

**THE CONTEXTS OF HER-STORY: AN EXPLORATION OF
RACE, POWER AND GENDER IN SELECTED NOVELS OF
BESSIE HEAD**

By

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Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the subject

ENGLISH

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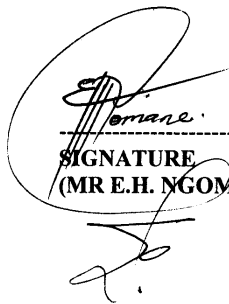
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NOVEMBER 2004

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I declare that **THE CONTEXTS OF HER-STORY: AN EXPLORATION OF RACE, POWER AND GENDER IN SELECTED NOVELS OF BESSIE HEAD** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledge by means of complete references.



SIGNATURE
(MR E.H. NGOMANE)

26 SEPTEMBER 2004
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I count myself fortunate to have had this study supervised by a very erudite and fine scholar. My gratitude goes to Mr D.N.R. LEVEY, who pulled me through this dissertation with patience, good humour and constructive criticism. I value his encouragement and interest, but even more his friendship.

I am deeply grateful to my wife, NONHLANHLA, and to our children, BUSISIWE and MASANA, whose constant sweet foreground noises made this study possible. I would also like to thank my twin brother, NKHESANI, who, ever since my earliest undergraduate days, has been a constant source of inspiration: He shared my enthusiasm and jollied me along when my spirits were down. My thanks also go to JONKIE DLAMLENZE for support and for her unfailing patience in getting the computer to work for me. DAWIE MALAN and LESLEY ROBERTSON deserve a special mention for having made this study bearable.

This study is dedicated to TSATSAWANI, MPHEPHU, KWATISA, MHLABA and “MPENZI” from whose “Open Hearth University” I received my formative orature lessons.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the triple imbrications of race, power and gender in the selected novels of Bessie Head. A critical analysis of *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1974) is undertaken with a view to identifying the subordinating and the marginalising tropes that result in silencing of female subjectivities in Head's protagonists. Linked to a critical reading of the novels, this study examines the role of cultural and psychological forces in maintaining patriarchal hegemony, which is based upon hierarchy and domination of women rather than equality.

Furthermore, this dissertation suggests that Head's depiction of narrow ethnic and racial bigotry serves a broader etiological purpose of accounting for "the state of things" within the South African context. Thus this study oscillates between the abstract constructs and the concrete social experiences within which Bessie Head's literary imagination subsists.

In this study, particular attention is paid, in addition to critiques of individual texts, to some of Head's biographical elements with a view on the one hand, to highlighting the moments, events and issues which are reflected as "contexts of her-story" and on the other, to amplifying how Head's formative experiences contribute to her critique of the exploitative racially structured narratives.

By using Foucault's theories within the social constructionist model, this dissertation aims to demonstrate the insidious intersections between racism and sexism and how these constructs are implicated in the conception and construction of power.

Specifically, this study argues that due to their arbitrary applications, racial and sexual difference be viewed as dynamic and contested, rather than fixed.

A synthesis is reached which accords literature a role within the framework of socio-cultural practice in general.

KEY WORDS

Bessie Head, Power, Gender, Identity, Margin, Centre, Race, Discourse, Novels, Patriarchy, Sexuality, Madness.

INTRODUCTION

There is a noticeable questioning of the received notion of “race” as a feature of social organisation, by many South Africans inspired by the advent of democracy in 1994; reinforced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the various commissions of inquiry into racism and the recently established Equality Courts; yet in a very real sense, our legacy of the negative concept of race will remain an abiding context of our socio-political and literary history.

Because writers often emerge as the reflectors of their societies, the writing act necessarily serves either to perpetuate exploitative power and cultural stereotyping or to challenge official orthodoxies and articulate the voices of those dominated and silenced by official discourses. As Edward Said puts it in his introduction to *The World, The Text and the Critic*,

[t]he realities of power and authority-as well as the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies-are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics

(1984: 5).

Therefore, women writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Bâ, Gayl Jones, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, and Maryse Condé are often especially aware of their tasks as producers of images that both participate in the dominant representations of their culture and simultaneously transcend and subvert these images by offering a re-vision of the dominant social modes. Bessie Head, as writer, observer and victim of the curse of racist attitudes is perhaps amongst the most perceptive of these women writers. Her fictional as

well as her non-fictional works often implicitly reflect the intricate interaction between race and gender within the dynamics of power relations.

It is, however, worth noting that over the course of her writing career, Bessie Head has persistently shown ambivalent attitudes and often controversial views on issues of racism, feminism and patriarchy, especially African traditionalism.

Throughout both her fiction and her other writings, Bessie Head raises the question of identity again and again: how does one represent the self, assuming that such a core identity exists? Commentators on Head's writings note this question in discussions of characterisation; further, they frequently extend the issue of identity to include the ways in which Head incorporates her own life in her writings. She has herself noted the strong relation between her fiction and her personal life. This study opens with a sketch of Head's life and the biographical intersections with her work, thus establishing a field of analysis where I intend to situate a reading of Bessie Head's narrative novels, *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1974), highlighting the moments, events and issues which are reflected as "contexts of her story." The correlation between Bessie Head's personal history and her creative expression is profound. In the novels selected for analysis, the central characters Margaret and Elizabeth all share some common aspects of the author's life. They both suffer as members of a marginalised gender and a subject race. It is not a coincidence therefore that I choose to follow the same pattern in my appraisal of her novels.

This study will explore the ramifications of race, power and gender in the selected novels of Bessie Head, with a view, on the one hand, to determining the intricate relations between the selected texts and their context, and, on the other, to revealing how the concepts of race and gender interface and contribute to internalised structures of power dynamics, oppression, marginalisation and

subordination of people with non-dominant identities, especially women. The study is mainly framed by the social constructionist theory.

The introduction to this study (the present chapter) describes briefly the theoretical tools employed and also contains a brief outline of Bessie Head's personal life. Certain novels are analysed with a view to exploring the mythologisation of racist discrimination and its relation to literature.

The discussion of the novels *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1974) in **Chapter Two** of this study will be undertaken in terms of the theoretical part of the dissertation. Although the issues that Bessie Head grapples with arise from historically specific contexts, they gain more poignancy when read against the contexts of the author's own pained, tragic "story" and personal experiences.

Like all of us, Bessie Head was a child of her age. She was shaped by the prevailing presumptions and prejudices of her society. According to Head scholar, Huma Ibrahim (1989: 95), Head had a "curious history". Born Bessie Amelia Emery of racially-mixed parentage in South Africa on the 6th July 1937, Head was effectively an orphan. When her mother "Tobby" was found to be pregnant, allegedly as speculation has it by a black stablehand ("who the father was, is completely unknown": Birch 1995:30), her mother was committed to a mental hospital and labelled "insane". Head was born in the asylum of the Fort Napier Mental Institution to which her mother was committed. Adopted by a white foster family when she was still very young, Head was then rejected by this family on account of her "strangeness" (Mackenzie 1990:119). The notion that young Bessie was fathered by a man of colour slowly took root. At the age of thirteen she was placed in an orphanage at St Monica Mission school, an institution for coloured children who were unwelcome in white schools in Pietermaritzburg (Eilersen 1995: 15). Her mother committed suicide in September 1943 when Head was still very young. The admittedly "autobiographical"

journal of her life, *A Question of Power*, has her protagonist Elizabeth introduce her history by asking: "Tell me about my mother" (quoted in Birch 1995: 16).

A few years later Head was trained as a teacher, and taught elementary school children in Durban, South Africa. Later she resigned from teaching for personal reasons and worked as a columnist for the *Home Post*, a supplement of *Golden Post* belonging to the *Drum* publications stable in Johannesburg. Head also became active in Pan-Africanist Congress politics.

On 1st September 1961, she married a journalist, Harold Head, and had a son, Howard, but divorced Head shortly thereafter. At the age of twenty seven she left for Botswana with her young son, where she lived as a refugee in the village of Serowe, working both as a teacher and an unpaid agricultural worker on Bamangwato Development farm at Radisele. Her experiences in Botswana were not much better - they were extremely traumatic, provoking a nervous breakdown. Bessie Head died in Botswana of hepatitis on April 17, 1986.

For my purpose here I have included this sketch of Head's past only as it is germane to the discussion of issues raised in this study. For a detailed study of Bessie Head's turbulent life, see Gillian Stead Eilersen's painstakingly researched biography: *Thunder Behind Her Ears: Bessie Head: Her Life and Writing* (1995).

Chapter Three of this study offers a summary of the various ideas and theoretical positions discussed. A synthesis is reached which accords literature a place within the framework of socio-cultural practice in general. This position, hopefully, will view the selected texts as social processes engaged in social practice. The emphasis will be on the specificity of a historical

moment which will help put the selected texts in context - in the light of the findings of the first chapter of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 1: THEORY

1.1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although there have been numerous critical discussions about race, power and gender, it is the interface between these issues on which this study focuses. That is, on how the one informs the other. This intricate relation, of necessity, remains germane to societies in which peoples' lives are dictated by the curse and the discourse of race, power and gender in their daily lives. Historical studies (Salvatore 1981, Geis 1993, Fast 1993) corroborate that structures of power bear a complicated relation to those of race and gender, particularly in relation to peoples of non-dominant identities. This dominant social mode calls for an examination with regard to its implications for literary analysis - for obvious reasons, two of which relate to the role of the writer in an unjust society and the role of literature as a vehicle either of perpetuating or subverting the status quo.

A number of broad positions with regard to the issue have crystallised so far. One position (Geertsema 1990: 2), takes on literature's propensity to represent reality: to have qualities that portray life as it is; perhaps, a socially constructed reality as represented, interpreted and (re) created by both critics and text constructors, usually in terms of oppression and injustice.

A second position (Althusser 1971: 174) propounds that the purpose of literature is to reveal "...the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes". The first position paradoxically leads to the second in that it views literature as an indispensable reflection of social practice.

At the other interpretive pole lies a third broad position: that which takes literature to be a discursive practice. The work of the deconstructionists, and especially that of Michel Foucault (himself not a deconstructionist though) can be identified within this paradigm.

These positions are somewhat unevenly related: While the first two legitimise literature through socio-political possibilities, the third does so through Foucauldian elements.

In this dissertation the social value of literature is explored and the possibilities of literature to act as a vehicle for changing the status quo are examined by means of an exploration of the myth of race: the study will consist of explorations and examinations of various positions on identity and race as well as on power and gender. The purpose is to synthesise from these positions what I call “a continuum of responding” that wishes to concretise a possible position on effective social change through literature. The main problem to be addressed in this dissertation can be framed by the following questions: What ideas and issues have been influential in the development of Bessie Head’s literary imagination? How do the concepts of race, gender and power act upon each other and within one another?

The following question is especially important: How does one go about destroying racial and gender stereotyping? In short, how is the status quo to be subverted? Can literary texts contribute to its subversion?

These are broad questions which will be addressed in the study, and which form the background against which this dissertation should be read. They are such broad questions, however, that detailed answers to them would fall outside the limited scope of a mini dissertation. The problem to be discussed in some depth pertains to the complex relation between race, power and gender as it manifests itself in Bessie Head’s novels, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. Obviously this cannot be viewed in isolation from the much vaguer and more generalised perspectives. The narrow and specific perspective is, theoretically, at least, linked to the broad perspective. Hence, I shall weave threads backwards as well as forwards within the broader and narrower perspectives with a view to

mapping out the process by which I have arrived at my understanding of the selected novels. In my view, this approach better facilitates an interface between theoretical considerations and the texts.

1.2. HYPOTHESIS

My point of departure here is that a text's power does not depend exclusively on itself and its "content" or "intrinsic" qualities, but rather on the con-texts into which it is inserted. A text's power, I postulate, depends as much on the network of its extra - or intertextual cross-references as on its intratextual relations. The purpose of this mini dissertation is to indicate, theoretically at least, that a text's power depends on its con-texts at least as much as on itself.

This might seem like reiterating the obvious since it is nowadays generally accepted that a text cannot be viewed in isolation. This is, however, not the point to be contested in this study.

Williams's observation (1977: 24), that literature is always in society, represents the kind of writing that Bessie Head's narrative fiction embodies: the subject of this investigation. One cannot simply refer to literature and society when discussing the relations between literature and society. In this study, *con-text* is not "context" in the sense of a mere "background". The conceptual stance I assume here is that a text's con-texts are made up of various kinds of texts (political, cultural, social, historical, literary, and others), which are concurrently in relation to the literary text. In the context of this study, the term *text* indicates that a "story" is being told in the medium of language and, in fact, of language in written form. A text can therefore be said to have con-texts in relation to which it is produced and processed. This does not, however, presume that literature must always be read "against its background", for this (thinking of Williams now) implies taking the "background" to be:

A general body of facts against which this foreground of activity we call literature is undertaken. The background is regarded, with all the implications of the metaphor, as a fixed unchanging scene, and against this the more significant activities of the making of literature are engaged in. So that, in denying the active relationship and interrelationship between literature and other social experiences and practices, we are cut off from considering what in fact are the real relations, the primary relations, between literary practice and other kinds of individual and social experiences and practices

(Williams 1977: 25).

Building on the insights of Williams, Said (1984: 4) insists that "...even when they appear to deny it, [texts] are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted".

Both Said and Williams's views are not dissimilar from those of Wenzel (2001: 65) who propounds that the influence of immediate context on the author and his or her product still remains a crucial factor in the interpretation of history and literature; because both are cultural constructs which relate to the "social mentality or ideology of an age" (Eagleton 1991: 208). Therefore, the key to interpreting a text remains, as Collingwood asserted in 1946, "to understand the questions it asks, and the answers it gives" (quoted in Lerner 1991: 337). The interpretation of fiction should therefore also take the author's context into account: the personal, social, and historical realities of the author as well as that of the text because, as Minneke Schipper (1989: 155) argues, authors are "recipients of texts (from their own and other cultures) on the one hand and producers of texts on the other hand". In the case of Bessie Head, the context of her-story is exposed through the dynamic interaction of the concepts of race, power and gender.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO BE USED

The ways in which literary texts communicate by positioning themselves in relation to a larger context have fascinated critics for centuries, perhaps because of our awareness, in spite of many doctrines to the contrary, that no text stands alone. The way in which texts are examined in relation to a broader context probably says as much about the perspective of the critic as about anything else: My study of the selected novels will likewise (and inevitably) say as much about my own interests and perspective as about the texts I investigate.

The study of gender in recent years has been largely guided by two orienting approaches: (1) a social constructionist emphasis on the day-to-day production or doing of gender (Coltrane 1989, West 1997 and Zimmerman 1995), and (2) attention to the interlocking systems of race, power, class and gender (Espiritu 1997, Collins et al 2000). Despite the prominence of these approaches, little empirical work has been done that integrates the doing of gender with the study of race. A contributing factor is the more expansive incorporation of social constructionism in the study of gender than in race scholarship, where biological markers are still given importance despite widespread acknowledgement that racial oppression is rooted in social arrangements and not biology (Glenn 1999). In addition, attempts to theoretically integrate the doing of gender, race and power around the concept of “doing difference” (West 1997) tended to downplay historical macro-structures of power and domination, to privilege gender over race (Collins et al 2000).

Still needed is work that integrates systems of oppression in a social constructionist framework without granting primacy to any one form of inequality or ignoring larger contextual structures of domination. The integration of gender, race and power dynamics within a social constructionist approach directs attention to issues we tend to overlook. Certainly, suggesting that race and gender are “both social constructs distinct from biological classifications” (Liu 1991: 155) is a first step

toward a critique of biologically based understanding of both concepts, but it is only a first step. Most scholars now stress that race, like gender, is an empty category to which numerous meanings can be attributed, depending on the context. Analytical moves that underscore this reality, such as when Henry Gates, Jr. (1986: 402-409) places the term *race* between quotation marks, do not bring us closer to unravelling fundamental questions about race, such as, Why do such categories exist as ways to identify human beings? What purposes do such classifications serve? How and when are these categories invoked? How are they invested with meanings? How do we account for the malleability of their meanings?

Pointing to the contingent character of race and gender only tells us that these categories are analytically similar. It does not necessarily suggest any relation between them. More importantly, these observations do not tell us why we should investigate gender to understand race and vice versa. Nor do these observations lead us to understand more fundamental questions about race. We need to push for theoretical understandings of the relation between race and gender that go beyond their shared status as contingent constructions.

In the following paragraphs, I would like to suggest several hypotheses on how race and gender might be linked as social categories. My speculations on this subject are rather tentative, but I hope, at the very least, to raise new questions and stimulate debate. Before doing so, however, I would like to restate that my understanding of race and its relation to gender is located in the social processes of defining and maintaining group boundaries. Specifically, I argue that race is a gendered social category that rests on regulating sexuality and particularly on controlling the sexual behaviour of women.

Recently, scholars influenced by critical theory have argued for the need to move beyond understanding racial bigotry as purely an outgrowth of irrational prejudices (see Goldberg 1990). Such thinking, in fact, to recast Liu (1991), exoticises racism, in the sense that it makes racism incomprehensible to those who do not hate along the same dimensions. In exposing the myths of racism, my task is not limited to pointing out that race is a social construct, an ideology, or an empty category. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986), debunking the beliefs of racists obscures the reality that race is a widespread principle of social organisation. We need to explore instead what Liu has called “the logic of racial thinking” (1991: 159). In particular, we need to identify the kinds of metaphors and the type of reasoning about human relationships that allow racists to believe in the reality of their categories. In doing so, we find such reasoning in benign situations as well as under conditions of discrimination, overt hatred, and even genocide. In other words, even those of us who do not hate by skin colour must realise that racial thinking is disturbingly close to many of the “acceptable” ways that we conceptualise social relationships.

To illustrate the myths of race and our familiarity with racial metaphors, let me begin with two dictionary definitions of race I found quite surprising and illuminating. The following definitions are challenged and qualified in this study, but they do provide useful prisms. This is how the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed 1989) breaks down “race”. Under the first definition, we find *race* as “a group of persons, animals, or plants connected by common descent or origin”. As illustrations, the dictionary lists “the offspring or posterity of a person, a set of children or descendants, breeding, the production of offspring, (rarely): a generation”.

In a second set of usages, the *OED* defines *race* as “a limited group descended from a common ancestor, a house, family, kindred”. To illustrate this second definition are provided the examples of “a tribe, nation, or people, regarded as of common stock, one of the great divisions of mankind”. The second example is qualified by this comment: “this term is often used imprecisely: even

among anthropologists there is no generally accepted classification or terminology". These definitions are then followed by explanations of the meaning of race when applied to animals, plants, and so on. The third and most fascinating definition simply refers to *race* as "a natural or inherited disposition".

In his book *Families in Former Times*, Louis Flandrin (1979) made the reverse discovery when he looked up *famille* (family) in a French dictionary, *Petit Robert*. There the word refers to "the entirety of persons mutually connected by marriage or filiations or the succession of individuals who descend from one another", that is to say, "a line," "a race," a dynasty". Only secondarily does *Petit Robert* define *family* in the way we usually mean it, as "related persons living under the same roof", "more specifically, the father, the mother, the children". Taking these sets of dictionary definitions together, it would seem that race as a social category is intimately linked to one of the basic ways human beings have organised society, that is, by kinship. As Flandrin points out, etymologically, the "name of the race" (*le nom de race*), predated our current usage of the term *race*, which denotes distinct large populations.

Although the specific referent in notions of race is to kinship, in order to understand the political and social significance of racial thinking we need to move beyond these "neutral" dictionary distinctions. It is when somatic differences are based on external physical characteristics mediated through stratified social order, as in the South Africa of Bessie Head's day, that the concept of race becomes important. It is in this context of apartheid that skin colour and hair type became the differentiating feature between people of the same country. This malleability in the notion of racial metaphors was constructed on two powerful, but false premises: The first was the notion that Afrikaners (and people of European descent) made up a discrete biological and social entity, a "natural" community of racial attributes, political and social affinities and superior culture. The

second notion was that Blacks (and other “non-Europeans”) were easily identifiable and belonged to the bottom rung of the social ladder. Importantly, communities described with racial metaphors are always limited. The intent is to exclude in the process of including. Thus it is not accidental that racial thinking borrows its language from biology, particularly from a systemic vision of the natural world wherein hierarchies, differences, and even struggles are described as indelible, non-voluntary and functional to the survival of the whole. However, such invocations of an indelible common whole de-emphasise and even suppress opposing interests within the group.

Indeed, the centrality of reproduction in racial metaphors, especially in the transmission of common “substance” through heterosexual relations, allows us to see the functioning of race as a social category to maintain control over sexual behaviour. For example, the promulgation of the Immorality Act (amended in 1957), The Mixed Marriages Act and the Populations Registration Act in the South Africa of the not so distant past reveals that race is not simply an empty category, but that it is an extraordinarily complicated concept for differentiation and stratification, and that it has clear implications for the study of how gender is implicated in the structures of power relations; in the past and the present alike.

Like that of race, the articulation of gendered difference has been a productive site for critics (Zimmerman 1995) with a diversity of approaches and viewpoints, and not infrequently controversial and conflicting assumptions emerging from the inquiry.

At least three distinct theories could have been used in order to frame the complications of race, power and gender in this study: first, an examination of the model of masculinity developed from Freudian and Darwinian concepts dating from the 1840s into the twentieth century (Viney 1999:88)

However, this avenue was rejected due to its biologicistic determinism and reductionist tendencies, which can only confirm the objectification of the female “other” which is associated with the realm of the body.

The second theory that could have been used is a feminist approach. While acknowledging the acuity of feminist scholarship, and the assumption that feminism is the immediate historical context within which gender issues emerge, my purpose here, however, is to critique not feminism but gender dissymmetry. This approach was eschewed because one would first of all have to examine the broad theories espoused by the various contradictory schools of feminism and their participants. A second reason for not pursuing this avenue is the limited scope of the present study. The theoretical part of this dissertation would have been concerned with an exhaustive examination of the feminist movement, its methodology and the problems it raises.

It is imperative that the reader accepts the basic tenet of this study, namely, that gender be looked at as socially constructed, as part of social practice, social structures and the imagination (Viney 1999: 91). I borrow from the social sciences the important distinction between “sex” and “gender”. “Sex” is a biological category: female or male. “Gender” refers to ways of seeing and reporting people and situations based on sex difference. “Gender” is a social or cultural category, influenced by stereotypes about “female” and “male” behaviour that exist in our attitudes and beliefs. Wickham (1986: 2) argues that the social meaning of gender is intimately related to the issue of culture. This in turn reflects the values, norms, customs and roles of any society and, therefore, the everyday life of people. Bauman (1991: 157) states that gender is the culturally produced social differences between men and women which are learnt through socialisation. According to Eisenstein (1984: 7), gender is the cultural and social “cluster” of expectations, attributes and behaviours assigned by society to the category of human being (male or female)

which the child is born into. Parents of infants treat their children differently according to their gender. For instance, many of us will be familiar with the Western tradition of designating colours to signify sex difference: “pink for girls, blue for boys.”

In terms of this conceptualisation, while the binarity of the sexes is an immutable fact, the traits assigned to a sex are regarded as internalised social constructs that are difficult but not impossible to change. Thus, while the designations “female” and “male” are sex categories the imaginative ideas associated with these differences are manufactured out of the fabric of culture and social structure and have little, if any, causal relationship to innate and stable biological attributes (Kessler and McKenna 1978, Lorber 1994). Nancy Chodorow argues that

Gender difference is not absolute, abstract, or irreducible; it does not involve an essence of gender. Gender differences and the experience of difference, like differences among women, are socially and psychologically created and situated... Difference and gender difference do not exist as things in themselves; they are created relationally, that is, in relationship

(1989: 100).

Chodorow’s assertions not only reject essentialist interpretations of difference but also presuppose an analysis of the interaction between men and women (and masculinities and femininities) as part of the same society. Men and women are not seen, or analysed, in isolation from one another and the society at large. Gender may, therefore, be regarded as a social concept which refers to the nature of the relationships between men and women, and the way these relationships are socially constructed (Moser and Peake 1987: 6).

Judith Butler (1990: 98) suggests that if it were not for our gendered social arrangements, “sex” as we know it, a strict classification of people on the basis, usually, of their genitals, would not have its present significance. The point tacitly raised here is that human biological variations assume importance for us when for social, economic and political reasons they become a basis for ordering people into hierarchies. Perhaps “sex” may be straightforward to identify, but arguably, the significance we attach to identification follows from the significance of gender divisions in the organisation of societies. The dynamics of power and domination as well as gender stereotyping are highlighted by this approach. It cannot be taken for granted that the world is “naturally” divided into two groups, “women and men”. This division should be seen as something historically produced, socially constructed, often contradictory but alterable. Rob Morrell (1997) expands on this when he argues that gender identities are constructs of a society or culture within their particular era and location. The anthropologist, Margaret Mead (1963) had shown that in non-western societies the attributes assigned to men and women can differ widely: men can be peace-loving, women warlike. These identities occur through social, often fictional representations of dominant and oppressed types. Therefore, in this conception, *gender constructs sex*, not *vice versa*.

Notwithstanding my commitment to constructionism, I need to point out that this conception of gender opens up a new field of theoretical entanglements and further problems in gender identity. Most problematic is the notion that if gender is constructed, and constructs sexuality, then it is open to the possibility of de-construction. (The term is used here as the antithesis of construction, not in the critical Derridean sense.) Francis (2002: 40) also notes that this position has been queried because of the intractable link and theoretical slippage between sex (biological) and gender (social). Hood-Williams summarises the problem very effectively:

The paradox is this in sex/gender: two contradictory notions are in place. The first is that sex determines gender. It is for a reason that it is men and only men that are always masculine ... But if sex determines gender what is the point of the concept of gender? If gender is always collapsing back onto sex why not just talk sex? The second is that sex does not determine gender; gender is a social construction [...But...] What would gender be 'about' if it flew off and left sex behind? Where would be the maleness of masculinity? The paradox is that gender must be, and cannot be, determined by sex. Neither makes sense (1999: 61).

Judith Butler raised the problem of the sex/gender dichotomy a decade ago (Butler 1990). Like earlier researchers (e.g., Kessler & McKenna 1978), Butler (1990) maintained that the dualism of sex is false, and that many people cannot obviously be identified or classed as male or female via traditional classifications. She maintained that gender is performative, "constituting the identity it is purported to be" (1990: 25). There is no real "essence" of gender, rather, it is various *acts* of gender which perpetuate the notion of gender: without the acts there would be no gender. In this sense, the labelling of different people as male/female, and the labelling of different behaviours masculine/feminine, enables and perpetuates the performance of gender.

The idea that men and women are not simply a biological given was first espoused by Simone de Beauvoir's perceptive observation, made in 1949, that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". Implicit in this statement is that you may be born female, but you become the kind of social being your society defines as "a woman" (the same of course is true of men/males). Cultural and ethnic complicity cannot be ignored in the "naturalisation" and collapsing of gender with the received (biological) notion of women. While naturalising beliefs might appear simply to be descriptive, they are associated with normative prescriptions. Connell's (1987: 246) words are

relevant here: “Naturalisation... is not a naïve mistake... It is a highly motivated ideological practice... Nature is appealed to for justification more than for explanation”. Naturalisation can therefore be viewed as an ideology that is deeply intertwined with an attempt to impose closure on a social world whose essential characteristic is the maintenance of gender inequality in general. According to Witz and Savage (1992: 31) the gender paradigm is embedded in the power relations of bureaucracy. This is usually associated with male dominance, which suggests that power is embedded in gender relations in the form of male dominance and female subordination.

Of course, the exact nature of gender is far from clear. What is apparent at this point is that gender related differences are multifaceted and over determined. Besides being a function of social, cultural and political structures that forms the context of reading and writing, they interact with other differences, in particular those grounded on race and class. For the purpose of this study, gender refers to the culturally produced social differences between men and women. These differences are unequal in nature and serve as a basis for discrimination. In any case, gender differences are not a matter merely of academic curiosity. Beyond the recognition of differences, there is the need to consider which differences are pernicious and which are salutary, which are to be modified and which are to be cultivated.

The focus on race, gender and power in the case of this study is deliberate and involves certain risks. Foremost among these is that of reductiveness and the possibility of falling into the essentialist trap. It is possible to lose sight of the fact that categories obscure considerable individual variation. In accordance with my view that both essentialism and non-essentialism have certain limitations, any essentialist position that emerges from this study is provisional and strategic. Another risk is the reification of race, gender and power. It is equally important to guard against discussions of race and gender foreclosing the recognition of individual variability and of

the common ground shared by all humans. At the same time, the elaboration of race, gender and power is essential, given the damaging “societal control myths” (Tosh and Roper 1992: 61-64).

3. METHODOLOGY

Bessie Head’s writings constitute a critical dilemma and a theoretical challenge. This dilemma is further compounded by Head’s abhorrence of labels “political or otherwise,” as Ibrahim (1992: 95) observed.

However, Head was always cognisant of the ways in which literary and other texts communicate by positioning her creative perceptions in relation to a larger context, perhaps because of her own awareness, too, that in spite of many doctrines to the contrary, no text stands alone.

I have chosen to focus the methodology of this dissertation on Michel Foucault’s theories on power and sexuality from a sociological perspective. This dissertation does not, however, claim any pretence to being a strictly empirical study. Before I briefly outline Foucault’s argument, let me state that Foucault has his limitations and should not be applied in an unmediated way to gender studies. It must also be noted, from the outset, that although Foucault considered feminism as a revolutionary movement, he did not write with a feminist perspective in mind. Not only did he advocate the decriminalisation of rape, but he also dedicated little space to women’s specificity in his work. His *History of Sexuality* addresses women peripherally, dedicating only a few pages to the hysterisation of women’s bodies and to a brief reading of the Lapcote incident which, in Kate Soper’s (1993: 43) view, “could very well serve as an example of sexual harassment and sexual abuse”.

Given that Foucault's theories of power and sexuality do not focus mainly on women or gender construction, one may wonder *a priori* whether it is academically legitimate to seek any theoretical anchor for gender studies in Foucault. In fact, that Foucault is neither a feminist nor a gender theorist has little impact on the pertinence of his work for gender studies. The problem, as Jean Grimshaw (1993: 52) affirms, is "rather a question of what affinities there are between some of the questions that gender theorists address and those that Foucault addresses".

I argue that Foucault's central interest in the functioning of power in modern societies leads to findings significant to any marginalised group, informing gender and cultural studies with an understanding of both the structures of power dynamics and an analysis of the multiple forces at work in oppressor/oppressed relations. In this context, the texts selected for analysis, albeit not without certain reservations, do attest to the relevance of Foucault's theories on power and sexuality for gender studies, since they contribute to unveiling the artificiality of the gender dichotomy and shed light on the encoding of subjectivity and bodies within the power-knowledge system (although Adrienne Rich, 1980 has raised these issues more radically for women in her analysis of compulsory heterosexuality). Foucault's notion of power offers lenses to magnify a dimension of the dynamics of power relations that enables a process of making sense out of the interacting diverse and complex forces. It reveals more clearly the control patterns that are easily overlooked in everyday situations. Foucault views power not only as a juridical notion or as something possessed and consciously exercised, but also as a relation or mode of interaction.

Power

... must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and, as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them, as the support

which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain which isolate them from one another, and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect whose general design or institutional crystallisation is embodied in ... the various social hegemonies

(Foucault 1990: 92).

Power represents the different modes by which a human being is made a subject, "...subject to someone else by control and dependence", and ties his or her own identity by a consciousness or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes "subject to" (Foucault, as cited by West 1997: 170). Foucault calls for a conception of power where the privilege of the law is replaced with "... the viewpoint of the objective, the privilege of prohibition with the viewpoint of tactical efficacy, the privilege of sovereignty with the analysis of a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced" (Foucault 1990: 102). "Force relations" in this characterisation of power must be understood as meaning relations of dominance rather than the application of brute force. Power is exercised in our society through subtle mechanisms and not through such open application of force. One such mechanism is discourse or, more exactly, "discursive practices" (Foucault 1969: 100-101).

Foucault's (1990: 100) notion of discourse offers a means of dissecting some of the elements of the more inherent dimensions of power relations. He views discourse as the joining of power and knowledge, as "...practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak ... Discourses are not about objects, they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention" (Foucault, cited by Ball 1990: 2). This explains meaning not as something that arises only from language, but also "... from institutional practices, from power relations, words and concepts change their meaning and their effects as they are deployed within

different discourses” (ibid:2). Accordingly, discourse can be “both an instrument, an effect of power, but a hindrance, a stumbling-block, and viewpoint of resistance” (Foucault 1990: 101). Thus, one can say that a discourse defines what can be said, who can speak and who must remain silent, in this way defining their being, or as Foucault (1980: 237) would have said, defining the way persons are constituted as subjects. It is by limiting who can speak, and what can be said that discourse is inextricably linked to power. Power relations also need to create knowledge and discourse in order to “hold good” (Foucault 1980: 119). It is this two-way interrelationship between knowledge and power that Foucault tries to convey in his term “knowledge/ power”.

Two final points need to be made: First, because of the contradictory nature of Head’s texts, and because these contradictions are intrinsic to Head’s perceptions, I have chosen to draw on some extra literary material from such fields as psychology, religion, sociology or history for examples which will help to amplify the central issue raised in this study. Hence, I shall incorporate such work as Leonard Thompson’s *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* and Bill Derman’s timely psychological text, *Race and Class, Society and Biology: Problems in the Analysis of South Africa*. Secondly, I have chosen to frame my study within a post-colonialist model because Bessie Head writes in a post-colonialist situation: She was mission-educated. She writes in English and her creative endeavour and much of her reading shows “tentative connections to the English lake poets” (Eilersen 1989: 7-15). In the psychological sense, my definition of the post-colonial situation includes Fanon’s 1967 concept of a society which has experienced racial and cultural oppression and which is still struggling to become free. By post-colonial I mean an historical, psychological, economic, and political condition. In this sense, there is no single post-colonial condition, but rather many post-colonialisms. Besides the aspects mentioned above, these conditions could be interpreted very loosely as a very general sense of cultural oppression that is “always present” in “any literature of subjugation” (Mishra and Hodge 1994: 284).

The theoreticians to be engaged with here do not necessarily constitute the “greatest hits” of gender, race and power theories or post-colonial theory. They have been chosen specifically as exemplars. This is not to fall into the dangerous trap of imposing pre-digested material onto literary analysis or of considering texts “either as functions of or as parasitic on some schematic philosophy or system on which they are dependent (as illustrations, exemplifications, expressions)” (Said 1984: 214). I should indicate that my choice of an eclectic theoretical method rather than a hard position is borne out of my belief that any critical theory that “subsumes” all other positions is ideologically suspect and in fact, another grand narrative.

In accordance with my methodological avenue, a reading of Bessie Head’s selected texts will follow.

CHAPTER II

1. THE CONFIGURATION OF “RACE” AND IDENTITY

“The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men [sic] in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea”

W.E.B. DuBois

The famous words with which this chapter opens were written by W.E.B. DuBois at the beginning of the twentieth century in *The Souls of Black Folk*. My key goal in this chapter is to focus on the ramifications of “the problem of the twentieth century” as depicted in *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. My quest to a degree is similar to the one Toni Morrison identifies in her study of white American literature, *Playing in the Dark*:

I began to see how the literature I revered, the literature I loathed, behaved in its encounter with racial ideology...yes, I wanted to identify those moments when...literature was complicit in the fabrication of racism, but equally important, I wanted to see when literature exploded and undermined it

(Morrison 1992: 16).

Although our modern world culture is in fundamental ways shaped by the ideas that DuBois represents, this does not mean that these ideas of “race” had no historical antecedents. Almost as far back as the earliest human writings, we can find more or less well articulated views about the differences between “our own kind” and the people of other cultures. These doctrines, like modern theories of “race,” have often

placed a central emphasis on so-called “essentialism” in defining the “other”, and on common ancestry in explaining why groups of people display differences in their attitudes and aptitudes. Within the essentialist interpretation of difference, “biology is destiny”. This theory depends on the acceptance of the assumption that differences are absolute, natural facts “evidently” represented in the body. In its broadest sense, “essentialism” refers to the belief that qualities are inherent in objects of study, and that therefore their relational constructions and the contexts in which these differences are created or studied are of no relevance.

In his essay entitled “Race: An Interpretation” (1999), Anthony Kwame Appiah avers that this is certainly true of the two main ancient traditions to which Western thinkers look back: those of the classic Greeks and the ancient Hebrews. Thus, we find Hippocrates in the fifth century B.C. in Greece seeking to explain the (supposed) superiority of his own people to the people of (Western) Asia by arguing that the barren soils of Greece had forced the Greeks to become tougher and more independent. Such a view attributes the characteristics of a people to their environment, leaving open the possibility that their descendants could change if they moved to new conditions. According to Appiah (1999: 64), while the general opinion in Greece in the few centuries on either side of the beginning of the common era appears to have been that both the black Ethiopians to the South and the blond “scythians” to the north were inferior to the Hellenes, there was no general assumption that this inferiority was incorrigible. Educated Greeks, after all, knew that in the *Iliad* Homer had described Zeus and other Olympians feasting with the “blameless Ethiopians”, and there are arguments in the works of the pre-Socratic

Sophists to the effect that it is individual character and not skin colour that determines a person's worth.

In the Old Testament, on the other hand, what is thought to be distinctive¹ about the Hebrew people is not so much appearance and custom as their relationship, through a common ancestor, to God. In the book of Genesis, Jehovah says to Abraham:

Go your way out of your country and from your relatives and from the house of your father and to the country I shall show you, and I shall make a great people of you and I will make your name great

(Good News Bible, Genesis 12: 1-2).

From this founding moment, this covenant between Abraham and Jehovah, the descendants of Abraham have a special place in history. It is Abraham's grandson Jacob who takes the name of Israel: his descendants thus become the "people of Israel". Just as the Israelites are "sons of Shem", the children of Ham and Japheth account for the rest of the human "family". But while these different people are taken to have different specific characteristics and ancestries, the fundamentally theocentric perspective of the Old Testament requires that what essentially differentiates them all from the Hebrews is that they do not have the special relationship to Jehovah of the children, the descendants, of Israel. There is, according to Appiah (1999: 67), very little hint that the early Jewish writers developed any theories about the relative importance of the biological and the cultural inheritances by which God made these different people distinct. Indeed, in the theocentric framework it is God's covenant

that matters and the very distinction between environmental and inherited characteristics is anachronistic.

Neither the Greek environmentalism nor the Hebrews' theocentric notion of the significance of being one people represents ideas that we should naturally apply in understanding DuBois's use of the idea of "races". To the extent that I think of DuBois's formulation as modern, as involving ideas that *we* understand, I proffer that an understanding of a people as a nation and of the role of culture and, crucially for my purpose, of literature in the life of nations is crucial.

I must, however, reiterate that the idea that the concept of "race" should have any place, let alone an important one in literary studies, has been attacked from many directions (Francis 2002, Ahmed 1997, Omi and Winant 1986). Perhaps the most surprising has been an attack in the name of "science".

In a society like ours, in which most people take their "race" to be a significant aspect of their identity, it comes as a shock to many to learn that there is a fairly widespread consensus in the biological sciences and anthropology that the word "race," at least as it is used in most unscientific discussions, refers to nothing that science should recognise as fact. As Appiah (1999: 64) succinctly observes, such classifications as *Negro*, *Caucasian*, and *Mongoloid* are of no importance for biological purposes. First, because there are simply too many people who do not fit into any such category, and second, because, even when you succeed in assigning someone to one of these categories, on the basis of skin pigmentation and hair, that implies very little about most of their biological characteristics. Even those scientists who still have a use for

the term “race” agree that a good deal of what is popularly believed about races is false, often wildly false. In their analysis of racial theories, Omi and Winant (1986: 68) argue that “race” has historically been conceived as either an “illusion” or an “essence,” that is, it is ultimately reducible to something more fundamental (e.g. social class) or viewed ahistorically as a fixed and objective characteristic. Nevertheless, a discussion of some of the literary ramifications of the idea of “race” can proceed while accepting the essential unreality of “race” and the falsehood of most of what is believed about it. The analytical framework I assume in this study is that “race” and “racism” is a system of privilege and oppression, a network of traditions, legitimating standards, material and institutional arrangements, and ideological apparatuses that, together, serve to perpetuate hierarchical social relations based on race. Like gender, “race” is an unstable and elusive construct, partly due to its complex intertwining with other forms of marginalisation, including the ways that marginalised groups can be played off against one another. This study should not therefore be taken as exhaustive.

The familiarity of racial metaphors should not lead us to over-generalise the phenomenon. Racial metaphors are used to build particular kinds of communities with their own peculiar internal politics. It is thus important to remember that there are, of course, forms of community building that do not draw on racial metaphors. For example, there are communities, even families, conceived as voluntary associations built on common values and commitment to common goals and not based on indelible ties.

How then should we interpret the handling of questions of differences between people in *Maru* and *A Question of Power*?

Bessie Head herself states in a letter she wrote to Vigne in 1971 that “the major theme is racial oppression” and that she has taken a hard look at it in *Maru* (Vigne 1991: 136). Again, speaking of *Maru* in a 1983 interview Head underlined her point when she explicitly stated that “It definitely tackles the question of racialism because the language used to exploit Basarwa people, the methods used to exploit them, the juxtaposition between white and black in South Africa and black and Basarwa in Botswana is so exact” (quoted in Mackenzie and Clayton 1989: 11).

She is in a strong position to speak with authority on this subject because of her own racial background, which led to her suffering from racial prejudice in South Africa and Botswana. She was, as a writer, caught up in what Stephen Clingman calls the inevitability of “writing in a fractured society” (quoted in Starfield 1997:2). Starfield also notes that laws pertaining to residential and social segregation plus the various censorship acts made it virtually impossible for a writer to write as anything other than a member of an enforced racial group. Therefore it is only reasonable to expect that if Head writes, this must remain for her an abiding context. In an interview with Cecil Abrahams (1990: 4), Bessie Head expresses the same concern on the question of racial identity:

Here were people with various shades of brown. Those who looked white, those who looked brown, and those who looked like Indians, and those who looked like Africans. As a newcomer to the Cape, I thought I had found the ideal place for my mixed-race soul. But quickly and painfully I learned that if

you were not fully grounded in the colour brown, you would have to be excluded from the community's business and be ready to endure insult...

The thematic development in *Maru* provides a unique version of the politics of race and gender in a postcolonial society and of the role of the postcolonial woman in shaping the destiny of her culture. Bessie Head condemns all forms of racial prejudice leading to racial oppression. She recognises that this evil existed in Africa before the white man started practising it against people of other "races": "Before the white man became universally disliked for his mental outlook, it was there" (*Maru*, p.11).

In order to understand more fully Head's representations of the effect of racial conflict on the identities of the oppressor and the oppressed, it is important to begin with the story of the character who sets it in motion: A Masarwa (Bushman) gives birth to a girl and then dies. A white missionary's wife, Margaret Cadmore, is called to the hospital to supervise the dead woman's burial because nobody there wants to handle a Masarwa. She sketches the dead woman, and being childless herself, impulsively decides to take the baby and rear her; she intends to prove that environment (the social and cultural conditions) plays a bigger role in human development than heredity. She gives her own name to the orphan and brings her up to become a teacher and artist like herself. When Margaret qualifies as a teacher, the older woman leaves for England. Margaret goes to the village of Dilepe to take up a teaching post at the school there. During all this time, Margaret suffers from the prejudice the majority feels and expresses towards her, once she has publicly admitted she is Masarwa, not a coloured, as everyone imagined.

In order for the younger Margaret Cadmore to achieve the theoretical possibility of a universal identity, “a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition as narrow as a tribe or race or nation” (*Maru*, pp. 15-16), she has to feel the degradation of belonging to a despised group without, as Maria Olausson (1997:85) notes, the possibility of rejecting this negative identity.

“Masarwa” is a derogatory term having the same meaning as “nigger” or “kaffir” in other cultures. According to Bessie Head, this “is a term of contempt which means, obliquely, a low, filthy nation” (*Maru*, p. 31). Racial prejudice can spring from superficial differences:

You just have to look different from them, then seemingly anything can be said and done to you as your outer appearance reduces you to the status of a non-human being

(*Maru*, p. 11).

In the context of *Maru*, difference in physical appearance is of importance. The Masarwa or Bushmen were also abhorred by the Batswana because “they hardly looked African, but Chinese”. Because their facial features looked different, the Masarwa are reduced to the status of a non-human being and could be institutionally declared slaves by the dominant Batswana. The focus on physical features also bears testimony to the trauma inflicted on people whose physical appearances become socialised into signs used to negate their humanity. In much the same way, Elizabeth, the protagonist of *A Question of Power*, is loathed and hated on account of her looks:

There wasn't any kind of social evolution beyond that, there wasn't any lift to the heart, just this vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks...

(*A Question of Power*, p. 19).

The Batswana's understanding of the configuration of difference between people can, perhaps, best be illuminated by Leonard Thompson, who in his book, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (1985), writes; "...the core assumption is that races possess inherently different cultural as well as physical qualities" (p. 69).

Head reveals the lengths to which a dominant, bigoted culture can use its power to define a different, and in the context of *Maru*, a despised racial group as having no point of entry into the dominant culture. Sampson's (1993) reference to one of the most insidious forms of domination and oppression-one that is rooted in language and ideology is relevant here. Like the Foucauldian notions of "force relations" and "discursive practices", this kind of domination does not use brute force to accomplish its ends. Rather, domination is accomplished through the construction of the word, "through the very frameworks by which self and other are experienced, subjectivity and self-understandings made known" (Sampson 1993: 3). Sampson argues that the distinction between words/ideology and real practice holds for those in positions of power but not for subordinate groups:

Dominant groups have the material power to make reality fit their ideas: less dominant groups become the reality the idea suggests. In other words, for the dominated groups, the idea is the reality. What is said and thought about

them becomes the reality of their lives, because those who have the power to say and think also have the power to construct the world in that image (1993: 27).

Indeed, for the Basarwa, the reality that is constructed is one of “castification”. Trueba (1993) describes castification as “fundamentally an institutionalised way of exploiting one social group... thus reducing this group to the status of a lower caste that cannot enjoy the same rights and obligations possessed by other groups” (p.30). This castification, marginalisation and oppression of subordinate groups is maintained in the power of language which in the dominant public discourse embodies the ideologies of cultural domination and racism.

In the Batswana discourse, the word “Masarwa” more than anything else conjures up a degenerate physical type. Bessie Head claims that the prejudice against “Bushmen” is so strong that it is not unusual to find the Masarwa grouped with wild animals rather than other human races: “In Botswana they say: Zebras, Lions, Buffalo and Bushmen live in the Kalahari Desert” (*Maru*, p. 11).

It is difficult to avoid noticing the frequency of the word “Masarwa”; recurring no less than fifty six times in the novel. It is combined with other derisive words such as “Low Breed” (p. 10), “Filthy nation” (p. 14), “Bushman” (p. 10), “non-human being” (p. 11), “oddity of the human race” (p. 11), “half the head of a man” (p. 11) and “half body of the donkey” (p. 11). These images occur in contexts related to a willed control and degradation of the Masarwa tribe by the Batswana.

Such denigratory depictions of otherness and representations of difference find their parallel in colonial encounters. According to Bregin (2000: 39), in the historical writings of the early colonial sojourners, one finds such denigratory tropes repeated over and over again. The texts of travellers, traders and missionaries alike deploy the loaded language of dehumanisation. Bushmen are variously described as animals, savage, vermin, untameable wild people, without intellect or history: “the most degraded and miserable of all nations, and the lowest in the scale of humanity”, too “brutish, lazy and stupid” even for slavery (Gordon 1992: 15). Their language was described by Edward Terry in 1777 as “inarticulate noise, rather than language like the clucking of hens, or the gabbling of turkeys” (quoted in Skotnes 1996:24). Jean Baptiste Tavernier in 1649 asserted that: “When they speak they fart with their tongues in their mouths” (quoted in Skotnes 1996:24). As South West African settler Paul Barth put it in 1926, the Bushman, “with his wrinkled skin, bloated stomach, and sly, cunning eyes, looks a beast of prey himself ...” (quoted in Gordon 1992: 137). What is perhaps less obvious here is that, insofar as the Bushmen are stereotyped and demonised, prejudice against them works to legitimate inequalities by establishing the superiority of one group as a product of contrasts with the Bushmen. By blaming the victims of exploitative economic and social relations, those in the dominant social group foster a climate in which attention is deflected away from the workings of power and instead is concentrated on the supposed inadequacies of the Bushmen.

It is in this context that Bill Derman (1981: 286) writes in *Race and Class, Society and Biology: Problems in the Analysis of South Africa*, “The ‘race’ question should be understood as socially constructed race and racism, and not ‘race’ as a natural or biological category”. What Derman is pointing out is that racism is not founded on

the (purported) innate differences between races, but that racial pathology is a man-made fiction stemming from distorted myth.

It is within such paradigms as these that Bessie Head chooses to make the heroine of *Maru* a Masarwa, the lowest of the low in Botswana society, in order to reveal how irrational, hurtful and even criminal such prejudice can be. Margaret was born a Masarwa but Margaret Cadmore, a well educated, cultured white woman who passed on her culture and knowledge to the younger Margaret, adopted her, at birth. Margaret's foster mother's giving the younger Margaret her own English name can be read as a kind of colonisation but also as a way of removing the child from the stigmatised position. Through this removal the younger Margaret can be given a new identity and with this proof of her humanity she is then reintroduced as a Masarwa in order to elevate the group as a whole. However, an arbitrary twist of fate -- the fact of her being Masarwa by descent -- prevents the younger Margaret from gaining social approval. Even her education does not save her from the power of racialism and from being ostracised. Pete, the school principal, explains the problem facing him to Seth, the education supervisor:

"I have a Masarwa on my staff". The man Seth whistled softly. It's the Margaret Cadmore woman?" He said looking serious. "God, this is going to raise hell among the Totems here. They're going to blame me", he said. "I only look at qualifications. She was top of the class the whole way through..."

(*Maru*, p. 41).

Obviously it was Margaret's outstanding educational qualifications that got her the job in the first place. However, in the eyes of Seth and Pete these are less important than Margaret's Masarwa origins. Since racism is a function of power, Pete's attitude to Margaret is: "She can be shoved out" (*Maru*, p. 41).

Certainly there is no place for a Masarwa teacher in Motabeng, where most destinies (particularly those of Masarwa) were known to everybody and seemed to go without saying. In the eyes of the Motabeng community Margaret is the "wrong" person to be a teacher. As a teacher and artist she disrupts the historically constructed master/slave dialectic of the Motabeng society by effacing their constructed stereotype of the Masarwa as "filthy" (p. 10), "low breed" (p. 14), "slaves who scrubbed other peoples' floors and looked after cattle" (p. 59). For the dominant group, as Driver (1996: 45) points out, "identity depends on the definition of the other as subordinate and loathed". Consequently, the children in Margaret's class are immediately coached by her school principal to react with the sense of loathing that is operative in the community's response to her:

Pete coached a fourteen-year-old boy, and by early Monday morning the whole class of the Masarwa teacher was prepared for what was to take place. The only sign they gave of their preparedness, was nervous giggles as they filed into the classroom... they all stared at her with fascination and attention ... from a distance their voices sounded like a confused roar: "you are a Bushman". they chanted. "you are a Bushman". It froze the whole school

(*Maru*, pp. 45-46).

This racist attitude is diagnosed accurately by recalling some of Frantz Fanon's ideas on racism in *Black Skin, White Masks* :

It is in his corporality that the Negro is attacked. It is as a concrete personality that he is lynched. It is as an actual being that he is a threat
(1967: 163).

Pete refuses to give Margaret credit for being honest: he feels she could have pretended that she was coloured, as Pete had assumed. His reaction when Margaret states simply and truthfully, "I am a Masarwa" (*Maru*, p. 40), is one of shock:

"The shock was so great that he almost jumped into the air". Almost immediately, Margaret was reduced to an "it." She was no longer a human being: "it" surely had all the appearance of a coloured
(*Maru*, p. 40).

Margaret's self-confirmatory assertion that she is a Masarwa is a conscious effort conceived not only to subvert the master narrative of social injustice but also to reinscribe the meaning of who she is by redefining the meaning of the group to which she is attached through birth. According to Olausson (1997: 86), the meaning of that group as the lowest of the low is also strongly interrelated with the meaning of all other groups in the society, so that what Margaret had to achieve was a total revolution in terms of identities firmly based on a hierarchy. Dorothy Driver (1996: 3) astutely notes that although Margaret's assertion "I am Masarwa", is a proclamation of ethnic identity, and thus threatens to put her back in a world of labels

and stereotypes, it in fact removes her from the chain of signification on which identity conventionally depends, for she does not add the clause used by other groups in their own self-identifications, "At least I am not a" Margaret's acknowledgement of herself as a Masarwa not by positioning an "other" but by placing that "I" in its own space offers her a place beyond the stereotype.

On page 44 of the novel, Pete complains to Seth and Morafi: "I had given her a loophole. Coloureds are just trash, but at least she could pass as one. It could save us a lot of bother".

When Dikeledi tells her to keep silent about her being a Masarwa, Margaret answers: "I am not ashamed of being a Masarwa" (p. 24). Margaret Cadmore closes off the possibility of passing for "coloured", which would have been available: "No one by shouting, screaming or spitting could un-Bushman her" (*Maru*, p. 18).

Margaret's declaration of her true identity leads to a revolution in the village of Dilepe: Firstly, she does what the Masarwa are not known to be able to do: "They don't look you in the face and say, 'I am a Masarwa'...who had ever said, I am a Masarwa?" (p. 44). Secondly, "The near perfect English accent and manners did not fit her looks..." (p. 23). The revolutionary possibility also emerges through Dikeledi no longer accepting the view of the dominant group but taking the humanity of the Masarwa as a starting point. In her argument with her brother, Maru (a respected son of a chief and in line as a powerful leader to become paramount chief), Dikeledi states: "There's no such thing as Masarwa. There are only people" (*Maru*, p. 65).

She understands the subjective power of racial prejudice: “You know how stupid racial prejudice is. It can’t think beyond its nose” (*Maru*, p. 67).

Moleka (also a highly respected son of a chief) finds himself strangely touched by some quality in Margaret, when he organises the delivery of a bed to the old library where Margaret is to live. He expresses his love for her in an extreme gesture: he invites Seth to a Sunday meal at his house and Seth finds all the Masarwa, who work for Moleka, seated at the same table: Moleka feeds a Masarwa with his own fork. However, Moleka’s love is not strong enough to sweep away all the customs of his society: he does not have the courage to marry a Masarwa. Maru believes that “Moleka would never have lived down the ridicule and malice and would in the end have destroyed her from embarrassment” (*Maru*, p. 9).

Maru, however, does have the courage to marry Margaret. He is expected to become paramount chief but he does not want to rule a society of “... petty human hatreds and petty human social codes and values” (*Maru*, p. 67).

Moleka’s condescending attitude to his Masarwa slaves can also be read as a benign form of racism: His feeding of a Masarwa with his own fork operates on the basis of a paternalistic relationship-grounded in distinctive assumptions about the nature of difference. The assumption is still that the Batswana are more civilized in relation to the (presumably) “childlike” Masarwa.

Maru is committed to principles of equality. By accepting the chieftaincy he would in practice undo all his principles because he would be living as a superior, reinforcing

the existing hierarchies. Maru's subversion of the status quo is characterised by his relinquishing of kingship and taking up a position outside of the order of domination. He now begins "secretly and quietly to undo the ties of his birth" (*Maru*, p. 110). Maru's rejection of the power of his own royal class is borne out of his belief in a world "where the human soul roamed free in all its splendour and glory. No barriers of race or creed or tribe hindered its activity" (*Maru*, p. 127).

Maru's marriage, which is against social customs, brings, on himself and Margaret, social scorn and exile. A diseased prostitute in Dilepe explained their attitude: "fancy" she said. "He has married a Masarwa. They have no standards" (*Maru*, p. 126). From the point of view of the dominant group he is now dead. But when the whole situation is studied from the point of view of the Masarwa it is not a death but a new beginning, a door opening "on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time" (*Maru*, p. 126).

The story concludes on a hopeful note:

"People like the Batswana, who did not know that the wind of freedom had also reached the people of the Masarwa tribe, were in for an unpleasant surprise because it would no longer be possible to treat Masarwa people in an inhuman way without getting killed yourself"

(*Maru*, p. 127).

By ending *Maru* through this assertive, empowering statement, Head demonstrates that she is no longer willing to accept racial difference as the instance which would

facilitate admittance to universal humanity. Olausen similarly argues that “Instead she (Head) envisions a position where racial difference would no longer be significant but would be replaced or reinforced by sexual difference” (1997: 83). This echoes De Lauretis’s observation that “we have officially entered the sex-gender system, the social relations of gender, and have become en-gendered as women ...”(1987: 12).

Like Margaret in *Maru*, in many of her hallucinations Elizabeth, the protagonist of *A Question of Power*, is clearly defined along racial lines: “Definitely, as far as Batswana society was concerned, she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be in on their things” (*A Question of Power*, p. 26).

Her status as outsider is not only due to the fact that Elizabeth is “coloured” but also to the fact that Elizabeth’s attempt to gain acceptance within the Batswana society revolves around the question of racial and ethnic origin and belonging. She is haunted in her dreams by:

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

(*A Question of Power*, p. 38).

The Medusa is also presented as an Afrocentric chauvinist: “you’re not linked up to the people”, she tells Elizabeth. “you don’t know any African languages” (*A Question*

of Power, p. 44). Dan's sexual perversion, on the other hand, is also inextricable from his Afrocentric chauvinism: "your hair is not properly African", he tells Elizabeth, "you are inferior as a Coloured...He thrust his black hands in front of her, black legs and a huge, towering black penis" (*A Question of Power*, pp. 127-138).

The 72 (mostly black) prostitutes with names like Miss Wiggly Bottom and The Womb have the nightmarish function of taunting Elizabeth for her sexual "weakness" on account of her mixed blood. At one particular moment the prostitutes shout at her, "Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death" (p. 46). This example shows how the sexual persecution which Elizabeth experiences is linked to her peripheral status as a refugee from South Africa, on the margins of Motabeng's masculinised, highly structured society, particularly as a "coloured" and as a member of a marginalised, disempowered race and gender.

The resistance to an identity based on racial and ethnic parameters thus becomes one of the most important goals for Elizabeth. She turns aggressively on Tom when he explains another way of opposing racism, namely that of identifying with an ethnic group and redefining it in positive terms. For Elizabeth such a redefinition means exclusion of others and this is what she most vehemently opposes.

As with *Maru*, in *A Question of Power* Head also analyses the immense exclusionary power of racism by which societies are rigidly and hierarchically compartmentalised. Like Margaret in *Maru*, Elizabeth, the protagonist of *A Question of Power*, dreams of existing on the outside of racially determined positions. Like Bessie Head herself, both Margaret and Elizabeth claim unknown dead mothers. Through this act, they

simultaneously reinforce and undermine their racially determined origins. Recent feminist psychoanalytic theorists such as Nancy Chodorow have explored the repercussions of the mother-daughter bond for the creation of women's identity; in particular, object-relations theory with its notion of a self-relation, which Chodorow represents, suggests the difficulty the girl child has in forming a sense of separate identity. Chodorow identifies two sources of identity for a person:

One origin is an inner physical experience of body integrity and a more internal "core of the self". This core derives from the infant's inner sensations and emotions, and remains the "central, the crystallisation point of the 'feeling of self', around which a 'sense of identity' will become established"... The second origin of the self is through demarcation from the object world. Both ego boundaries (a sense of personal psychological division from the rest of the world) and a bounded body ego (a sense of the permanence of physical separateness and of the predictable boundedness of the body) emerge through this process. The development of the self is relational

(1978: 67-63).

According to Chodorow, it is more difficult for a girl child to develop a sense of separateness than for a boy child because a girl is the same sex as her mother and tends to experience her mother as "more like, and continuous with" herself. Because of the initial psychological bond with a same-sex object from which her identity derives, it is not surprising, then, that Head asserts the connection of herself to her mother: "A birth such as I had links me to her in a very deep way... Her name was Bessie Emery and I consider it the only honour South African officials ever did me -

naming me after this unknown, lovely and unpredictable woman” (Head, cited in Eilersen 1995: 8). “...I still say she belongs to me in a special way and that there is no word as yet for what she has done”, continues Bessie Head in a correspondence with Randolph Vigne (1991: 65). By re-establishing the bond with their dead mothers both Elizabeth and Bessie Head affirm their identity as women.

Elizabeth is closely connected with the definition of herself as a “coloured” in South Africa. In the context of South African legalistic discourse, the word “coloured” spans two implicit agendas: of race and miscegenation. As a “coloured” Elizabeth is denied what Craig Mackenzie (1989: 121) calls “full selfhood” in a racist South Africa. Like Bessie herself, she experiences family -- in Nixon’s words -- “not as a natural form of belonging but as an unstable artifice, invented and reinvented in racial terms, and conditioned upon the administrative designs of the nation-state” (1994: 102). As a “half-caste” she is despised in traditional African society. Notwithstanding this rejection, Elizabeth, like Bessie Head herself, successfully subverts this brutal rejection and fashions some positive perspectives on life for herself. “The best and most enduring love is that of rejection”, remarks Bessie Head in another of her letters to Randolph Vigne (1991: 58).

Elizabeth’s great-grandmother’s behaviour tends to be the catalyst of Elizabeth’s refusal to accept the definitions of herself along paradigms based on skin colour. Her foster mother continues this defiance:

“First they ... sent you to a nursing-home. A day later you returned because you did not look white. They sent you to a Boer family. A week later you

were returned. The woman on the committee said: “what can we do with this child? Its mother is white”

(A Question of Power, p. 17).

Elizabeth is accepted into foster care by the “coloured” woman but this does not give her a “coloured” identity as her own. Of Elizabeth’s problem in claiming a racially determined position in the first place, Adetokunbo Pearse writes:

With the white people she [Elizabeth] feels a sense of inferiority due to the streak of “inferior” black in her. With black people she feels a sense of superiority due to the streak of “superior” white in her. Her complexion becomes even more complicated because she cannot enjoy the temporary purging of pent-up emotion through hating the other, for being white and black, she cannot afford to hate either

(Pearse 1983: 84).

Pearse’s observations illustrate that while many people view “race” categorisation as a taken-for-granted feature of our society and a fundamental part of one’s social identity, such binary factors are relative and do not signify, in reality, a fixed entity concerning what it is to be a human being. After all, Cecil Abrahams (1990: 4) notes that Elizabeth is regarded by the blacks of Batswana as a queer specimen of humanity who does not belong to either the white or black race. The dichotomies between black and white move her from being not white enough to not being black enough. Elizabeth suffers in the form of three different registers of domination, all of which

exclude her: as a non-White in South Africa, non-male in Motabeng, and non-native female in Motabeng.

The racial stereotypes reflect and are facilitated by power relations in a society. One group will create stereotypes about another group in order to control them or to justify their power over that group. Because it denies the complex humanity of the demeaned Masarwa target group, the Batswana racial stereotypes say more about the creators' needs than about the target's nature. Because they always display their creator's dread of the target group, racial stereotypes eventually subvert their makers' cruel intentions; for instance, by classifying the Masarwa as subhuman or grotesque, the Batswana betray their own concern about their own human capacity.

2. THE MADNESS OF POWER GAMES

Beliefs about racism are situated at the intersection of two issues: the social construction of gender and the role of power in structuring gender inequality. As Chandra Mohanty (1991: 3) writes, "Bessie Head's work resonates with the recognition that women writers and writings about women are inscribed in relations of power". In Bessie Head, the problems of racial oppression are not distinguishable from questions of gender oppression, either.

Possibly, sexist prejudice could be construed as a form of othering, in identifying (usually the female) gender as the marker of a distinct and inferior, subhuman "race". Mackinnon (1987: 246) claims that the appropriation of women's sexuality [in the sense of possession by men] is a defining element of gender inequality. Mackinnon

(ibid) defines sexuality as “that social process which creates, organises, expresses, and directs desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society”. In Mackinnon’s view, “[t]he idea of gender difference helps keep the reality of male dominance in place” (1987: 251). That is, the concept of gender difference is an ideology which masks the fact that genders are socially constructed, not natural. For Mackinnon (ibid), male dominance is not only “perhaps the most pervasive and tenacious system of power in history, but ... it is metaphysically nearly perfect.” Moreover, the force of male dominance according to Mackinnon “is exercised as consent, its authority as participation, its supremacy as the paradigm of order, its control as the definition of legitimacy”.

Likewise, Rich (1980) argues that compulsory heterosexuality is at the heart of men’s dominance, consolidating men’s power over women and providing a foundation for the maintenance of gender inequality. Following Foucault (1990: 152), who claims that “sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of “natural given” which power tries to hold in check...It is a name that is given to a historical construct”, Weeks (1986: 24) argues that “far from being the most natural element in social life ... [sexuality] is perhaps one of the most susceptible to organization”. Additionally, in her book entitled *Technologies of Gender* (1987), Teresa de Lauretis argues for a feminist revision of the concept of gender. She sees the familiar account of gender as sexual difference as a limitation, and argues for the reconceptualisation of gender as “the product and the process of a number of social technologies, of techno-social or bio-medical apparatus” (1987: 3). Despite her eschewal of Foucault’s theories de Lauretis draws her vocabulary from Foucault’s account of sexuality in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.

Some of the issues that engage Bessie Head's imagination in her novels: *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, are the ways in which racial, sexual, and class-based oppression are intractably linked within a culture, so that one kind of oppression often leads to another. De Lauretis's (1988: 135) observation that "black women experience racism not [only] as blacks but as black women" is pertinent here. For example, in *Maru*, Margaret suffers both as a member of a subject race and of subject a gender. As noted earlier, when Pete decides to get rid of Margaret, he tells Seth: "She can be shoved out ... it's easy, she's a woman" (*Maru*, p. 41).

Embedded within this statement is an explicit male bias which ranges from aggrandizement of masculinity to overt misogyny. This kind of gendered language is deliberately and consciously aimed at keeping women out of the sites of power through the perpetuation of chauvinistic and sexist norms. When issues are posed in this manner, gender becomes socialised into sex differences and problems of sexist hierarchy and unequal power become obscured. Consequently the problems of sexual harassment, abuse and unequal access to resources remain unchallenged, marginal issues. Seth's reply is equally couched in the wilful, entrenched patriarchal negation of women:

Her qualifications are good. She couldn't possibly have got there on her own brains. Someone was pushing her. We don't know who and they might be important

(*Maru*, p. 41).

Seth subtly implies that as a woman, Margaret is inherently an intellectual underling and cannot be expected to excel on her own except from the patronage of a man of influence or that she could have “climbed” into her position through submitting her body to some powerful man in the village.

Of course, men are expected to become Doctors, Engineers, Pilots or Teachers, but if a woman of Margaret’s calibre consistently performs top in her class, she is met with disbelief as a freak and made insignificant because of her gender. Gendered racial prejudice thus affords a framework of meaning that forces the burden of proof regarding ability and worthiness on the Masarwa woman: Margaret finds herself continually having to persuade her school principal and the village totems that she has “earned” her place; any perceived shortcomings on her part undercut not only her reputation but are considered to reflect upon her race and gender as a whole. By contrast, Moleka, an arrogant and philandering heir to chieftaincy is held accountable as an individual but never as a representative of maleness or Batswananess. Within this framework, racial difference is a key organising principle, implicitly or explicitly preparing understanding for perceptions predicated on racial and gender contrasts. Using a different context, John Stuart Mill said in 1867:

Women who read, much more women who write are in the existing constitution of things a contradiction and a disturbing element

(quoted by Ryan 1997: 14).

Again, accustomed to patriarchal domination and to what Gina Wisker (2001: 145), beautifully calls the “acting out of cultural otherising”, to Pete, Dikeledi is “...the

bossy little bitch (who) buggered up the works" (*Maru*, p. 46) when she ruins his plans to dismiss Margaret as "an ineffective teacher ... totally incapable of controlling her class" (p. 46). The hegemonic control which men exercise over power and social structures enables the xenophobic Seth and Pete to instigate learners to hurl abuse at Margaret and thereafter to reject and define her as "an ineffective teacher...". Noting in *Black Scholar* that Head has "probably received more acclaim than any other black woman novelist writing in English", Nancy Topping Bazin (1986) added that Head's analysis of Africa's "patriarchal system and attitudes" enables her to make connections between the discrimination she experienced personally from racism and sexism, and the root of oppression generally in the insecurity that compels one to feel superior to another. Bessie Head herself has pointed out that "Black women have a certain history of oppression within African culture...[where] women's problems are rooted in custom and tradition" (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989: 15). What is certainly very clear here is that the male has a superior position to the female. Patriarchy, as defined by Gerda Lerner (1986), is an institutionalised form of male dominance over women and children, both within the family and in society in general. It suggests that men hold powerful positions in important social institutions, while women do not, although women are not entirely deprived of all economic, legal and political rights. It takes various forms and modes in different societies and adapts itself during different periods of time (239).

In her theorisation regarding the contemporary meanings of gender, sexuality, and sexual violence, Catherine Mackinnon (1987) insists that no instance of sexual behaviour in the West falls necessarily outside of the influence of patriarchal conditioning. Likewise, in an article entitled "Nationalism and Gender Issues in

South Africa" (1991), Patricia MacFadden proffers the notion that "in all African societies, men...have tended to use their status and influence as social controllers, to gain ready access to women's bodies" (14). MacFadden argues that this assumption, which is deeply rooted in African patriarchal culture, defines women's bodies as the source of male pleasure as well as the vehicle for the reproduction of male virility.

In *Maru*, both Moleka and Maru perceive women as "prizes", to be acquired and privatised (as lovers or concubines). "They were notorious in Dilepe village for their love affairs" (35). "Their victims exploded like bombs" (35). Although Maru and Moleka are described as having different attitudes and expectations in their treatment of their women, whatever their differences, the result is the same: They emerge as exploitative and show a callous indifference to the suffering that their philandering causes women. Moleka is "arrogant and violent" with women:

There was nothing Moleka did not know about the female anatomy ... no woman... could resist the impact of his permanently boiling bloodstream. But he outraged them, and horrible sensations were associated with the name of Moleka. Moleka and women were like a volcanic explosion in a dark tunnel. Moleka was the only one to emerge, on each occasion, unhurt, smiling

(*Maru*, p. 35).

On the other hand, Maru

...often took to his bed with some indefinable ailment. His victims, too, displayed alarming symptoms. The strongest fled as though they had seen a

nameless terror. The weakest went insane, and walked about the village muttering to themselves

(*Maru*, p. 36).

Likewise, *A Question of Power* explores aberrant patriarchal behaviour and links gendered oppression to male control over women's bodies and wanton pursuit of satisfaction. Dan's nice-time girls' identities are only connected to his reductive definitions of them as sexual objects. This is evident in the names, such as Miss Wiggly-Bottom, Sugar-Plum Fairy, Pelican-Beak and the Womb, which Dan accords these women. These names reduce women's wholeness to parts of their bodies, since they do not properly exist as anything except their sexual organs. All through these names runs the exclusive focus on the characteristic way in which these women have sex, for an example:

In every way Pelican-Beak was enchantment. She was gay and carefree, tough, energetic and so athletic she seemed to be a trapeze artist. Her symbol came along with her, the beak of the Pelican bird. It referred to her passage way, which was long and tough like the bird's beak. This special gift enabled her to make love in all sorts of postures without any danger of internal injury...

(*A Question of Power*, pp. 167-168).

Of Miss Wiggly-Bottom Dan says: "Her sex was outside, on her bust and thighs, it wasn't inside. There was just a vacuum inside" (*A Question of Power*, p. 129).

There was also Miss Sewing Machine who” liked her penny-button tickled” (p. 127). There was also Miss Chopper, Miss Pink Sugar-Icing, whom he was on the point of marrying, Madame Make-Love-on-the-Floor where anything goes, Body Beautiful, Madame Squelch Squelch, Madame Loose-Bottom. The womb was ^{one} of his favourites. One cannot ignore the symbolic name. The name “the womb” is used to reinforce a sexuality which is possible only between subject and object, Dan the man being the subject and *his* “nice-time girls” being *his* objects of sexual gratification. The saying “*Tota Mulier utero*” (“woman is nothing but a womb”) sums up Dan’s attitude towards women. Furthermore, one cannot ignore the perturbing imagery of man boastfully flaunting his phallic power in the face of his women victims. Dan’s “flaying (of) his powerful penis in the air” (p. 13), and the description of his sex organ as “towering” and permanently “erected” (p. 128) can be read as explicit manifestations of the perverted, gendered hierarchy that encourages the naturalisation of male objectification of the female body, wherein the validation of manhood and self-realisation as male can be achieved only through what Ravenscroft (1976: 175) calls “... gargantuan sexual exploits with an incredible succession of sexually insatiable females...”

According to Ola (1990: 70), Dan’s beastliness and exploitative sexuality reminds the reader of Moleka’s sexual abandon and bigotry, and of what Head calls “the African man’s loose carefree sexuality which lacks the stoppages of love, tenderness and personal romantic treasuring of women” (*A Question of Power*, p. 137). Just as Dan is revealed to be sexually aggressive and exploitative, so too, is Sello. Sello is accused of having sexually assaulted his own daughter:

The huge satanic image seemed to be waiting for her full attention... He had a rendezvous in mind. He was approaching his small girl, the one who had been holding on to his coffin. She raised one hand. She cried: "Don't! Don't!"

(*A Question of Power*, pp. 139 -140).

This attitude to female sexualisation accounts for the inscription of women's bodies in a patriarchal social system which reinforces the traditional male-dominant/female-submissive model of sex. This is also typified by Dan's intrusive physical reconstruction of Miss Pelican Beak's physical appearance in an attempt to make her powerless so that the status quo of the "normality" of women's subordination could remain. "One night he decided Miss Pelican Beak with her long, tough vagina was too pushy, so he broke her legs and elbows and redesigned her pelvis to make it more passive" (*A Question of Power*, pp. 167-68). Miss Pelican Beak's body not only becomes the site of reconfiguration according to the dictates of male desire but also the "trope of gender-as-a-construction" (Harbord 1996: 40). Dan's literal reconstruction of Miss Pelican Beak's female anatomy represents an extreme form of othering: a grievous violation of the other's physicality. Put crudely, the de/reconstruction of Miss Pelican Beak's sexuality appears to act out the idea of the female subject as the invention by a male inventor. Thus gender or rather femininity becomes literally a male construction.

This is further reinforced by the negative description of Elizabeth's physical appearance as a lack of certain (gender) elements: "Her hair is frizzy, she is too fat, her breasts are too large and she has no vagina". However, Elizabeth subverts and reinscribes this appraisal of her femininity in somewhat ambivalent terms: "It was

maddening to her to be told she hadn't a vagina. She might have had but it was not such a pleasant area of the body to concentrate on, possibly now and then if necessary" (p. 44). Despite the ambivalence of her views, Elizabeth succeeds in hollowing out the patriarchal stereotype of a conventional, "normal" woman. Read against Dan's "permanently erected penis" (p. 128), Elizabeth's lack of a vagina indicates a profound asymmetry in the treatment of the two genders. It appears that the male body is ostensibly deproblematized: the penis becomes the standard against which one measures otherness. The vagina becomes a symbolic marker for exclusion. Elizabeth's external appearance, which is described as a lack, also echoes a patriarchal essentialist mode of thinking; that a woman has specific inborn attributes. Accordingly, those women who lack specific "sexed" bodily essences are excluded from the "woman" category.

The violence of rape and of incest is the most explicit instance of male domination and the brutalisation of the female body. Here it would be productive to invoke Foucault's notions of violence and power. Foucault (1980) suggests that violence is an enactment of power at the level of the body, an operation whose possibility is conditioned by the character of specific institutions, and by relationships between institutions. Thus, violence must be seen in terms of two interconnected factors: first, the existence of systems which encode differential power relations (boss/worker/priest/parishioner/doctor/patient), and second, the systematic recruitment of men to the most powerful positions. It is certainly the case that men are the custodians of social organisation in which violence is a functional component. As I have indicated elsewhere in this study, it can be argued, against this approach, that Foucault's own theories are notoriously gender-blind, the implication being that

the question of gender will simply drop out of any such analysis. For this reason it is important to supplement “institutional” analysis, which is strategically valuable, with “gender-consciousness”. By this I mean that a concern with what Connell (1987: 16) calls “gender relations” should play a role in setting the agenda for analysis of and interventions in power structures. A framing interest in gender relations will enable us to see which interventions are most urgent, which situations are most unjust, which groups are most victimised. After all, the feminist project in all its forms is fundamentally about social justice: it is about addressing real inequalities. And the value of a “gender-consciousness” lies in its ability to identify what counts as an inequality, to make inequality visible where it was previously unseen. A theorisation of gender is indeed necessary, therefore, to an analysis of power. But it is important to remember that gender is itself an effect of power, and that it is the analysis of power which will make gender intelligible to us, rather than the reverse.

Like Margaret in *Maru*, Elizabeth is at the mercy of two power-seeking, sexually exploitative men who, in Virginia Ola’s words, “turn her mind into a battleground as they compete for the domination and possession of her personality” (Ola 1990: 68). The title *A Question of Power* underscores further what Bessie Head grapples with in the selected novels. The title is therefore a theme and an occasion to reflect on the nature and dimensions of power mechanisms. In *A Question of Power* Head explores the dimensions of power far beyond the psychosocial and political spheres, to put in stark relief its apocalyptic perspective. This perspective appropriately accords with Foucault’s, for whom “Power does not work in a single constitutive way - it employs polymorphous techniques” (Foucault 1990: 11).

Furthermore, power is at the same time personal and transindividual. Power relations, according to Foucault, “are both intentional and non subjective ...” (Foucault 1990: 95).

In *A Question of Power*, the source from which power is drawn lies within every individual soul. This insight is illustrated by the fact that even though power is on the one hand described as an invasive force, the characters of “Sello”, “Medusa”, and “Dan” are simultaneously products of or emanations from Elizabeth’s own inner mind. Elizabeth recognises that “The roots of evil, as a creative, propelling force, had become as close as her own breathing” (85-86). Elizabeth’s reference to “a creative force ... a power outside themselves that could invade and destroy them” (98) is reminiscent of Foucault’s notion that “Power ... produces reality ... domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault 1980: 194). Head herself wrote in a 1982 article, “I associated evil in my mind with the acquisition of power” (Mackenzie 1990: 77).

Elizabeth, the protagonist of *A Question of Power*, experiences the destructive male’s lust for power in the form of a psycho-drama in which she is defiled by violent phantoms who perform obscene actions of multiple sex, homosexuality, incest and bestiality. “Why, why, why? What have I done?” (p. 173) she cries out. Like Sello’s daughter, Elizabeth suffers a nervous breakdown and has to be hospitalised (p.173, 176).

For the purposes of this study, Michel Foucault’s analysis in *Madness and Civilization* (1965), where he traces the “civilised” replacement of the leper by the

mad person in Europe, is relevant here. "Both were public eye-sores that needed to be controlled, and tolerated within state-defined boundaries" (Katrak 1996: 7-8). Foucault claims that when leprosy disappeared from the Western world at the end of the Middle Ages, a vacuum was left in "the margins of the community" from the 14th to the 17th century. Humanity waited,

...soliciting with strange incantations a new incarnation of disease, another grimace of terror, renewed rites of purification and exclusion ... Leprosy disappeared, the leper vanished, or almost, from memory, these structures remained. Often in these same places, the formulas of exclusion would be repeated, strangely similar two or three centuries later. Poor vagabonds, criminals, "deranged minds" would take the part played by the leper ... so many signs that the expulsion of madmen had become one of a number of ritual exiles

(Foucault 1965: 10).

Elizabeth's public display of nervous breakdown ("The ugliness of the inner torment was abruptly ripped open and exposed to public view" (p. 50) echoes Foucault's analysis of madness and exile, of madness and voyaging. When Elizabeth, exiled and self-exiled in her mental breakdown, is taken away to hospital, that "voyage is at once a rigorous division" in Foucault's words, "and an absolute passage". As Foucault continues, "In one sense, it simply develops, across a half-real, half-imaginary geography, the madman's liminal position ... symbolized and made real at the same time by the madman's privilege of being confined within the city gates: his exclusion must enclose him, if he cannot and must not have another prison than the threshold

itself, he is kept at the point of passage” (p. 11). Elizabeth, in the hospital, is confined “in the interior of the exterior and inversely,” to use Foucault’s words, who regards this as “a symbolic position ... if we are willing to admit that what was formerly a visible fortress of order has now become the castle of our conscience” (p. 11).

At the most basic level, Foucault’s provocative analysis allows one to construct madness as socially produced and as performing a particular social function, to “guarantee”, in Foucault’s words, “bourgeois morality as a universality of fact” (p. 259). Because of Foucault’s assertions on madness, the figure of the madwoman in literature has attracted certain critics. Helene Cixous (1975) famously and contentiously welcomed what she called “the hysterics” as her sisters, arguing that “the hysteric is ... the typical woman in all her force” (p.154). Juliet Mitchell similarly declared that:

...the woman novelist must be an hysteric. Hysteria is the woman’s simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism...

(1984: 290).

In her key study, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture* (1985), Elaine Showalter discusses the idea that “madness” can itself be a form of dissent, but is also a label applied to those who deviate from the “norms” of femininity which were physically unhealthy: the wearing of corsets, particular eating habits, and crucially, the suppression of creative energy and artistic expression in favour of the

domestic. In a related discussion Mary Jacobus *et al* (1996: 110) suggest that the question of madness in literature is intrinsically gendered. It is often females who are called mad and males who call them so. For instance, Showalter argues that the term “mad” was applied to the suffragettes, who were called “mad” when they fought publicly for the rights of women. As Showalter (1985: 145) observes, “when a patriarchal culture feels attacked, one obvious defence mechanism is to label rebellious women mentally disturbed”. The treatment of the suffragettes as “mad” was indeed one convenient and effective way of silencing them.

The attraction of the madwoman for all these writers is obvious: as a figure of rage, without power to alleviate her suffering or express it in terms that make sense to society, she sums up virtually everything feminism might wish to say about “patriarchal structures” and the suppression of women’s speech.

“Madness” is not exclusively female terrain. While Ernest Hemingway and the late Zimbabwean author Dambudzo Marechera are not routinely discussed as “mad,” their notorious deaths could be viewed alongside the suicides of Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf. However, according to Jacobus (1986: 110), Hemingway’s suicide in particular tends to be read as a conflict between the masculine ideal created in his fiction and the life of the artist. Even suicide, it seems, is gendered; or at least, cultural readings of the act of suicide are gendered.

In *A Question of Power* patriarchal domination is represented by the phantoms of Sello and Dan. These phantoms come to life and into power through the “mad” imaginings of Elizabeth. Her relationship with these phantoms leaves her with a

sense of unworthiness because she is psychically, physically and sexually abused. In fact, Sello is the creator of the powerful phantom, Medusa, who inhabits Elizabeth's "mad" world. The Medusa is "the direct and tangible form of his own evils, his power lusts, his greed, his self importance" (p. 40). Because of the abuse by the "dominant, powerful persons" (p. 12), Elizabeth describes her life as living "right inside a stinking toilet" (p.14), the "pit" (p. 53). She is thrown off balance. "Anything toppled her over, a thunderbolt, a command, any suggestion of powerful assertiveness" (p. 115). To undermine Elizabeth's sense of herself as a woman, both Sello and Dan employ male homosexuality. Dan tells Elizabeth it is a "universal phenomenon" (p. 138). He makes Sello appear before her with his boyfriend (p. 148), and he says, "They do it all the time" (p. 139). An implied attack on homosexuality is expected since, in the hegemonic gender system, the contempt for homosexuality, especially among heterosexual men, is part of the ideological package supporting men's dominance. Connell (1987: 248) argues that "the explanation for Western culture's homophobia is complex, but part of it must be the degree to which the fact of homosexuality threatens the credibility of a naturalised ideology of gender and a dichotomised sexual world". Rich's (1980) influential work, *Compulsory Heterosexuality*, as noted elsewhere in this study, has firmly established the notion of compulsory heterosexuality as a central practice in the social construction of gender inequality.

The display of homosexuality, like the display of heterosexuality (Dan's "seventy-one-nice-time girls" (p. 173) is meant to degrade and humiliate Elizabeth. As Lloyd Brown puts it:

Dan and Sello as images reflect the manner in which Elizabeth perceives men in her world, and the manner in which her perception of men, and theirs of her, have shaped her moral sense, her sexuality, and her individuality as a woman ...these male images represent the degree to which... Elizabeth's self-awareness as a woman has accepted and must deal with the various nuances of male symbols as the essence of power...

(1979: 52).

Read in another context, the phantoms that besiege Elizabeth also reproduce some of the sexual stereotypes generated by racists in South Africa. Elizabeth's experiences of racial and sexual discrimination are subtly signposted as having originated in South Africa. There she realised that white people "went out of their way to hate you or loathe you" (p. 19). Similarly, Dan bombards her with a "torrent of hatred" every day (p. 168). On the other hand, Dan's indefatigable lust seems almost the embodiment of the white stereotype of African men as bearers of uncontrolled libidos. The reproduction of the myth requires a racist obsession which, according to Bhabha, "vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated... as if ...the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never be really... proved" (Bhabha 1996: 66).

The coloured protagonist Elizabeth, although the victim of black male sexual harassment, is not a racist. Her psychic haunting by the demonic Dan is offset by the phantom of Sello, whose apparent purity is comically represented by his early appearances in a monk's robe. At times, however, Sello too lapses into the bestiality of Dan, so that the two characters become "merged as horrors in her mind" (p. 148).

These moments provide some of Elizabeth's worst nightmares, much like the common trope in a horror film, where a moment of security or escape from nightmare proves illusory, and the horror resumes with added intensity. It is as if Head uses these moments of ambiguity to psychically debate and eventually subvert the stereotypes of black/white sexuality, which she feels inhabit her.

The character of Medusa adds another variant to the scripts of this psychodrama. Head's Medusa is an ambiguous figure. Sometimes she is an embodiment of female sexuality, associated with Elizabeth's need for masturbation, sometimes she is a malignant force of domination complicit in using power to ill-treat Elizabeth: "The Medusa was shouting, shrill and high: "you wanted my power. Now you felt it" (p. 39). The Medusa also proclaims, "who's running the show around here? I am. Who knows everything around here? I do" (p. 43). It is also Medusa who throws the powerful thunderbolts which cause Elizabeth debilitating headaches.

Head's stance here is that women can be as oppressive to women as some men are. Her stance here compares with her indictment of racial oppression between blacks and blacks and between blacks and whites.

Elizabeth internalises the sexual/racial exclusion mechanisms of white apartheid and reproduces them in a distorted form. Given the "fact" that Elizabeth's descent into "a nightmare world of no compassion" (p. 196) derives from the schizophrenic South African racial system one would expect that the monsters of her dreams would take the form of whites. Yet this is not the case. Likewise, in *Maru*, racism is confronted in an unusual way by depicting the oppression of the Bushmen by the Batswana,

rather than choosing a black/white theme. Whereas apartheid stereotypes of black lasciviousness are manifestations of a despised other, in *A Question of Power* the relations are almost reversed. Within the socio-cultural reference system of Motabeng, the sexual stereotypes associated with Dan, Sello, Medusa and the prostitutes act as reified indices of African patriarchal power, from which Elizabeth feels excluded.

The novel assumes a somewhat subjective level; fiction oscillates between autobiography and creativity, drawing upon Bessie Head's own nervous breakdown while living in exile in Botswana. She draws upon her own mental breakdown to create the consciousness of the narrator; the school teacher Elizabeth who, like Head in her real "life-story", is institutionalised in a mental hospital. However, unlike clinical psychosis, which is usually triggered by brain abnormalities, Head's "insanity" results directly from external forces: her traumatic life in apartheid South Africa and her having been made to wait for fifteen agonising years of alienation before Botswana could grant her citizenship. In Elizabeth's case, "insanity" gives rise to two realities - one concrete, one metaphysical: the first one results from the "permanent nervous tension of living in South Africa" (*A Question of Power*, p. 19) and the second results from being tortured by the "soul personalities" with "so many fantastic images" that she develops a "strange 'other' self" that learns to respond to these horrific images differently from her interactions with "normal people" (*A Question of Power*, p. 58). Such "madness" cannot be cured by medication alone; rather, it hinges on challenging the external powers in which it inheres.

Head associates the crushing power of Elizabeth's mental tormentors with the principle of power "in its overwhelming lust for domination and prestige" (p. 135). Fear of domination by male power, by ethnic aggression, and by racism are the operative forces that cause the mental anguish in Elizabeth's life. This makes Elizabeth rail against all power-hungry politicians, whether white or black, and even against a patriarchal, Judaeo-Christian-Islamic God, "some unseen being in the sky" (p. 209) who allows his creatures to suffer: "what did they gain, the power people, while they lived off other people's souls like vultures" (p. 19). Elizabeth contends that "no one is the be-all and end-all of creation, that no one has the power of assertion and dominance to the exclusion of other life" (p. 35).

At the novel's conclusion, perverse sexual nightmares and maddening power games over, Elizabeth is fully restored to what anti-Freudian psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1967) refers to throughout his works as "superior sanity" and a sense of identity and belonging.

She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man. As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging

(A Question of Power, p. 206).

Through this philosophical gesture of maintaining one's humanity which leads to a sense of belonging, the dehumanised, marginalised Elizabeth undergoes a pivotal change of status: from being consigned to the margins she reclaims a sense of

belonging in the centre of the “brotherhood of man”. In this regard Aegerter’s (1996: 231) remarks serve as an instructive point of departure on the polemics of centre and marginality:

Placing women at the centre of textual representation refuses their regulation to a matrix of marginality that oppresses according to race, class, gender and culture, and restores women’s centrality in cultural and self definition.

With this frame in mind, the next chapter explores how Bessie Head herself as well as her protagonists move back and forth, within and between the margins and centre.

CHAPTER III

WHITHER MARGINALITY AND THE ART OF SELF- REPRESENTATION?

The foregoing study has examined the selected novels of Bessie Head through the prism of gender, race and power; constructs whose ramifications permeate the novels.

The importance of this study lies in the effort to provide a framework with which to understand how race, power and gender organise and are organised by social processes. This is reflected in Bessie Head's awareness of both the micro and macro dimensions of race and in her indictment of stultifying colour bars and oppressive tribal prejudices. Significantly, Bessie Head's artistic quest pleads mutual inter-human relationships predicated upon universal humanity. In *A Question of Power* she writes: "I don't like exclusive brotherhoods for black people only ... I have got my concentration elsewhere. It's on mankind in general" (pp. 132-133). At the micro level, race is an identity around which people organise their activities and interactions. At the macro level, it is an aspect of social structure, which Omi and Winant (1986: 137) define as a "site" of social relations. In addition, Omi and Winant insist that the racial dimensions of social relations be viewed as dynamic and contested, rather than fixed. Thus, at both micro and macro levels of social relations in *Maru* and *A Question of Power* race and gender represent a field of social organisation, social conflict and cultural significance. As the preceding study has argued, Head invokes her own unique, even subversive version of racial configuration. Instead of offering black/white racial divisions as a dominant textual theme, as has been the case with many of her contemporary South African writers, Head subverts this dominant leitmotif by focusing on black on black racial discrimination. In Head's hands tidy racial dichotomies become the weapon of their own destruction.

The marginal positions attributed to Margaret, the protagonist of *Maru*, and Elizabeth, the protagonist of *A Question of Power*, become, in Head's fictional universe, an advantage. Head subtly presents a version of a marginal position as a site of freedom and power. It is in their marginal positions that both Margaret and Elizabeth are able to refute the mechanics of fixed categories and to question all identities and hierarchies, thereby undoing all narrow meanings and yardsticks of what it means to be a human being. By foregrounding her protagonists against the power dynamics of the central, dominant culture, Head is able to rescript the contexts of her novels. Dikeledi's rebuttal of Pete in *Maru*: "there is no such a thing as Masarwa. There are only people" reveals that calling attention to margins destroys marginality and collapses the centralised narrative discourses of the Batswana society, "because the act of giving attention to what is defined as outside the frame unsettles the oppositional hierarchy of important versus unimportant" (Hite 1989: 121-122). In choosing to treat the marginalised as central in her novels, Head refuses the dominant narrative of what really matters in social relations. Sample (2003: 56) makes a compelling point when she claims that Bessie Head's protagonists do not speak from the traditional space of silence and of being the subjects of somebody else's discourse. They have a vantage point from which they can observe the behaviour of the persecutor. They are somewhere else, as Sample (2003) articulates; "in a position that no one can easily identify because they do not occupy the marginal place allotted to them in the binary hierarchised symbolic system that constitutes social reality" (pp. 121-122).

In 1984, bell hooks described the margin as part of the whole, but located outside the main body. She characterised the margin as a site for developing an oppositional world view that strengthens and sustains, and also affords a more comprehensive way of knowing. The view from the margins is more comprehensive because its holders can look in both directions: from the outside in and from the inside out. For their survival, both Margaret and Elizabeth must understand both the

centre and margins; therefore, they possess a wholeness denied to those who only recognise the perspective of the centre. They are able to resist hegemonic dominance because they understand themselves to be part of a complex whole that encompasses both the centre and the margins. In a more recent statement of her perspective on marginality, hooks states that earlier she wanted to portray marginality as

the site of radical possibility: a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such,...[it] [Marginality] offers to one the possibility of a radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds

(bell hooks 1990: 149-150).

hooks does not mean that margins are not places of repression. As used by hooks, privileging the margins brings us to the places where many women have lived, resisted oppression, and shared power. While I agree with the notion of retaining margins, I eschew the tendency to construct the opposition between margins and centre in hierarchical, essentialist terms. The margin-centre dichotomy obscures the existence of variety and difference that could be called neither central nor extreme. Here my perspective has been strongly influenced by Foucault's formulation of power as discussed elsewhere in this study. This perspective is also shared by Biddy Martin (1988), who reads Foucault's theories thus:

Foucault also challenges any easy division between a dominant and essentially repressive discourse and one oppositional, pure voice of liberation. He characterizes power as a multiplicity of force relations, the interplay of various discursive fields with their immanent

necessities and developments. Power and authority are no longer vested in a central point, not in Foucault's analysis or in the actual working of power in our world. Nor does resistance arise from a single point...

(Martin 1988: 9-10).

Foucault's analyses offer an alternative interpretation of the meanings often given to centre and margins. Foucault has used the net image, arguing that power is exercised through a "net-like organization" and that individuals "circulate between its threads". He employs this metaphor to reveal the construction of power through infinitesimal mechanisms, manifold relations of force. Like Martin, I use Foucault's work to illuminate the false prisons of the dichotomies which not only restrict women's choices to either full-scale revolt or acceptance, but also foster inaccurate and immobilising ideas about how society and culture are ordered and what it means to live within them. Martin claims that Foucault's method allows him to shatter existing dichotomies without assuming a position as yet another polar opposition and thus remaining caught in the very schema his work reveals as false:

His methodological deconstructions explode the self-evidence of constituted meanings, defy the acceptance of received categories as exhaustive, and expose the cost at which such coherence and solidity are effected. The point from which Foucault deconstructs is off-centre, out of line, apparently unaligned. It is not the point of an imagined absolute otherness, but an "alterity" that understands itself as an internal exclusion

(Martin 1988: 10).

Clearly, one can "read out" of Foucault a different form of practice for the marginalised: undoing all categories and meanings, questioning all identities and positions, avoiding declarations of

closure. Thinking in terms of the margins and a centre means being caught within restricted possibilities, but Foucault's work reveals that it can be formulated as a means of escape from those restrictions.

In using Foucault for gender, identity and feminist purposes, I am aware of the difficulties involved in combining commitment to Foucault's theoretical project with the political goal of ending women's oppression. I concede the problems posed by Foucault's silence about gender construction and his ambiguous stance on the significance of political action for change. But I have, hopefully, performed a reading out of Foucault that enriches gender understanding and the feminist critique of power and the division between the centre and the margins of society.

Nancy Hartsock (1990) and Nancy Fraser (1989) have formulated strong criticisms of Foucault's usefulness for feminists. Their readings of Foucault proffer another way to formulate the centre-margin distinction and to assess its contribution to feminist projects. Hartsock maintains that "poststructuralist theories such as those put forward by Foucault fail to provide a theory of power for women" (1990: 159). In her estimation, postmodern theories in general are dangerous approaches for marginalised groups to adopt. She believes this to be so because these theories, of which Foucault's is just one example, are unable to give an account of the systemic domination of the many by a few. Hartsock does not deny that Foucault has made some important contributions to our understanding of power, but her principal agenda is to characterise his theory of power as inhospitable to an analysis of gender and feminist practices striving for socio-cultural transformation. Hartsock would have us recognise that Foucault's work distracts us from the commitment of feminists to re-think domination and undo it. She identifies the source of this potential to distract as the difference between Foucault's agenda and that of feminists: the enormous difference between seeking to disrupt the disciplinary order by revealing what it

subjugates and silences, and seeking to replace it with a more just world. In Hartsock's view, Foucault does not supply us with

an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top and can transform the margins as well as the centre. The point is to develop an account of the world which treats our perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges, but as primary and constitutive of a different world

(1990: 171).

Hartsock's position is that Foucault's ideas about the world and the self, his accounts of power, do not satisfy these requirements, and are therefore not "theories for women." I suggest that another position is possible. Rather than constructing Foucault as a set of substantive commitments that must either be accepted or rejected, we may choose to see possibilities for appropriation of his ideas. By setting Hartsock's reading of Foucault alongside Nancy Fraser's, I hope to make this choice more persuasive. Nancy Fraser (1989: 55) identifies two strands in Foucault's work [maybe dating from different periods of his work?]: In one respect, his work aspires to replace humanism with something new, while in another respect, it aims not to develop an alternative, but rather to be humanism's critical conscience. Fraser refers to these as the "transgressive" and the "immanentist" Foucaults, respectively. She is critical of the "transgressive Foucault", the one who seeks a new way of seeing, as appearing to lack the political seriousness and the resources for an alternative political vision that feminism requires. In this respect, she shares Hartsock's position. Both argue that Foucault cannot supply us with everything we need to create new ways of thinking and new forms of social organisation. But Fraser moves on to indicate a possible way for feminists

to appreciate Foucault, while yet remaining critical of his unwillingness to develop a normative basis for opposing the modern social order.

While I agree with both Hartsock and Fraser that Foucault does not provide a basis for building a feminist vision of political community, I believe that feminists may also wish to do other things as well, and that Foucault can be useful for those tasks. His work reminds us of the dangers that lurk within conventional distinctions such as the one which encourages us to assume that it is both necessary and helpful to distinguish what is marginal from what is central. In this logic, Foucault's theories are compatible with feminist critiques of essentialism such as that of M.E. Bailey (1993) who recalls that since the 1960s feminists have questioned the "dualistic categories men and women as given, natural and eternal categories" (p. 99). The oppositional men/women model sustains the notion of a feminine nature which is at once immutable, universal, and transhistorical, and therefore fictional from a Foucauldian perspective. Moreover, such an essentialist definition of the feminine takes into consideration neither the effect of cultural constructs of the feminine nor differences existing between women, whether they be social, racial or sexual. Bailey thus acknowledges the relevance of Foucault's theories which allow her, along with Sandra Bartky, to deconstruct essentialism into "an expression of power-knowledge" (p. 104). In the same line of thought, Toril Moi has also pointed to the challenge Foucault poses for feminism: "we can never answer the question of what resists power, nor give any fundamental critique of the notion of "power" itself" (quoted in Grimshaw 1993: 51). Therefore, Foucault succeeds not only in unsettling our categories and assumptions but also in enabling us to move back and forth between margins and centre through his simultaneous marginalisation and centralisation of everything. This is a helpful perspective that shakes us up from being too comfortable in our oppositional stance.

With regard to Bessie Head and her “self”, she portrays herself mainly in interviews, unpublished as well as published articles, her books and letters. Her letters, mainly written to Randolph Vigne between 1965 and 1979, reveal various facets of the writer’s life. The parts may not necessarily add up to a seamless whole, but to a large extent reflect a life-story from an intimate first person viewpoint that is rooted in a tangible reality since they contain dates, an address, and a “signature”. These letters inadvertently create an autobiographical text, especially because they have been written to the same person - Randolph Vigne - over a prolonged period of time. Arguing whether or not a series of letters and interviews fits the mould of “traditional” autobiography may not be as useful as questioning restrictions of the autobiographical “canon”. On the other hand, I need to caution that it is not always practical or advisable to approach every letter or interview as autobiography.

Although she has been dead for eighteen years now, Bessie Head has been, and will continue to be, celebrated as one of the South African diaspora’s finest *femmes de lettres* of the twentieth century. In many ways her literary reputation continues to thrive. As recently as 2002, her novel, *A Question of Power*, was featured as one of Africa’s 100 Best Books of the 20th century during the Zimbabwe International Book Fair. *The Sunday Times* newspaper has recently established the annual Bessie Head Fellowship to stimulate distinguished writing in the African continent.

Head’s sense of the self is located within the context of her mother’s tragedy – institutionalisation in a mental hospital because of her reputed interracial sexual relations with Bessie’s father, a Black stablehand. As Gina Wisker (2000: 5) puts it, “hers is a testimony and an imaginatively engaged exploration of alternatives to racial oppression...enabling us to contextualise the autobiographical and fictional works of ... South African women who also explore and establish identity in a

historical [and] cultural location of which there is - or was – ‘no world’ and no word for much of what to do and say”. Analogously, Betty Govinden postulates that

Telling our stories, using the “self as subject”, shows the intersection between the individual and the large forces of our history. In telling our stories we attempt to understand both intellectually and emotionally.... In remembering in the present, we begin to realise that parts of our past are waiting to be reclaimed, re-visioned and told as we view the past through the lens of the present, weaving an inter-textual narrative

(Govinden 1995: 170-183).

The semi-fictionalised works of Bessie Head (*Maru* and *A Question of Power*) as well as the autobiographical accounts in non-literary texts inevitably tell her own story about herself as much as they project South Africa as a whole during the Apartheid era, as well as describe her chosen exilic country - Botswana. I contend that the circumstances of Head’s birth, which she recounts through fictionalised characters in her novels, seek to establish the context of her own identity and sense of self. However complex the “true story,” her reinscription of her-story starts off by showing how identity is always a construction of those who at a particular moment have the power to define it. Bessie’s identity was determined by The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (number 55 of 1949) amended in 1950, also called The Immorality Act (amended in 1957). This Act was a legislative prohibition against “any immoral or indecent act”, such as carnal intercourse and marriage across the colour bar. Eilersen (1995: 7) alludes to this Act’s effect on the Emery and Birch families’ reception of the obviously “coloured” Bessie. The Consolidating Act number 23 of 1957 “entrenched the colour bar in more explicitly sexual terms than did its predecessors” (Colleran 1995: 42). The latter Act stipulated that any kind of sexual act (not necessarily

intercourse) between those classified as white and those not classified as white, was unacceptable. Russell Vandenbroucke (1986: 287) and Jeanne Colleran (1995: 42) refer to these laws as the cornerstones of apartheid.

In their application, these laws had a particularly pernicious effect on the rights of all women in South Africa, irrespective of colour (du Pré 1996: 86). The Group Areas Act of 1950 blatantly discriminated against women. A white woman was considered to be “Coloured,” Asiatic or Native if she was married to a “non-white,” but a white man remained “white” if he was married to a “non-white”. Thus, the law singled out white women by applying to them an artificial and spurious classification while exempting white men who were exactly in the same position (du Pré 1996: 88). Both the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages and the Immorality Acts respectively passed in 1949 and 1950 were also unfair to women irrespective of “race”. In a number of instances, where mixed couples were tried together, the woman, most often a “non – white” was generally found guilty and sentenced while the man, most often a white person, was either found not guilty or let off lightly. Courts most often refused to accept that the fault could lie with men. The unfortunate aspect of the application of these laws is that it not only appeared to single out women for blame but it also appeared to confer on police and the courts the right to specially humiliate women. In their treatment of, and attitude to women arrested under these Acts, police officers rationalised that a woman who had sex with a man of another colour had degraded herself and therefore did not deserve any respect. The “offending” woman had to suffer the indignity of being arrested in an unclothed state and of getting dressed while the arresting officers watched (du Pré 1996: 91-92).

Yet 1950 is the year considered by Errol Durbach (1987: 509) as the *annus horribilis* of apartheid legislation. In this year the Population Registration Act helped to arbitrate on race classification because it assigned all persons to racial categories, thus separating the various races (Vivier 1983:

178). There were four racial groups: white, black or Bantu, “coloured” and Asian. There was no mobility among the races; a child’s future was determined at birth. Thus, biology was destiny.

First rejected at birth and pronounced unacceptable by blood relations who, according to Sophia Ogwude (2001: 68) “were only races and not people”, then rejected by foster families, and later (initially) rejected even by her adopted country, Botswana, it is within this context that Head begins to recreate an identity for herself:

I was born on the sixth of July, 1937, in the Pietermaritzburg mental hospital...The reason for my peculiar birthplace was that my mother was white, and she had acquired me from a black man. She was judged insane, and committed to the mental hospital while pregnant. Her name was Bessie Emery and I consider it the only honour South Africans ever did me - naming me after the unknown, and unpredictable woman

(Cited in Mackenzie 1990: 58).

Although the circumstances of Bessie Head’s birth have elicited reactions from critics (see for example Gardner 1986, Dovey 1989), the parallels between her fiction and the tragic social reality into which she was born are far too close to be ignored. Although the novel is not a straightforward autobiographical reconstruction of her lived experience, like Bessie Head’s own mother, Elizabeth, the protagonist of *A Question of Power*’s fictional mother is a white woman who is confined to a mental institution because she is impregnated by a black servant who works in the household. The autobiographical aspect of Bessie Head the novelist is transformed into imaginative fictional autobiography by the thirteen year old Elizabeth, Bessie’s namesake who, as a new pupil, is told by the British principal of the missionary school:

We have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native

!

(*A Question of Power*, p.16).

The principal's callous pronouncement exposes succinctly the power of the dominant racial discourse and the reference to "a full docket" exposes the hegemonic power of official documents to exercise control and to police lives.

In her 2003 essay entitled "A Peculiar Shuttling Movement: Madness, Passing and Trespassing in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*", Kapstein observes that in the South African context, "madness" not only provided a convenient trope for difference but was also used as a catchall for various and sundry social and political transgressions (p. 72). By contravening the 1927 Immorality Act, Elizabeth's parents, like Bessie Head's traversed one of South Africa's most sacred tenets and thus unsettled the illusion of fixed racial boundaries. Perhaps because of the pronounced race and class violations, sexual transgression was displaced onto the category of mental illness and thus Elizabeth's mother and Bessie Head's are classified mad as a direct result of having crossed the colour line (Kapstein, *ibid*).

Despite the depiction of thirteen recurrent psychotic episodes in *A Question of Power*, it is also worthwhile to note Sophia Ogwude's (2001: 68) observation that the kind of madness which Bessie Head writes about is madness used as a label to denote overt non-conformism in a social set-up as brutal as South Africa's, where the merely alienated are untruthfully diagnosed as mad. This view finds a parallel in noted British anti-Freudian psychoanalyst R.D. Laing's contention that societies

can on their own manifest symptoms of psychosis, making it possible for an individual only to “experience himself in despairing aloneness and isolation” (1969: 15).

Laing conceives of madness as a struggle for liberation from false attitudes and values, an encounter with primary feelings and impulses that constitutes a possibility for the emergence of the “true self” hidden from the false outer being, whose chief function is adjustment to the demands of society and the family. “True sanity”, he wrote in *The Politics of Experience* (1967: 116), “entails in one way or another the dissolution of ... that false self completely adjusted to our alienated social reality.” Insanity, Laing concluded, might very well be a state of health in a mad world. Echoing Laing, Bessie Head subverts stereotypical associations of madness with deviant sexuality and miscegenation and “rehearses these stereotypes with a difference, suggesting madness as a potential site of resistance to official constructions of reality” (Kapstein 2003: 72).

In her 1993 article entitled “Historical Roots and Rural African Culture as Part of Bessie Head’s Frame of Reference”, Gillian Stead Eilersen states that Bessie Head reproduced her mother’s alleged insanity verbatim when writing about her self ten years after the publication of *A Question of Power*. Additionally, the affinity between Elizabeth and Bessie Head has been corroborated by authorial comments. (Though one should not always believe an author because the events of the author’s life, how they are remembered and recorded are dependent on the contexts of the author’s point of view and perceptions of reality at a particular time).

In a (1983: 44) interview with Linda Susan Beard, Bessie Head has well brought out this deep relationship:

There’s no way in which I can deny that was a completely autobiographical novel taking

a slice of my life, my experience, and transcribing it verbatim into novel form...It was an experience I went through ...

So profound is the missionary principal's callous treatment of Elizabeth that it continues to haunt Bessie Head the novelist, who recaptures it yet again in *Maru*:

It was only when [Margaret Cadmore] started going to the mission school that she slowly became aware that something was wrong with her relationships to the world. She was the kind of child who was slyly pinched under the seat, and next to whom no one wanted to sit (*Maru*, p. 17).

Here, again, Bessie Head's comments in the (1983: 44) Susan Beard interview are apposite:

The two are very closely linked ... I used certain personal material. I would state, for instance, that my beginnings and background can be found in the girl Margaret Cadmore ... Bits were borrowed ... Central to my decision to write it was the astonishing similarity between racial prejudices ...

These traumatic experiences are somewhat reminiscent of Bessie Head's life story of a marginalised and deprived identity. Like Margaret, Bessie Head's own son Howard was stigmatised at school: "... My son started school and during mid-term was assaulted on the ground of his looking like a Masarwa or Bushman" (quoted in Starfield 1997: 40).

Jacquiline Rose (1994: 402) provides further evidence for the close association between Bessie Head's fiction and her own life story when she claims that Head blurs the boundary between autobiography and novel by placing her text at the borderline of fiction and chronicle. Kapstein (2003: 78) deftly observes that "as she refashions her story, Head demonstrates the constructed nature of official histories".

Despite the calamitous personal experience, Bessie Head's poetics succeed in working on two fronts at once, "both occupying a kind of centre, assuming a subjectivity long denied, and maintaining the vigilant, disruptive stance speaking from the post-modern margin provides ..." (Schenk 1988: 286). The implications of her plea for personal, social, psychological, cultural and political equality are briefly summarised in the epilogue below.

As the central tenets of this study have already been synthesised in this chapter (chapter III) a further synopsis is deemed unnecessary. Instead of a conclusion, therefore, I suggest an epilogue. This includes a brief review of the impact of Bessie Head's creative mind and some speculative remarks on racism.

CHAPTER IV

EPILOGUE

In this age of the Equality Courts, the Human Rights Commission as well as the Commission for Gender Equality, a focus on the lingering effects of racism and gender discrimination seems outdated, antiquated and irrelevant. Yet “the problem of the twentieth century, (the) problem of the colour-line” is still raging on, albeit in subtle forms. For example, schools will still deny learners admission, ostensibly because of lack of educators for particular languages. In an article entitled “Busting open club owners’ racist door policies” in the *Sunday Times* of the 21st of February 2004, Pierre De Vos, a professor in Constitutional Law at the University of the Western Cape, opines that “clubs and bars will never admit that they are excluding black patrons because of their race, but will use vague and subjective criteria - such as inappropriate dress, attitude problems or class differences to deny patrons entry”. In such cases it is not easy to prove racial discrimination.

Racism may have been expunged from South Africa’s laws and school textbooks, but the reality is that cultural categorisation and difference will remain as our dominant headline stories. To perceive the picture, one only has to look at the recent resignation of the former Springbok Rugby communication manager, Mark Keohane, saying he could not be part of a squad that tolerated prejudices. The way Happy Sindane’s “true” racial identity was given front page headlines and first place on radio and television news bulletins (and discussed in our living rooms, on shopfloors and in bars) in 2003 reminds us that however challenged, power relations and fixed categories of identity still remain our master narratives. One could also look at the near havoc wreaked by South Africa’s Boeremag members and the rightwing bombs detonated in Soweto and Bronkhorstspuit in 2002. According to Duncan Brown (2001: 68), such problems have their parallel, amongst many other places, in Botswana. The government there wishes to remove Bushman people from their

land to extend cattle farming operations, and reduce their hunting rights, which may be more lucratively sold to overseas tourists. This issue has resurfaced again: The *Pretoria News* of 26 August 2004 (SAPA) reports that the Botswana government is attempting to persuade the Bushmen (Basarwa) to opt for relocation to settlements outside the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. In what was widely seen as a move to pressure them to relocate, the government stopped the delivery of water and social services to Basarwa inside the reserve in January 2002, saying that at 50 000 pula a month, it was too expensive to continue the services. The government argues that it wants the Basarwa out of the reserve so they can be brought into the mainstream of development. The human rights pressure group Survival International has said the reason for the relocation is to prevent the Basarwa from laying claim to any minerals discovered in the reserve. One also has to look at the resurgence of fascism in countries like Germany and the genocide in Rwanda to understand the continuing impact of “our” fascination with the concept of “race”.

In the end, though, notwithstanding Bessie Head’s early and untimely death, the legacy that she left in terms of her re-writing of racial compartmentalisation and her subverting of patriarchal hegemony remains. Her endeavour was not in vain. She is, as a writer, a woman who has

... resorted to an effective, quietly devastating subversion of the traditional stereotypical roles ascribed to women by asserting their independence and rewriting literature and, by implication, history and thus finally irrevocably (re) inscribing (women) into history

(Wenzel, quoted in Cloete 1998: 32).

The selected novels of Bessie Head therefore underscore Guy Ossito Midiohouan’s (1991: 96) humanist statement about African literature:

As the expression of a creativity that ceaselessly strives to reinvent society, culture and history in an impulse that renders us more conscious of ourselves and of the world around us ... modern African literature collectively profiles our identity and helps make us into people who, while being carried along by the currents of history and attending to the life of the world, are not assimilated into an impoverishing, planet-wide uniformity but, on the contrary, contribute to the universal, which can only be rich by virtue of the variety that different peoples bring to it.

It is crucial to note that the respective endings of the two novels discussed in this study envision positive stances not only showing the nature and sources of racism but also advocating complete eradication of racial and gender prejudice, while simultaneously showing a general awareness of the abuses of power, not only the abuse of women. In this context, Alice Walker's concept of womanism seems pertinent. Walker holds that it is necessary to formulate a specific approach that focuses on black women's identity and commitment to gender issues. Ultimately, a womanist is a "black feminist or feminist of colour [who is] committed to survival and wholeness of entire people male *and* female" (Walker 1983: xi). Walker implies that womanists are concerned with overcoming not only gender discrimination but also discrimination based on race or socio-economic status. Another, more recent African-American alternative concept to feminism is Clenora Hudson-Weems's "Africana womanism" (1993). Like Walker's womanism, "Africana womanism" is created and designed for all black women.

The Nigerian womanist literary critic Chikwenye Ogunyemi arrived at the term womanism independently of and at about the same time as Walker (Ogunyemi 1985). While in her early publications she used the term womanism without a modifier, today she speaks specifically of African womanism. Susan Arndt (2001: 711) posits that although Ogunyemi's conception has

important parallels with Walker's and Hudson-Weems's versions of womanism, there are decisive differences too. The most substantial is that Ogunyemi wishes to conceptualise an ideology that clearly demarcates and emancipates African womanism from both white feminism and African-American womanism/feminism. "Since feminism and African-American womanism overlook African peculiarities", she explains, "there is a need to define African womanism" (Ogunyemi 1996: 14). Only African women may be African womanists in Ogunyemi's sense. The core of Ogunyemi's definition of African womanism is the conviction that the gender question can be dealt with only in the context of other issues that are relevant for African women. However, in this connection she clearly exceeds Walker's and Hudson-Weems's race-class-gender approach. She stresses that an African womanist "will recognise that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy" (Ogunyemi 1985: 64). Moreover, "an African womanist must deal with among other things, interethnic skirmishes and cleansing, ... religious fundamentalism, ... the language issues, gerontocracy and in-lawism" (Ogunyemi 1997: 4).

Obioma Nnaemeka (1989: 10) sums up womanism skilfully when she avers that it (womanism) is as opposed to the oppression of women as it is to that of men. It espouses a family-centred rather than a female-centred perspective. Realising that black men were partners in the struggle against racial oppression, black women feminists could not afford the leisure of privileging gender over race to the extent that white middle-class feminists did. For those women for whom oppression is multiple, racial discrimination and economic exploitation remain primary concerns.

Ultimately, apart from gaining a perspective as well as demythologising the gendered and racial social structures, I would hope that my reading of the two novels has not only contributed towards an understanding of the individual texts but has also made the reader "other-wise", as Bessie Head

was. Kadir (1993: 1) defines the term “other-wise” as follows: “To be other-wise means to be wakeful to the otherness within as well as mindful of the other as other”.

Finally, although Bessie Head eschews all kinds of labels, the complexity of her position as a South African coloured writer demands that her writing be related to her socio-political and historical contexts. Apart from this, the selected novels do make strong political statements and “the reality of a statutory inhumanity is a ceaseless murmur at the level of their sub-text” (Green, quoted in Vivier 1983: 11). In each of the selected novels, Bessie Head also successfully transforms her self-conscious marginal status as an “orphan”, an exile, a single mother and a member of a subjugated race and gender into a tool of subversion and catalyst for change. Through this process, what is “other” becomes central and what is usually central-the psychodynamic specificities of racial and gender oppression as well as the lust for power, which are both text and subtext of her novels - become “othered ” and gain far wider significance.

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