of the death he had inflicted on her, risen again with a still, sad fire-washed face (1973:99)

According to Olaussen:

[I]n Greek mythology the Medusa is one of three Gorgons. The other two, Stheno and Euryale, were immortal but Medusa was killed by Perseus. The monstrosity of the Gorgons was confined to their head, which had snakes for hair, tusks like that of a boar and a gaze which turned men to stone (1997:194)

Paradoxically, Sello’s wife, Medusa, is first introduced as a Madonna, “an image of holiness” (1973:37). This description draws on the Christian

Madonna, but Head's Medusa, just like her Greek counterpart, is a creature of malevolence and, unlike the Christian image of the Madonna, she is described as:

[A] powerfully built woman ... she was flat-chested, narrow-waisted with broad hips. She was powerful [and] she had an exciting way of walking. Her thighs rubbed against each other like the rustle of silk against silk (1973:37)

This erotic image is hardly a Christian Madonna. Her muscular physical structure and her pitch-black colour identify her as an African figure. Yet, her Madonna façade and her mystical inspiration is hardly African. The Madonna/whore binary in Medusa's character delineation adverts to the stereotypical embodiment of a woman as either an object of beauty to behold (a Madonna) or a phallic receptacle (a bitch to be laid). Head creates cultural hybridity through the blending of myth and patriarchal stereotypes of women. This hybridity is further expanded through intertextual allusions to classic literature. For instance, reference to "Gulliver" has, as its inspiration, Gulliver's treatment among the Lilliputians in Swift's satire, *Gulliver's Travels* (1975). There are also intertextual resonances with *When Rain Clouds Gather* through references to historical figures such as Kwame Nkrumah (1968:19), Shaka Zulu (1968:9), Hitler (1968:134) and Pharaoh (1968:127). These personages are archetypes of power and its attendant corruptibility. The confluence of historical figures and mythology can be construed as embodiments of Head's treatment of the phenomenon of cultural hybridity. This hybridity is reinforced through reference to various tribes and nationalities. As a case in point, *When Rain Clouds Gather* makes mention of the Xhosa and Zulu tribes (1968:7), the Barolong (1968:10), the Batswana (1968:127), the Jews (1968:134) and other nationalities.

In *A Question of Power*, hybridity is also established at the level of character delineation. In his characterization, the Sello of Elizabeth's nightmares transcends the narrow confines of pure national identity:

[I]t seemed almost incidental that he was African. So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment. And yet as an African, he seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements: "I am just anyone" (1973:184)

Likewise, Elizabeth eschews the fixities and definitives of a specific identity: "she wasn't a genuine African, she was a half-breed" (1973:104). Even though *A Question of Power* is a work of fiction, the development of Elizabeth's identity points to a transmuted authorial experience. Equivalents to the circumstances of Head's life are discernible to a point of raw biographical data. Like her fictive character, Elizabeth, Head was a person of mixed race.^{1 3} Elizabeth's outsider status in the village of Motabeng and her dementia correspond with Head's life as an exile in the Botswanan village of Serowe and her subsequent clinical madness. Elizabeth confirms her hybrid status in a charged tirade against Dan: "I'm not the dog of the Africans, do you hear? I'm not the dog of these bloody bastard Batswana, do you hear?" (1973:175). Elizabeth is neither Black, nor White, nor African, nor European and not a Motswana, but rather a synthesis of all these identities. Similarly, Margaret Cadmore (Junior) in *Maru* exhibits hybrid characteristics:

Her mind and heart were composed of a little bit of everything she had absorbed from Margaret Cadmore [senior]. It was hardly African or anything but something new and universal, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as tribe or race or nation (1971:16)

In fact: "not one thing about her fitted another and she looked half like a Chinese and half like an African and half like God knows what" (1971:23). These portraits of Margaret and Elizabeth gesture to Head's auto/biography of classification as a "coloured" and the attendant agony of being in a limbo. By appropriating elements of her auto/biography to draw character sketches of Elizabeth and Margaret, Head adverts to the principles of critical race theory. Schur outlines the key tenets of critical race theory thus:

[C]ritical race theory has differentiated itself from traditional legal criticism in part by insisting on the importance of auto/biography in shaping legal doctrine and practice. Many critical race theorists have developed biography and autobiography as literary devices in their criticism to demonstrate the relationship between form and content in legal thinking (2004)¹

By combining and blending autobiography with her works of fiction, Head uses auto/biography as a potential critical tool in the appraisal of social relations. She also, however, acknowledges that in societies characterised by entrenched group identities, boundary dissolution through miscegenation often produces monstrous outcomes, where “nothing fits”. The example of Margaret Cadmore junior demonstrates that the children of parents from different races may find it difficult to fit into any group.

Other than the labyrinths of allusions and iconographies of diverse religious movements that Head traverses, her hybrid focus is also evident at a cultural level. An example is ‘The Special One’, in *The Collector of Treasures*. The story is shaped by intertextual and cross - cultural references to menstruation. The narrator notes that “... all primitive societies have their holy fear of a woman’s menstrual cycle; during that time she is dirty; and a source of death and danger to the surroundings in general” (1977:85). This facile and misogynistic conception of menstruation, transposed onto African traditional culture, is traceable to Old Testament doctrine:

[W]hen a woman has her monthly period, she remains unclean for seven days. If a man has sexual intercourse with her during her period, he is contaminated by her impurity and remains unclean for seven days, and any bed on which he lies is unclean (*Good News Bible*, Leviticus 15:19–27)

This conception recalls a related Nepalese cultural view of menstruation. Commenting on gender matters in Nepal, Joss (1990) observes that:

[W]hen girls start menstruating they are hidden away in a dark room for 9 days. The second month it is less time and from then onwards the young woman knows that each month she is unclean for 4 days. She must not enter the kitchen, touch anyone else's food but her own and must eat and sleep separately. At the end of the 4 days she must wash all the clothes she has worn as well as the bed clothes (in Allen *et al*/1992 :300)

Here, in the ubiquitous stereotyping of menstruating women, cultural forces conspire to produce a taboo Object – woman. Pertinent connections are established between religion, traditionalism, oppression, hygiene, gender and suppression of women by patriarchal institutions such as churches and tribal councils. The patriarchal association of menstrual blood with contagion runs counter to the common expression of admiration when a girl has her first period: “Now you are a woman”. It is curious that a woman is regarded as contaminated during her menses. Yet, with the cessation of the monthly flow of menstrual blood and the onset of menopause, she also carries a stigma. However, this glib cross-cultural conception of menstruation is undercut by a subversive consciousness as expounded by the narrator in ‘The Special One’: “I simply told her quite seriously that where I came from the men usually slept with the women when they were menstruating” (1977:85). The narrative voice is as subversive as it is self-assertive in its denunciation of this sordid view of menstruation.

The foregoing discussion has focused on the hybrid and syncretic dimensions of Head's short stories and novels, with side glances at the sociological contexts of her fictions. I have established that Head's short stories and novels are considerably complementary and contiguous due to the catalytic and integrative nature of hybridity.

My contextual approach to these texts has enabled me to demonstrate that hybridity manifests itself in the cross-pollination of cultures, the propagation of memes and the confluence of gametes – as embodied in liminal characters such as Margaret Cadmore (Junior) in *Maru*, Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* and Head herself. I have also shown that the judicious medley of languages in

The Collector of Treasures results in accessible and comprehensible creolity. The short stories and the novels lend insight into aspects of cultural life such as medical lore, marriage, judicial institutions, religion, hunting for game, traditional farming methods and the encroachment of modern culture upon traditional patterns of life. In their totality, these aspects re-establish the identity of Head as a visionary who is inspired by the possibility of the commonality of humankind.

The hybridity that Head's literary *oeuvre* gestures towards finds expressions today in the widespread viewing of television, the use of radio, the accessibility of the internet and in the popularity of musical collaborations. The musical performances of Paul Simon and Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Peter Gabriel and Papa Wemba have entranced the world of music. Similarly, the distinctively Wolof music called *mbalax*, popularized by the likes of Youssou N'Dour, Baba Maal and the pidginized lyrics of the Nigerian Fela Kuti have had a huge impact across world cultures.

ENDNOTES

¹ See also Van der Veer, P. (1997).

² My use of a dyad – ‘black’ and ‘white’ - does not suggest that I unproblematically endorse these constructed identities that have for so long divided humankind. They are used, rather, as signifiers of features characteristic of the National Party politics of apartheid. The classification of Bessie Head as a ‘Coloured’ was in terms of the population Registration Act (Act 130 of 1950). This Act legislated a separatist grading of human beings on the basis of skin pigmentation. The Group Areas Act (Act 141 of 1950) further created separate areas where each racial group could live and own property. See also, Moyana, H. and Sibanda, M. (1984).

³ As a case in point, see Saracino, M.A. (1991). *La donna dei tesori racconta da un villaggio del Botswana*. This is a translation of *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana village tales*.

The paradigm of intercultural hybridity which is suggested here is contestable. For instance, Ahmed criticizes Spivak and Bhabha, pointing out that “[t]he idea of hybridity which presents itself as a critique of essentialism, partakes of a carnivalesque collapse and play of identities, and comes under many names”. See also Ahmed, A. (1995) and Ahmed, A. (1992).

See also Mazrui, A. (2004). This article is relevant in its discussion of the deterministic relationship between language, culture and cognition.

⁶ The “Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon” is based on the research findings of Keys Jr. Keys observed the behaviour of monkeys on the island of Koshima in 1952. He observed that scientists were providing monkeys with sweet potatoes dropped in the sand. The monkeys liked the taste of raw sweet potatoes, but they found the dirt unpleasant. An 18-month female washed the potatoes in a nearby stream. She taught this trick to her mother and her playmates. This innovation was gradually picked up by all monkeys on the island and colonies of other monkeys from neighbouring islands. See also, Keyes, K. (2004)

For similar definitions of memes, see also Grant, G. (2004); Henson, H.K. (2004) and Razabek, H.M. (2004).

The *kgotla* system of justice bears similarities to the Western juridical body of persons sworn to render a verdict on the basis of evidence submitted in a court of justice. This body is known as a jury. However, in a persistently patriarchal Africa, the *kgotla*, also known as *tinkundla*, *kgoro* or *nkundla* is exclusively presided over by men, usually elderly members of a particular community. It is important to note that in the Western system of juridical justice, the judges are invariably elderly men, although there are women magistrates and judges who are arguably younger.

⁹ Ritual murders still occur to this day, more than twenty years since Head published her short story: ‘Jacob: The story of a Faith-Healing Priest’. See for example, this report from the *Sunday Sun*:

Two men – Petrus Kgabe, a 73 - year - old local traditional healer, and Moses Mmko, 55, a businessman – appeared in the Seshego's magistrate court ... in connection with the murder of a severely mutilated child found in Polokwane in July. An ear, hand and genitals of Sello Chokoe, 10, of Moletji, were hacked off. His skull was damaged and he remained in a coma until he died in August. (4 September 2004:4) See also, The *Daily Sun*. (June 2004:1).

¹⁰ *Kalimah Tayyibah* is an introductory book to the tenets of the Moslem religion.

¹¹ See, for example, Wilson, R. (1964). and Ruddolph, K. (1977). These texts provide a helpful insight into Gnosticism and its evolution.

¹² The doctrine of reincarnation is fully expounded in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (a Hindu holy book). According to this doctrine, a dead person may be reborn as an animal or as a human being, and the sort of life he or she will lead depends on whether that person has been good or bad in his or her present life. This is known as Karma. Reincarnation is finally over when a person has lived such a good and holy life that he or she is reunited with Brahman. This final, perfect stage is called Nirvana. I obtained this information in an interview with a Hindu devotee (18 September 2004).

¹³ For an engrossing insight into the turbulent and grinding circumstances of Head's life, see Eilersen, G.S. (1995).

¹ For other key texts in critical race theory, see Tate, W.F. (1997). Ladson-Billings, G. (2000) and Nebeker, K.C. (1998)

CONCLUSION

[Head] was more than just a feminist, protest, utopian or autobiographical writer. She was all these put together, as well as the most potent and compelling female voice Only a niche special enough to accommodate all these discursive and philosophical achievements can we justifiable [sic] carve out for her in the African literary hall of fame (Oa 1994:74)

She [Head] was also one of the most distinguished women writers in Africa (Olaussen 1997:13)

Commenting on the artistry of Achebe's short story, 'The Madman', Balogun notes:

[I]t is a consciously made piece of fiction. It is so consciously made and so poetic that it is, in fact, a poem - a prose-poem whose seven brief divisions, which move with cinematographic rapidity, sound like the seven stanzas of a poem. The story actually sustains a consistent cadence based on repetitions, alliterations, rhythmic dialogue, rhythmic description, syntactical parallelisms, paradox, irony and a metaphoric proverbial diction (1991:102)

Although Balogun made this perceptive comment apropos of Achebe's short story, his observation easily applies to Head's collection of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures*. Head's text is a well - crafted piece of fiction. It is so rhapsodic that it is, in fact, analogous to a prose - poem with chiaroscuro qualities. The entire collection of thirteen stories is replete with a poetic timbre based on personifications, repetitions, syntactical parallelisms, ironies, paradox, alliterations and a metaphoric bent. The narrative piece entitled 'Jacob: The Story of a Faith - Healing Priest' exemplifies how the collection works. The story opens with a beautifully constructed personification which gives a panoramic sweep of the geographical setting of this story:

The quiet, sleepy village of Makaleng was about thirty miles from a big railway station in Northern Botswana. Makaleng village was quiet and sleepy because the people were fat and well - fed. Envious visitors to the village often exclaimed that there must be something wrong with the sky overhead, because whilst the rest of the country was smitten by drought year after

year, Makaleng village never failed to receive its yearly quota of twenty - two inches of rain (1977:19)

The poetic devices of personification, parallelism, repetition and alliteration embellished in the first division (stanza) of this prose - poem melt with intensity to create a mellifluous rhythm that cinematographically reflects the placidity and the fecundity of the village. This serenity is later shattered by the callous prophecies of prophet Lebojang and his propensity for ritual murders. Personification in this “stanza” is built around the adjectival phrase, “quiet, sleepy village,” which is repeated in the second sentence. The change in word order between the first and second sentences generates an internal parallelism. Part of the rhythmical beauty of the parallelism emanates from the appropriately placed alliteration of the consonantal “f”: “... the people were *fat* and well-*fed* (1977:19, my emphasis). The alliterative “fat/fed” construction not only contributes to the poetic beauty of this story, but also links the fertility of Makaleng village with the proverbial dictum: “the children of a real woman do not get lean or die” (1977:30). The cadence of alliteration is further complemented by the contrastive nouns, “drought” and “rain”, which assume a metaphoric spin in relation to the major concerns of the story. Not only does the word “drought” operate as a semantic contrast to “fat”, but it also intimates at the heinous deeds of Lebojang. Lebojang's nefarious prophecies and his participation in ritual murders are connotative of a moral drought, whereas prophet Jacob's benevolence connote a moral rain -- rain as a signifier of life. It is significant to note that the rhythm of the many parallelisms of this opening “stanza” emanates from contrastive syntactical and semantic structures, as demonstrated in the following examples:

[T]he village had a *small* population ... and a *big, broad* sandy river cut its way through the central part of the village ... and in winter *gigantic* pools of water simmered like mercury in the pot-holes of its sandy bed.

...

For *some hours* a deep *silence* would reign over the grazing area; then *all of a sudden*, the agonized *bellows* of the cattle ...

would send the birds into the air with startled *shrieks*
(1977:19-20, my emphasis)

Here, the cadence of the rhythm is sustained by the simple device of repetition. The repetition is based on the recurrence of phrases as in: “the village,” “the river”, “broad” and “gigantic”. It is pertinent to note, also, the preponderance of contrast as in: “small/big”, “silence/bellows” and “hours/sudden[ly]”. These contrastive words are at a semantic disjuncture with the following synonymous constructs: “big/gigantic” and “bellows/shrieks”. These are qualifiers of quantity and of quality. Complementing the run-on lines of the “stanza” under discussion is the poetic device of simile which directly compares the water to mercury: “pools of water shimmered like mercury in the pot-holes of its sandy bed ...” (1977:19). This simile not only describes a topographical feature, but also enhances the aesthetic satisfaction that one derives from the reading of the story. Not far from this simile is a sentence with a rhythmic timbre that links with the simile to produce an internal half-rhyme:

[W]ater *shimmered* like mercury
The *summer* grass of Makaleng was a miracle
(1977:19, my emphasis)

This rhythmic structure ensures not only a continuum at the sentence level, but a coherent unity of meaning as well. ‘Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest’ is a cryptic story-poem which can be segmented into eight sections (stanzas). For my purposes here, the divisions are along thematic concerns. The first section describes the scenic beauty of Makaleng village, which is the setting of the story. This section begins, “The quiet, sleepy village ...” and ends, “drove around in a very posh car ...” (1977: 19-20). The second division provides a proleptic character delineation of prophet Jacob as a long-suffering servant of God. This section begins thus, “It was not the habit ...” and ends, “strange and incomprehensible acts ... ” (1977:20–21). The third “stanza” draws biblical allusions to the story of the “Old Testament” book of *Job* (1.13–22). The “stanza” gives a narrative account of how Jacob, just like

Job, suffers total disaster – he loses his property, wife and children. This section begins, “There was a time when ... ” and ends, “the Lord told him to go to Makaleng ...” (1977:21–23). The fourth section gives a retrospective account of Jacob's childhood. This section begins, “It was not the first time ...” and ends, “they were taught to sing the alphabet and clap their hands ... ” (1977:23–24). The fifth division relates the experiences of Jacob as a self-abnegating servant of God:

[I]t didn't seem as though Jacob's God wanted him to have anything for himself even when he was little. No meat came, no jersey. It makes you feel something is wrong because even in old age Jacob hasn't got shoes. It makes you feel like breaking down and weeping because even in old age Jacob hasn't got shoes (1977:25)

This section begins, “There is a point in his story ... ” and ends, “one of the oddest churches in the whole wide world ... ” (1977:25).

The sixth section provides a contrastive analysis between the religious inclinations of Jacob and prophet Lebojang:

[I]t took great simplicity of heart to approach a church such as the one conducted by prophet Jacob. Prophet Jacob had no shoes, so he conducted his services in his bare feet After the first reaction of surprised amusement, no one paid much attention to the church of Jacob because of his poverty and because his congregation was composed entirely of children (1977:26–7)

...

Lebojang's relationship with people was that of a businessman. You paid your money and that was that. If you dressed well and looked rich, a servant would immediately approach you and lead you into Lebojang's plush lounge Lebojang enriched himself from rich and poor alike (1977:28)

This “stanza” begins thus, “On his arrival in the village ... ” and ends, “the Lord sent him a wife named Johannah ... ” (1977:26–29). The seventh “stanza” narrates the entrance of Johannah into prophet Jacob's life. This

“stanza” begins, “Johannah was a tall, striking handsome woman ... ” and ends, “which priest would give this permission when it meant losing one of his pay pockets?” (1977:29–35). This “stanza” contains passages of lyrical beauty, as in the following example:

[S]he cried in such a peculiar way that even Jacob, who was concentrating his mind on her tale of sorrow, diverted his attention to her tears. They kept welling up in abrupt little bundles which were then caught in the thick cluster of her eyelids and deposited neatly into her lap. Not one splash soiled the smooth curved surface of her cheek - bones (1977:30-1)

Here, there is a semantic relationship between “sorrow” and “tears”. “Sorrow” signifies mental distress caused by disappointment, and “tears” signify a physiological manifestation of grief through crying. There is also a pleasant alliteration on “s” in the enchanting phrase: “Not one splash soiled the smooth curved surface of her cheek - bones”.

The eighth and closing “stanza” of this prose–poem begins, “Not long after these discussions of the people ... ” and ends, “he was suffering now” (1977:35–36). This “stanza” narrates the demise of Lebojang:

Kelepile waited to hear no more. In fact, his legs were shaking with terror He knew well enough that the conversation was about a ritual murder, just committed. The first thought in his mind had been to save his own life but to his amazement he found his shaking legs taking him to the police station. And this was how it came about that the police surrounded Lebojang and two other men Lebojang was sentenced to death. But the story did not end there People say the soul of Lebojang returned from the grave Some people also say that Lebojang's soul is like that of Lazarus (1977:36)

Here, the narrative incorporates a cryptic oxymoron, “waited to hear no more” and an allusive simile, “Lebojang's soul is like that of Lazarus”. The allusion to Lazarus recalls the biblical parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in the New Testament book of *Luke* (16. 19–31).

Further studies along this line of argument will discover in Head's elegant prose more poetic resonances than have been demonstrated. What I have shown, however, is sufficient to show that *The Collector of Treasures* is indeed a literary nugget. A commendable quality of this collection of short stories is that it is not poetically ostentatious even though it is poetically charged.

Thomas (1990:93) calls Head's stories "an intensification, a distillation, if you will, of Botswana history and actuality in order to suggest its impact on those who live it" Nowhere in any of Head's works of fiction is this distillation and intensification more elegant than in *The Collector of Treasures*. In her distillation of life in a Botswanan village, Head, as I have shown, interpolates and transposes orality as a crucial touchstone of the text's expression. Orality breaks into the text through the storyteller framework and an evocation of the familiar African storytelling milieu. As I have established in my reading of *The Collector of Treasures*, the text draws the reader to the fire-side in its compelling oral storytelling techniques and the storytelling ethos it evokes: an omniscient narrator comfortably ensconced by the hearth, an intimate audience, copious summary and a didactic drift to each story. Didacticism is suggested by illustrative lines such as: "according to custom all adults were regarded as the mothers and fathers of all children" (1977:34), "thrift and honesty were the dominant themes in village life" (1977:39), "custom demanded that people care about each other" (1977:43) and "one never ought to judge a human being who was both good and bad" (1977:44). These examples are directly didactic in intent and reinforce the values of respect, honesty and care for one another.

According to Ola (1994:74), "[Head] had a deep, intense and expansive imagination". It is this expansiveness of imagination that accounts for Head's various emphases in *The Collector of Treasures*. Not only does the text articulate contiguity and congruity between orality and literacy or lend profundity to such topics as polygamy, prostitution and the oppression of women, its examination of cultures, creolity and hybridity marks Head as an artist of the large canvas.

At the other end of the scale, *The Collector of Treasures* evinces vivid strokes of heteroglossia and splashes of dialogism. Dialogism, in Bakhtin's critical discourse, designates "the coexistence in a single utterance of two intentionally distinct, identifiable voices" (Hirschkop and Shepherd (eds) 1989:3). Bakhtin adumbrates the fundamentals of his theory of heteroglossia thus:

Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the [story] (whatever the forms for its incorporation) is another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated This double-voicedness sinks its roots deep into a fundamental, socio-linguistic speech diversity and multi-linguagedness (1981:324–326)

Both dialogism and heteroglossia designate modalities of the same phenomenon.¹ Bakhtin's insistence on the contextual relevance of a text and the polysemous meanings it yields is at variance with Saussure's conception of language as an abstract and self-contained unit.² In *The Collector of Treasures*, the shaping effect of heteroglossia and dialogism arise from the crucial role of the socio-historical context of the text as an essential element in decoding its meanings. It is this interaction between text and context that provides a plurality of perspectives between narratee, narrator, author and reader. Meanings are set to proliferate dialogically and not organized into a self-contained kernel of axiomatic truths. The story, 'Heaven is not Closed', provides an example of the text's dialogic and heteroglossic nature. This is demonstrated, for example, in the following utterances:

The old man leaned forward and stirred the dying fire with a partially burnt-out log of wood. His listeners sighed the way people do when they have heard a particularly good story. As they stared at the fire they found themselves debating the matter

in their minds, as their elders had done ... years ago. Was heaven really closed to the unbeliever, Ralokae? Or had Christian custom been so intolerant of Setswana custom that it could not hear the holiness of Setswana custom? Wasn't there a place in heaven too for Setswana custom? Then the gust of astonished laughter shook them again. Galethebege had been very well-known in the village ward ... for the supreme authority with which she had talked about God (1977:12)

Here, behind the primary narrator's story we read a second story – the immanent narrator's story. It is the immanent narrator who explicates how the primary narrator tells his stories. The narrative view expressed here is opposed to the apocryphal priest's retort: "heaven is closed to the unbeliever ... " (1977:11). Yet, neither narrator, narratee, reader nor author is granted an authoritative voice, and a vent - hole opens up for vestiges of heteroglossia to be manifest. The pluralism of meanings is suggested, for example, in the following line: "As they stared at the fire they found themselves debating the matter in their minds ... " (Head 1977:12). I grant that in debating the matter, both the narrator's audience and Head's readers proliferate the narrative with meanings specific to their contexts. The intertwining of context and text; the conflation of narrative voices; the liberating consciousness of some of the characters and the presence of an immanent narrator provides an occasion for dialogism.

According to Taiwo (1984:198), "[*The Collector of Treasures*] is valuable for the human interest it encompasses, its exciting literary style and the imaginative skill displayed by the author". Overall, the thirteen vignettes that constitute *The Collector of Treasures* are akin to a panoply of treasures. Elsewhere, Head writes:

With all my South African experience I longed to write an enduring novel on the hideousness of racial prejudice, but I also wanted the book to be so beautiful and so magical that I as the writer, would long to read and re-read it (1979:22)

Head made these poignant remarks in respect of *Maru* (1971), but they also apply to *The Collector of Treasures*. In this dissertation, I have tried to re–

discover the beauty and the magic that *The Collector of Treasures* weaves. I have also bestowed upon the text its appropriate status as one of the most lyrical works to have emerged from the African literary landscape. Its conjurer, Head, now rests, sunk beneath the dry maw that is the Botolaote graveyard - at the edge of the Kalahari desert.³ Like Paulina, in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968:94), "She had travelled a longer way, too, on the road of life, as unexpected suffering makes human beings do" According to Eilersen (1995):

Botolaote cemetery ... is sandy and stony, straggling and weed-ridden, but looks out over the Serowe plain with the broad, sweeping vision that was Bessie's own. There she could, in the sentiments of Bill Salter that she had once listened to so insistently, at last transcend the stress of living and stand stripped and free (1995:293)

I find it appropriate to close my argument with Achufusi's perceptive comment:

[N]o single research work can cover all aspects of any given issue. Such a task is impossible even with a single author The most that any single researcher can expect to accomplish is to contribute his or her own share to the common heritage of aesthetic and critical activities which already exist, and to the common enterprise of nourishing and enriching the commonwealth of letters (1991:43-4)

Head's collection of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana village tales* expounds a recognition of the permeability of borders between orality and literacy and, advocates the dissolution of boundaries defined by language, culture, and religion. Her hybrid status gives her a unique angle to hybridity

ENDNOTES

¹ See also Dentith, S. (1995).

² Saussure takes a rather ahistorical conception of language, seeing it as absolute in itself even if language systems are arbitrary and conventional. His theory hinges on the operational concepts of the “signifier” and the “signified”. The “signifier” refers to a particular phonetic configuration which produces a specific word and the “signified” refers to an image associated with that word.

³ Head died on 17 April 1986 (aged 49).

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