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Instances of Bessie Head's distinctive feminism, womanism and Africanness in her novels

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Bessie Head was one of the *Drum* writers of the 1950s. As critics such as Huma Ibrahim have indicated it was only after her death in 1986 that she was included in discussions on the *Drum* generation. The result of her prior exclusion has been the double marginalization of Head's literary contribution, as one of the overlooked black South African writers of the 1950s and the lack of critical acclaim of her as an individual author. For this reason, she is one of the black South African writers who should consciously be given prominence today. This article utilizes an analysis of Head's novels not attempted so far. It is difficult to interrogate Head's work fruitfully, unless questions are addressed to whether she approaches her imaginative writing as an Africanist, a feminist or just as a woman. It will be argued that her fiction highlights the plight of the socially marginalized in eccentric and seminal ways and that it bears the potential to enrich debates on Africanism, feminism and womanism. Conclusions on how the complexities of Head's psyche can be beneficially used to enrich a more judicious reading will be drawn from evidence gathered from her novels. **Key words:** Africanism, Bessie Head, *Drum* writers, feminism, womanism.

Introduction

Huma Ibrahim (1996: 14) significantly points to an "increasing recognition of the complexity of Head's writing" that started only as recently as 1989 with the posthumous publication of her shorter and smaller pieces *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989), *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings* (1990), *The Cardinals* (1993) and *A Gesture of Belonging* (1991). This paper recognizes that the layers of the complexity of Head's novels still have to be decoded more fully from a number of perspectives, and it is its aim to highlight some increased lucidity that may be obtained through considering Head's novels from the point of view of Africanism and womanism/feminism.

Ibrahim (1996) and Elder (2004) stress the need to detect the peculiarity of Head's functional notion of normative concepts. Ibrahim (1996: 20) observes that Head's "exploration of the limitation of women's power" marks a fundamental deviation from the simplistic feminist premise that "even the smallest power in women's hands somehow advances the cause of feminism." For Ibrahim (1996: 20), such a feat in Head's problematization of the seemingly smooth concept of feminism should be attributed to her awareness that "societal taboos surrounding women's sexuality are

controlled by aspects of patriarchal discourse." What follows from such an observation by Ibrahim is that Head's characterization of women within the African cultural context straightforwardly portrays the impingement of patriarchal African societies on their subjectivity. It is this view that the present essay seeks to debunk as simplistic from the point of view of Head's brand of Africanism and womanism/feminism.

Bessie Head's first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, originally published in 1969, provides fertile material in which the complex intersection of her autobiographical approach with her perspectives on feminism can be examined. Not only should a closer scrutiny of any of Head's literary works reclaim the central position *Drum* writings deserve within the evolutionary history of black South African literature written in English (Rafapa 2007:63), but this should also redress the fact of Head's unjustifiable exclusion from the *Drum* hall of fame. It is true that when other *Drum* greats such as Todd Matshikiza, Es'kia Mphahlele, Casey Motsisi and Can Themba's outstanding literary contributions are acknowledged, the name of Head is almost always excluded, thus subjecting her to a double marginalization.

This paper adopts the view that Head is Afrocentric, in addition to engaging in her eccentric ways with the issue of feminism. According to Rafapa (2006: 10), "Afrocentrism refers to an attitude that directly combats European hegemonic discourse in order to negate its inherent Eurocentrism as a pole diametrically opposed to that associated with Africanists." Apartheid was one manifestation of the friction between the Eurocentric ethos of the ruling whites and the Afrocentric one of the oppressed blacks (Rafapa 2006).

The fact that Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* is set in the African state of Botswana, and the biographical aspect of her fleeing apartheid South Africa of the 1940s as a black African woman of mixed origin, raise genuine expectations that she looks at life with an Afrocentric outlook. Africanist writers such as Mphahlele (2002) define an African as one belonging to groups that have been historically referred to as blacks, coloureds and Indians within the South African context. It is from this point of view that Bessie Head is discussed in this essay as an African writer displaying an Afrocentric outlook.

Head's writing doubly as an African and a woman necessitates the hypothesis that she writes both as an African and a feminist. That there is no consensus on what African feminism is, justifies the continued pursuit to find as many examples of it as possible in order to refine its definition. A study of Head's novel that includes such a perspective should contribute not only to a better understanding of her work, but also to a more distinct concept of African feminism.

It is possible to approach Head's literary output as one animated by her African feminist views, provided that such a concept exists. As Ibrahim (1996: 9) observes, "feminisms informed by the colonial experience suggest a very fundamental departure from Western feminisms" and are "defined by a need to resist but not reject the world

we are given, phallocratic though it is." At times African feminism is equated to womanism by those who have been concerned with it for a while. The current tenuous description of African feminism or womanism has led to some people of colour such as Alice Walker trying to dissociate themselves with the term, while others such as Amina Mama are of the opinion that there is nothing wrong with the term (Dryden et al 2002: 114). Reasons for some African writers shying away from being referred to as feminists include the association of feminism with whites (Mama and Salo), and the negative publicity the press has given to feminism within the different social contexts to the extent of feminists being labeled lesbians and man-haters (Dryden et al 2002: 114). Those who feel more comfortable with it maintain that western feminists are aware, in the postcolonial period, that different women are being oppressed differently (Dryden et al 2002:114; Mama and Salo). Writers such as Spivak (1997) have also clarified that feminism should not be equated with man-hating.

Besides the need to interpret Head's fiction in relation to her Africanness and feminism, it is crucial, as (Ngcobo 1992: 343) observes, to understand Head's psyche because it informs her writings. Head's whole frame of reference, her development and her psyche are centred around the circumstances of her birth as she believed them to be – as evidenced in *A Question of Power* (1974). This autobiographical novel tells circumstances of the work's protagonist, Elizabeth, modeled on the author's real life.

In her own life Head was a troubled woman discriminated against by South African and Botswana whites for being black, and by blacks for being coloured. She was born out of an illicit love affair between a white woman and a black man. Ngcobo (1992: 343) asserts that "mentally and socially [Head] suffered several traumas because of the circumstances of her birth" including the fact that the "social code of behavior [at the time] condemned the mother's action as lustful and depraved – and therefore shameful." It is natural that for someone like Head, whose circumstances of birth resulted in acute social abuse like this, the discrimination and oppression of women will be felt poignantly and fictionalized with commensurate vigour and vividness.

This paper probes how Head's novels reflect such attitudes that are likely to have adversely influenced Head's psychological development and led to her feelings of ambivalence, with the result that her development of sexual relations and racial consciousness were affected. This appears to be evidenced in her prose narratives evincing negative feelings about her own sexuality as well as her vacillating feelings towards Africans – attitudes that one might opine give rise to questions about her sense of belonging. The functions of Head's psychological processes appear to be her unique identity with Africanness and refracted position on African feminism or womanism, which this paper intends to trace.

Traces of Head's position in relation to Africanism and feminism/ womanism

One aspect of Head's traumatised memory is her deep-lying feeling of not being accepted by the Batswana because, as she states in one of her published letters in *A Gesture of Belonging*, "they all spat at [her] for being Coloured" (124). Mosieleng (2004: 57) describes Bessie Head's condition of exile as severely handicapped by her personal background, "which was fundamentally non-African in many respects, three of which may be singled out: language, companionship, and art." The fact that "Bessie Head was to remain an outsider despite her interest in the history and village tales of Serowe, mainly because of her refusal to learn Setswana" (Mosieleng 2004: 57), is evidence enough that her conception of herself as an African is complex (see Rafapa 2008: 254).

Such a preoccupation with the difference between herself and the Batswana is likely to lead at least to inferiority or a superiority complex, which may manifest itself in the form of vengeful aloofness, and Head seems to have reacted in this manner. It is perhaps not so surprising that Head's description of one of the leading characters in *When Rain Clouds Gather* by the name of Makhaya assumes a preoccupation with his looks. Given Head's maltreatment on the basis of her 'coloured' looks, her concern with the looks of her characters is quite rational. It is the discourse such a fixation with physical looks engages in that this paper seeks to challenge in order to highlight Head's peculiar conception of feminism/womanism and Africanness.

The character Makhaya is described by those who come to meet him for the first time as attractive. As if speaking vicariously for the Golema Mmidi Batswana population, because he is the first black person Makhaya meets near the railway station on his first day in Botswana, the old man Dinorego makes the evaluation that Makhaya is "very attractive" (*When Rain Clouds Gather*, 14). Head's consolidation of Makhaya as a character of good looks is sustained throughout the novel. For example, after Dinorego has introduced Makhaya to Mma-Millipede, the old woman remarks behind the stranger's back that he "is too handsome" (*Rain Clouds,* 68). This is one of the reasons why when the British volunteer Gilbert and Dinorego's daughter Maria agree to marry after three long years of proposals, the only remaining woman reputed by villagers to possess "the big brains" like Maria, Paulina Sebeso, is "unashamedly joyful that a stroke of luck" has "removed her deadliest competitor" for Makhaya (*Rain Clouds*, 86). Head's foregrounding of physical looks goes beyond individual and assumes communal dimensions. This is revealed when the carefree Grace Sebina "is portraying" the chorus-like "thoughts" of the agrarian women of the rural Botswana village of Golema Mmidi, in taunting Paulina for eyeing the foreigner bridegroom, by stating that she "must have noticed that the foreigner is very handsome" (*Rain Clouds*, 88).

In consideration of such a characterization, it is reasonable to describe Head as having a superiority complex towards the Batswana black Africans on the basis of her being coloured and 'more attractive'. This is why her alter ego, Makhaya, brings

about change among the Batswana for the reason of being different from them. In Mosieleng's (2004: 60–1) view, such a "fetishizing of the outside figure" is a manifestation of Head's attitude that "traditional politics and structures are inherently beyond repair and, at most, need to be overthrown by outside forces." Significantly, Mosieleng (2004: 60–1) sees the result of such an attitude as Head's "formulaic representation of the tribal Botswana communities." In other words, she does not really bother to represent the Africanness of her Batswana characters in its objective profundity.

One can also argue that the social and institutional rejection Head suffered in her childhood is made such a strong feature of characterisation in this novel. The rejection gives rise to feelings of isolation and alienation for Head, not unlike the characters in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. It comes as no surprise then that the novel's central themes are located in the double-pronged quest for own identity and social regeneration; with virtually all the residents of Golema Mmidi grappling to "mend their lives that have been devastated by evil powers elsewhere" (*Rain Clouds,* 346). As testimony to the fact that Head's view of (black) Africanness is controversial, "the evil powers elsewhere" are actually a reference to the traditional chiefs symbolizing African institutions (*Rain Clouds*, 346). The member of Batswana royalty who is an antagonist to the evil chief only assumes the vindicating ascription by his embracement of changes that are introduced by the outsiders, Makhaya and Gilbert.

Both Makhaya and Gilbert have been outsiders in their own communities even before going into exile in Botswana, in much the same way Head has been an aloof coloured outsider within the African South African population. At the centre of this social regeneration effort described in the novel is the concept of a farming co-operative headed by a white man, Gilbert Balfour, who the reader is told, "had not felt free in England either, at least not in the upper middle class background into which he had been born…" (*Rain Clouds*, 98). Gilbert's alienation is revealed in the explanation that "if your mother's brother bought his wife a mansion, your mother had to have a mansion too or threaten to commit suicide, and then your mother almost did commit suicide a few years later after you were born because all the polite women kept on remarking on how you were such a big-boned lad with an ungainly walk and didn't somehow quite fit" (*Rain Clouds*, 98).

Apart from a highlighting of suffering due to social injustice that pervades Head's novel, unfair judgment according to physical looks again shows up in the group of words "you were such a big-boned lad with an ungainly walk and didn't quite fit." Gilbert's suffering at the hands of the upper class English is not unlike Head's, after she had been born to a white South African family. Such an ironical consciousness of unfair discrimination by the upper class kin in the cases of both Head and Gilbert, appears to be blind to the converse feeling of superiority towards the less privileged than the self, as is the case in the way both Gilbert and Head relate to the socially marginalized Batswana.

Feelings of rejection and alienation emanating from one's physical appearance are further evidenced with Makhaya's tormented self-description as someone tossed about tortuously within the apartheid South Africa milieu because he is "Makhaya the Black Dog" (*Rain Clouds*, 124). Makhaya's meeting and subsequently making friends with Gilbert mark a turning point in Makhaya's life. In particular, the friendship between the two visionary men helps to unsettle the sense of unwantedness that has turned Makhaya into a reclusive figure. Gilbert's sense of social neglect has already been dissipated after the Batswana communities have embraced him and have gravitated towards his scientific agricultural project. At the one level, characters like these are agents of the social regeneration that should rid the community of Golema Mmidi of social bias that, inter alia, leads to them discriminating against those constituting rungs in the social ladder seen as less powerful. At the other level, the irony of the outsider being depicted prejudicially as a saviour is perpetuated through the commonness forged between the plights of Makhaya and Gilbert.

Stylistic and thematic parallels with later novels

One feature of Head's literary production is the crystallization of her trademark style and themes in novels published after *When Rain Clouds Gather*. In discussing her debut novel, one is able to proceed to later works organically because of identifiable connective devices.

Identification of Makhaya's (from the earlier *When Rain Clouds Gather*) and Maru's (from the later work *Maru*) lot and transformative impulse with Head's own biographical details cannot be mistaken. This feature continues to be a trait of her third novel, *A Question of Power*. Describing her struggle to impose her autobiographical details in a purposefully inflected manner in the protagonist of *A Question of Power* (1974) as she managed with the characters of Makhaya and Maru in her two earlier novels, Head confesses that this time she keeps on "waiting for the man" that she wants "once again" to victimize, to "step free of " the female protagonist (*Rain Clouds*, 151). This is an admission that Head finds it as difficult to forge characters that are freed from her biography as she can't discard her African feminist/womanist stance in crafting also her later fiction. The transformative impulses displayed by Makhaya and Maru are no less than Head's own quest to purge society of its frailties.

While at the one level reference to her intent to "victimize" the male character in her fiction points to her feminist project to satirize sexist tendencies in society's males, at another, more subtle level, it betrays her discourse on Africanness. In this regard, Horn (1991: 143, 146) observes accurately that while Head "criticizes individual abuses of power" within "a rural African community" in which "inequality between men and women" is crass, she does not contest the traditional "positions of authority themselves." In other words, Head is not dismissive about Africanness as a distinctive

consciousness and lifestyle, and yet she does not embrace it uncritically. This perhaps explains why she remains approving of qualities in which men surpass women, even while denouncing abusive individual males such as Moleka in *Maru* (1971).

This seemingly essentialist censuring of what Head casts as an inherently female weakness among the African female characters of her fiction, as well as her patent identification with the male character, attests to her African feminist position taking on epic dimensions of indicting the African cultures against which she chafes. At this elevated level, Head is not merely an outsider to the Batswana ways, but consistently continues to consolidate her outsider position to black Africanness, displaying as a coloured a supremacist gaze in relating to South African blacks. Identity with the male characters appears rather to be some connection with the masculine section of her psyche, and not any association with some part of black Africanness.

With this stylistic backdrop in our minds, it is understandable why the gender sensitivity with which benevolence is pushed forward in *A Question of Power* (1974) is inclined towards favouring only men. Head's statement in her 14 January 1969 letter is congruous with the view of Batswana men as generally benevolent and their female societal counterparts as malevolent on the whole: "Do you know who is the spreader of racialism? It is women, always women. They are the real poison. Men can't afford to be racialists […] Batswana men here sleep with Bushman women" (*Gesture*, 72). This is reminiscent of the character Maru's individualistically bold marriage to Margaret Cadmore in the novel *Maru*. The question of class prejudice being absent in men and present in women in *Maru* and *A Question of Power* is more a perpetuation of Head's ironically one-sided view of social justices than tenable grounds for casting male characters in a positive light. Head's soft spot for black male characters and masculinity remains stark. Such an exclusive ascription of benevolence to men already germinates in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, as when a diatribe is directed at "a few men" of Golema Mmidi for judging Paulina as "too bossy": "Then they all said it, overlooking the fact that they were wilting, *effeminate* shadows of men who really feared women" (*Rain Clouds*, 89, emphasis added). According to Head, then, real men do not show "effeminate" or feminine qualities. For Head, to be like a woman is to be weak and deplorable. In Head's opinion, weak men acquire the flaws inherent in women: "*there are men who are women in disguise because malice and viciousness are feminine qualities and […] such men can kill a woman like me*" (*Gesture*, 116, emphasis added).

It becomes clear that Head understands herself as composed of masculine qualities, which is why in the same text she explains why such feminine men are psychologically poised to kill the likes of her. She explains that this is because although she looks feminine and is "blabber mouth enough to be feminine", she is "really masculine in feeling" (*Gesture*, 116). Why a female writer such as Head does not associate with feminism can only be ascribed to her affinity with males and masculinity – a stance hardly reconcilable with conventional feminism. Head's description of the men she

despises as "effeminate shadows of men" reiterates her repulsive convulsion against women as weak creatures full of bias.

Yet women such as Dikeledi in *Maru* have been victims of chauvinistic males like Moleka, while the Khoisan teacher Margaret has been a victim of bias ensuing from both males and females in the Batswana village of Dilepe. Any censoring of female characters despite such negating incidents can only be attributed to inert propensities like Head's unbalanced regard for characters belonging to different genders. Such flashes of psychological propensity to exonerate men at the expense of women, highlighted in the above discussion of Head's published letters, and now showing up in *A Question of Power*, can only be a symptom of Head's ambivalent feminist position that prejudicially labels women as inherently weaker than men. Against this backdrop, Head's equating of female black characters with God and Truth in her remark that: "God […] must […] be female and black" (*Gesture*, 79), can either be understood as a symptom of vacillation or that of Africanness. The Afrocentric writer Es'kia Mphahlele (2002) demonstrates in many of his discursive essays that from the perspective of Africanism, women are perceived to be strong pillars of society.

Yet Head's position as an outsider to the core of Africanness epitomized by the lifestyles and thinking of black Africans, handicaps her African outlook to the extent of her Eurocentrically misrepresenting the very feature of Africanness she states above, in protesting that women "have always been treated as inferior to men in tribal communal life" (*Gesture*, 466). In attempting to offer a corrective to the sexist patriarchy that is depicted in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head appears to be ambiguous on who should be apportioned blame for the women's plight. An example is the episode involving the old woman who offers Makhaya overnight accommodation when the latter arrives as a refugee in Botswana. The woman, variously described by Head as "the crude, rude phenomenon", "old hag" and "loathsome woman" (*Rain Clouds*, 7, 8, 9) encourages a ten-year-old child to offer herself to Makhaya in exchange for a ten-shilling note. Her reaction of surprise to Makhaya's conscientious refusal of the offer prompts a revealing response from the old woman: "This is a miracle! I have not yet known a man who did not regard a woman as a gift from God! He must be mad!" (*Rain Clouds*, 9). Rather than blame the Batswana men for sexist behaviour, here Head holds the female characters responsible. Feminist-oriented critics bemoan the "male centred mythologizing" tendencies inherent in South African literature such as this by Head, especially literature produced by male writers (Driver 1992). Head's delineation of a female character who expects men to objectify and commodify women like this as if she is not herself a woman, thus perpetuating the sexist tendency that Driver (1992) describes as the myth of the Hottentot Eve through which women are projected as objects of exchange, is contrary to what conventional feminists and Africanists would advocate.

Conclusion

That a satisfactory description of African feminism or womanism is yet to be attained is attested in Mohanti et. al (1991: 4), when they argue that "the very meaning of the term feminism is continually contested." From evidence gathered from Head's fiction, it is evident that her conception of Africanness is that of a localized nature which continues to distinguish her as a coloured African. As Bissell (1996) reminds us, the writings of Head cover many aspects of her personal experiences as a racially mixed person, growing up without a family in South Africa.

This article has argued that the biographical aspect of Head's writing, combined with her failure to identify with and regard herself as equal to black Africans, has resulted in her being an outsider to Africanness. The outcome of such a social detachment has led Mosieleng (2004: 65) to comment accurately, that "Bessie Head's vision of a better African society can only be built on the ruins of traditional African institutions […] through *the intervention of a stranger*" (emphasis added). This led to her contextualization of feminist discourse within an African traditional milieu contradicting Head's Africanness and adopting Eurcocentric misrepresentations. Evidence of such cultural disorientation is in Head's vacillating feminist discourse, which has led critics such as Nono Kgafela (2007: 97) to suggest that in *When Rain Clouds Gather* she writes "like men, projecting patriarchal literary tendencies in writing about women" and express some doubt as to whether there is "a female voice" in the novel.

This kind of ambivalent feminist discourse pervades Head's novels. Head's delineation in *Maru* of the different circumstances of the oppression of the Motswana woman Dikeledi by the ruthless womanizer Moleka and that of the Khoisan lady teacher Margaret by the traditional Batswana community of the village of Dilepe does point to a different oppression of these African women, from that experienced by women in different societies such as those of the west.

The community of Golema Mmidi in Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* is as anchored in traditional African practices as are those constituting the social milieu of her second and last novels, *Maru* and *A Question of Power* respectively. Issues handled in Head's fiction can thus be seen as affirming feminist views like those of Dryden et al (2000: 117), in their assertion that African feminism should include the geographical area of Africa, the study of African women's oppression, the recognition of the uniqueness of different African societies and the study of women's choices and successes. However, contradictions about womanhood and Africanness (mentioned in this article) detract from discursive coherence required at the abstract level of ideas and theory. Rafapa (2006) has observed that although social commentators from within African lifestyles and consciousness did not necessarily use western terms like "chauvinism" and "feminism", to be traditionally African in outlook is not inherently paternalistic. The absence of such awareness in the way Head handles feminist and

Africanist discourse, has led to a contradiction between her position of Africanness and her feminism or womanism.

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