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### A Case of Refracted Feminism: Reimagining Bessie Head's Oeuvre

Critically hailed as one of the most celebrated voices in African literature at the time of her death in 1986, Bessie Head and her oeuvre have remained the subject of ongoing scholarly discussion to this day. Head was not only a fine writer but she also emerged into literary prominence at a time and place of great significance in the history of southern Africa. It will be argued that her fiction underscores 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. This paper recognizes that the layers of complexity in 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 her discourse on feminism. Although issues handled in Head's fiction can be seen as affirming feminist views like those of Colleen Dryden et al (2000: 117), in their argument 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, the contradictions about womanhood and Africanness detract from discursive coherence required at the abstract level of theory and ideas.

Critic 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). Ibrahim (1996) and Arlene Elder (2004) emphasize 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), 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 and agency. It is this view that the present essay seeks to debunk as simplistic from the point of view of Head’s brand of feminism. In doing so it is pertinent to first explore the tensions in the lives of Bessie Head’s female characters within the dialectic of opposing tendencies such as male domination and female subjugation, inferiority and superiority, oppression and liberation, power and powerlessness and public responsibility and private pain.

In the case of Margaret in *Maru*, Head illustrates that as an adult, she is confronted with gender discrimination in addition to the racial and ethnic marginality she has suffered since childhood. When the discovery of Margaret’s Basarwa origins culminate in the decision to get rid of her, Head points to the multitude of her problems. Head demonstrates that Margaret’s womanhood comes into play in the principal’s

decision to get rid of her: 'She can be shoved out...It's easy. She's a woman.' (41). Based on Batswana cultural perceptions of the female sex, Margaret's femaleness becomes a tool which the principal intends to use to his advantage. After foregrounding the socio-cultural conditions Margaret is confronted with in Dilepe, Head is particular about illustrating Margaret's strength and personality as a way of challenging Batswana gender and racial perceptions. For instance, Maru's royalty makes him a revered figure and beyond reproach in the community. Hence, when he demands that a bed lent to Margaret when she arrived at Leseding be returned, despite awareness of the harshness of his decision, Moleka, as well as the two men sent to collect the bed, silently carry out his command. The traditional expectation of silent submission from women (and the Basarwa) is however challenged when Margaret, who embodies both, goes to the offices where Moleka and Maru are and asks to keep the bed until she is able to purchase her own. Margaret's action here reveals exceptional agency, especially in the context of her inferior status as a woman and a Mosarwa. In spite of the agency she displays, there is an ambiguity in Margaret's character which serves to illustrate the complexity and dilemmas of black women's lives. Margaret's character illustrates black women's internalisation of social beliefs deep rooted in traditional custom and the difficulty of getting rid of such practices. When Maru decides to marry Margaret, he does not ask whether she wants to marry him. He simply takes her away to be his wife in the distant place he decides to settle in. While marrying Margaret is meant to demonstrate the equality of all humans that Bessie Head advocates, the idea that Margaret silently follows also reinforces the exclusion of the Masarwa and women's docility. Maru can have a life together with his chosen wife, only outside the realm of the community. Additionally, it also shows how a traditional imposition on women has been internalized and become cultural practice. Because she is woman, Margaret has no say in the marriage decision. She simply follows

where she is led. This ties in with Isaac Schapera's study of Batswana life which shows that traditional practice allocates women inferior status (Schapera 1955).

Dikeledi, the other woman in *Maru*, is the quintessence of modern black womanhood in Botswana. Highly liberated, Dikeledi is presented as a free spirited renegade in many ways. As daughter of the reigning chief, social expectations would allocate her the position of role model in the community; a repository of Batswana tradition and customs. Dikeledi, however, does not comply with such a position. She wears short tight skirts and smokes cigarettes. She is the first female member of the royal household to put a 'good education to useful purpose' through employment (25). Unlike other female members of the royal family, Dikeledi uses her education to gain freedom. She turns a personal interest in people into a career in teaching. And as part of the teaching team at Leseding, she displays independence and individuality of character. Against local belief and practice, she does not subscribe to the idea that Basarwa are less than human. A part of her inheritance as daughter of the reigning chief is two slaves. Yet, contrary to tradition, 'without fuss or bother, [Dikeledi] paid them a regular monthly wage' (25). Dikeledi's love and concern for other humans is also responsible for her affection for Margaret. When Margaret comes to Leseding, she quickly gains the friendship and respect of Dikeledi. Dikeledi's belief in Margaret's humanity is the reason for her angry outburst when the pupils in Margaret's class undermine her humanity through their chants. In a voice 'like murder, shrill and high like the shattering of thin glass against a wall' Dikeledi shouts: 'Stop it! I'll smash you all to pieces! She's your teacher. She is your teacher!' (146). Dikeledi's treatment and defence of the racially marginalized, an expression of her wrangle with oppressive traditionalism, is however problematized by what amounts to a traditional outlook towards men. Dikeledi has clearly internalised traditional notions of what it is to be a woman in her society. Like many other

women, Dikeledi feels a sense of inadequacy because she is not attached to a man. Thus in spite of her independent personality, Moleka's love is important to Dikeledi's sense of self worth. Unfortunately however, her obsessive affection for Moleka blinds her to his moral faults, she does not see through his deception. When he makes her pregnant, it is not out of affection but because he sees her as a sexual object, a tool for exacting revenge against her brother, Maru. Dikeledi's feelings for Moleka are regardless of his corrupt and irresponsible morality. Her individualism and independent personality is compromised through dependence on Moleka's affection for a sense of self worth.

Feminist critics choose to draw a parallel between the oppressive colonial regime with the structures of power implicit within patriarchal institutions to seek autonomy and empowerment for their female protagonists. However, Bessie Head's portrayal is much more multilayered, renegotiating as it does the political and gender implications of her social context with more urgent, personal preoccupations. Significantly, especially in Bessie Head's earlier work, these urgent personal preoccupations are resolved, for her heroines, by the creation of successful relationships with powerful male figures. Thus, as well as as illustrating the complexity of women's lives, the narrative of the marriage also demonstrates romanticism.

Head's socialisation, which I suggest is based, in part, on patriarchy, the organizing framework of most Southern African societies, and which she sometimes demonstrates through, for instance, a romanticising of the male figure, is examined in relation to her ambivalent stand on feminism (*A Woman Alone*: 95). For instance even though Margaret is an unaccepted member of society, her lifetime of racial persecution and deprivation comes to an end when the most highly placed male in the society chooses her for his wife and she gets to marry the most eligible bachelor in the community. Although one of the main issues Head addresses is men's oppression of women, her

portraits also depict strong, considerate and helpful men. Though not always realistic, the portraits reflect African and classic Western ideologies of ideal manhood. The characters exemplify a concept of manhood which foregrounds traditional perceptions of men as leaders and protectors. In addition, in spite of the complexity and significance of the issues raised, romantic love always plays an important role in Head's fiction. There is always romance in her stories and it is possible to ascribe this to Head's own deprived childhood and failed marriage. In *Thunder Behind Her Ears*, Gillian Stead Eilersen suggests that Head had always harbored a dream of finding the perfect life partner and living happily ever after. Such a dream is clearly expressed through the happy marriages at the end of *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*. Although Head is a romanticist, she is however also very perceptive to the realities in her society. Through the characters of Matenge in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Dan and Sello of the Brown Suit she foregrounds and addresses the oppressive, destructive and insensitive nature of many Africa men. In other words, Head does not evade the negative impact of patriarchy as her texts examine the physical and psychological effect of men's abuse of patriarchal power on women. This suggests that Head's men are polarized between good and evil. Head's paradoxical portraits of manhood, complicate in my opinion any efforts at seeking to fit Head into neat theoretical categories, especially in relation to feminism.

However, importantly, Head does not try to solve women's gender problems through male exclusion. Her texts depict men playing crucial roles in the women's lives. Such a portrayal demonstrates Head's belief in the place of men in women's lives which links her with African feminists such as Obioma Nnaemeka (1997, 1998), Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves (1986) and Filomina Steady (1994) who point out that the struggle for African feminists includes women, men and children. Joyce Ladner, an American feminist, articulates similar sentiments when

she writes: Black women do not perceive their enemy to be black men, rather the enemy is considered to be oppressive forces in the larger society which subjugate black men, women, and children (Ladner 1972: 277-8). Although Head's portrait of the relationship between mothers and their children, such as the one between Elizabeth and her son Shorty in *A Question of Power*, complicates traditional ideas about motherhood, she creates male figures who play momentous roles in the female characters' lives. Susan Gardner rightly identifies a consistent pattern in Head's fiction in which female characters confront their difficulties mostly with the help of 'god-like men (Gardner and Hill-Scott 1986). Eilersen (1995) makes a similar observation and suggests that Head's 'god-like' male figures are a result of the lack of a male parental figure as Head grew up. I suggest that Head uses these god-like male characters to challenge male insensitivity and cruelty to women. By creating male characters such as Eugene, Sello 'the monk' or Tom, Head suggests and demonstrates that men can be compassionate and sensitive to women's pain and situations and that they have a role to play in changing the social situation of women.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather* Makhaya is the medium of Head's feminist consciousness. His monologues illustrate his rejection of men's domination and exploitation of women. This rejection is most clear at the border where, in an instance that shows women at the service of patriarchy, an old woman orders her granddaughter to sell him sex. Makhaya's thoughts, we are told, go back to his sisters: He had sisters at home, one almost the same age as the child and some a few years older. But he was the eldest in the family and according to custom he had to be addressed as "Buti" which means "Elder brother", and treated with exaggerated respect. As soon as his father died he made many changes in the home, foremost of which was that his sisters should address him by his first name and associate with him as equals and friends. When his mother had protested he had merely said, "Why should men be brought up with a false sense of

superiority over women? People can respect me if they wish, but only if I earn it".(15-16) Though Makhaya rejects male supremacy this time, his later behaviour, for instance at the cattle-post when they go to find Paulina's son, as well as Paulina's attitude towards him, tend to affirm the same superiority he rejects at the border. Presented as someone who is aware of the sexual exploitation of women by men, Paulina is unwilling to get involved in a relationship where a man will once again exploit her. After all she already has two fatherless children. She sees the numerous uncommitted male-female relationships around her as 'purposeless' and 'aimless'. What Paulina desires is a stable male-female relationship expressed through marriage. Paulina's perception of marriage, which she clearly shares with Head, is in the patriarchal terms of her society, with men as protectors. Hence Paulina's attraction to Makhaya, amongst other things, is premised on the protection and care he will provide her and her two children. When at one point he enquires after her daughter, she is surprised and ponders deeply about his gesture<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps, she thought, this man still had tribal customs, which forced him to care about children. Paulina's sentiments and expectations express nostalgia for a lost Batswana past when men supposedly took their family responsibilities seriously. When Makhaya finally marries her, Paulina feels a sense of security and from then on looks to him for support and direction. The constant evocation of traditional practices when men 'protected their women' implicitly asserts male supremacy and endorses Batswana patriarchal structures that are simultaneously complicit in women's oppression.

*A Questions of Power* similarly portrays Sello in several roles as God/protector. Like Maru in *Maru* whose royal position as chief sets him apart in the society and ascribes to him the role of protector of his subjects, Sello is a paternal figure hierarchically removed from the community of characters in the text. Like Mam, Sello

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<sup>1</sup> Batswana men no longer cared. In fact, a love affair resulting in pregnancy was one sure way of driving a man away, and it was a country of fatherless children now. Every protection for women was breaking down and being replaced by nothing. (115)

possesses the power and capacity to conduct telepathic relations with his subjects and is also able to look into the souls of people. The most crucial statement of *A Question of Power* is actually attributed to Sello. Warning Elizabeth about Dan's false and unhealthy concept of love, Sello tells her that: 'Elizabeth love isn't like that. Love is two people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the soul of the other like a ghoul' (*A Question of Power*. 197). Like Paulina, Elizabeth's relationship with Sello is on patriarchal terms. She is dependent on him. We are told that: 'She seemed to have no face of her own. Her face was always turned towards Sello whom she adored' (*A Question of Power*. 25); Elizabeth's existence seemed to be only as a 'side attachment to Sello' (25); '[S]he...rapidly accepted Sello as a comfortable prop against which to lean' (25). Later, when she fails to heed his warning, '[S]he floundered badly in stormy and dangerous seas' (29). Eugene, the South African in charge of the development project and Tom are similarly portrayed. The American Peace-Coop volunteer Tom becomes a 'permanent fixture' in Elizabeth's life from their first meeting. The narrator makes clear that: 'She [Elizabeth] was to depend on Tom heavily for the return of her sanity' (*A Question of Power*. 24). Tom's constant presence and concern provide Elizabeth with the physical and emotional balance and stability she needs to help her regain her sanity.

With this stylistic backdrop in our minds, it is understandable why the gender sensitivity 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 idea of

class prejudice being absent in men and present in women in *Maru* and *A Question of Power* is equally a perpetuation of Head's ironically one-sided view of social justices and tenable grounds for casting male characters in a positive light. Head's tenderness for black male characters and masculinity remains stark. Such an exclusive ascription of benevolence to men already emerges in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, 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 evince "effeminate" or feminine qualities. For Head, to be like a woman is to be debilitated 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 comes to understand 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 unpins herself from 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 conviction 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 censuring of female characters despite such negating incidents can only be attributed to inert proclivities like Head's unbalanced regard for characters belonging to different

genders. Such psychological propensity to absolve men at the expense of women, highlighted in the above discussion of Head's published letters, and conspicuous in *A Question of Power*, can only be a symptom of Head's equivocal feminist position that prejudicially labels women as inherently weaker than men.

It is however not just to the men that Head attributes patriarchy. Her work illustrates the role women play in executing and enforcing patriarchal ideals. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) points out that, 'African complex kinship structures and the day-to-day negotiations of our lives through gender, sex and male female relational experiences make us realise that patriarchy not only includes women but gains some of its force and effectiveness from the active participation of women too' (16). Such representation calls to mind Gloria Chukukere's comments in which she perceptively points out that 'In their attempts to present a balanced viewpoint, female writers are equally objective in their analysis of female roles especially in exposing the inherent weakness of their victims which assist to perpetuate their subjugation within the patriarchal society' (Chukukere 1995: 10). This exposition of the women's weaknesses includes what Obioma Nnaemeka calls 'woman on woman violence', such as female circumcision, the ridicule of barren women, which many African feminists see as important to black women's lives (Nnaemeka 1995: 83).

In *A Question of Power* Head effectively dramatises women's participation in patriarchy through Medusa. Though Medusa, Sello, Sello of the brown suit and Dan, are creations of Elizabeth's mind, Medusa's character illustrates, nonetheless, how women can enforce male ideals and thereby help in their and other women's subjugation. I suggest this because the phantoms of Dan, Sello, and Sello of brown suit and Medusa are real to Elizabeth. She talks with them and feels the reality of their threats physically. Medusa and Dan are the ones who torture Elizabeth to madness. Presented as 'the direct and tangible

form of his [Sello's] own evils, his power lusts, his greeds, his self-importance' (*A Question of Power*. 40), Medusa illustrates how women internalise patriarchal ideals and implement them. Thus, Medusa's participation in Elizabeth's torture, symbolizes the ways through which structures of male dominance and female submission are 'reproduced by women' (Chukukere 1995:298). Dan and Sello try to kill Elizabeth's spirit through Medusa and the 'seventy-one nice-time girls'<sup>2</sup> (173) by undermining her womanhood. Regardless of being psychological, Elizabeth's story is an illustration of how sexuality is used as a tool for patriarchal oppression. I suggest that though Dan and Medusa deem Elizabeth's position inferior, in reality, she is comparable with the seventy-two women Dan flaunts before her. Like Elizabeth, these women are similarly sexually marginalized. Their value is as objects for Dan's sexual satisfaction. Names such as Squelch-Squelch, The Womb, Miss Sewing Machine, Miss Wiggly-Bottom, Pelican Beak, and Body Beautiful demonstrate the women's sexual objectification and point to their sexual function as 'nice-time girls' (128). Head's focus on the exploration of sexuality and how it is used to oppress women is important especially in relation to its traditional African view. In many Southern African societies, sexual lessons are consequently given to women at the three most vital stages of initiation; puberty, marriage and the birth of first child (Kuthemba-Mwale 1977). Women play crucial roles in these lessons as instructresses. For instance, in societies such as the Lomwe and Yao of Southern Malawi, the lessons might include demonstrations<sup>3</sup>. That the basic aim of these lessons is male satisfaction demonstrates women's participation in patriarchal agenda. Similarly, in addition to throwing her blinding thunderbolts, Medusa offers Elizabeth 'top secret' information through demonstration. Sprawling her long black legs in the air, she exhibits herself and with a mocking smile challenges her: 'You haven't got anything *near*

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<sup>2</sup> Dan continuously flaunts his sexual escapades with his numerous women before Elizabeth. He sometimes performs sex with the women on Elizabeth's bed. He boasts of his and his women's sexual energy.

<sup>3</sup> The young women are shown how to prepare for and please the man during intercourse.

that, have you?' (*A Question of Power*: 44). Medusa's cruel taunt demonstrates how sexuality can be used by women to oppress other women.

Furthermore, in another attempt to offer a corrective to the sexist patriarchy that is depicted in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head again appears to be ambiguous on who should be apportioned blame for women's plight. A case in point 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 astonished reaction 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 Botswana men for sexist behaviour, here Head holds the female characters responsible. 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 commodities of exchange, is contrary to what conventional feminists and Africanists would advocate. This kind of ambivalent feminist discourse pervades Head's novels.

As is the case in most literature by black women from Africa and the Caribbean, women and women's issues are fundamental to Head's narratives. Like Brodber, Senior and Ama Ata Aidoo, Head portrays several strong, resilient and resourceful, but also mentally fragile women in her fiction. Through her female characters, Head explores women's socio-cultural conditions, roles and disadvantages and more significantly, she celebrates their achievements. The focus on women challenges

their oppression but also reinforces Head's vision of an ideal environment in which all humans, regardless of gender, race and class, will live in harmony. In the world she envisions, love and reverence for other humans is fundamental. Despite this political concern, it is documented that Head was always reluctant to accept the title of feminist: 'I am not a feminist...in the sense that I do not view women in isolation from men' (Eilersen 1995: 238, quoted from Khama Memorial Museum (KMM) 44, Bessie Head Papers (BHP) 26.01.1981 and KMM 72, BHP 19.09.1982, Serowe, Botswana). Commenting on the relationship between feminism and writing in Southern Africa, Head says: 'Writing is not a male/female occupation. My femaleness was never a problem to me, not now, not in our age... I do not have to be a feminist. The world of the intellect is impersonal, sexless' (*A Woman Alone*, 95). I suggest that Head's reluctance to identify herself as a feminist is linked to two factors. Firstly, it is clear that Head's refusal is linked to her philosophy of life, which is concerned with all humans regardless of race, gender and class. This is an ideal she holds on to throughout her fiction. Secondly it is also possible to approach Head's literary output as one animated by her African feminist views. As Ibrahim (1996: 9) observes, "feminisms informed by the colonial experience suggest a very fundamental departure from Western feminisms<sup>4</sup>" and are "defined by a need to resist but not reject the world we are given, phallocratic though it is." A study of Head's novels that includes

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<sup>4</sup> The current tenuous description of this has led to some people of colour such as Alice Walker trying to dissociate themselves with the term. Reasons for shying away from being referred to as feminists include the association of feminism with whites and hence a sense of deviation (Mama and Salo). To adopt the term feminist would have suggested identification with white women who were seen as the 'originators' of feminism an aping of western women's ideology that is 'destroying' traditional African culture. From such a perspective, feminism is regarded as an undermining of the liberation efforts of the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements by implication, which would suggest participation in the racial atrocities of the apartheid regime. I would like to propose that in an environment of racial exclusion such as the one Bessie Head belonged to in South Africa Head's reluctance to label herself feminist is understandable, especially considering the effect of apartheid on black people. On the other hand African writers such as Amina Mama who feel comfortable with the term 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).

such a perspective should contribute not only to a better understanding of her work, but also a revelation of a more distinct concept of her feminism<sup>5</sup>.

Moreover, in addition to the above, this paper adopts the view that, Head's Afrocentrism too makes her engage in eccentric ways with the issue of feminism. While at the one level reference to her intent to "victimize" the male character in her fiction alludes 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." This perhaps explains why she remains approving of attributes in which men surpass women, even while denouncing abusive individual males such as Moleka in *Maru* (1971). In other words, Head is not dismissive about Africanness as a distinctive consciousness and lifestyle, and yet she does not embrace it uncritically. For instance, the seemingly essentialist censuring of what Head casts as an intrinsically 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 supreme dimensions of indicting the African cultures against which she chafes. It is also imperative to note, although Head's writing doubly as an African and a woman necessitates the hypothesis that she writes both as an African and a feminist, some scholars find it possible to foreground her refracted position on Africanness. Bissell (1996) reminds us, the writings of Head include many aspects of her personal experiences as a racially mixed person, growing up without a family in South Africa and evidences her conception of Africanness

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<sup>5</sup> Different social contexts give different connotations to the term feminism, to the extent of feminists being labeled lesbians and man-haters (Dryden et al 2002: 114). However, writers such as Spivak (1997) have also clarified that feminism should not be equated with man-hating.

to be of a localized nature which continues to distinguish her as a coloured African. One aspect of Head's traumatised memory is her deep-seated feeling of not being accepted by the Batswana community because, as she claims 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 essentially non-African in many respects. Such a preoccupation with the difference between the Batswana and herself is likely to lead at least to inferiority or a superiority complex, which may manifest itself in the form of vengeful aloofness". Consideration of such a characterization, Head is not merely an outsider to the Batswana ways, but consistently continues to consolidate her outsider position to black Africanness, displaying a supremacist 'coloured' gaze in relating to South African blacks. It may be reasonably argued thus, that the biographical aspect of Head's writing, combined with her failure to identify with and regard herself as equal to black Africans bears testimony to the fact that Head's view of Africanness is controversial.

Lastly, aside from the need to interpret Head's fiction in relation to her Africanness, it is crucial, as L.G Ngcobo (1992: 343) observes, to understand Head's psyche because it informs the distinctive feminism in her writings. Head's whole frame of reference, her development and her psyche are centered around the circumstances of her birth as she believed them to be – as evidenced in *A Question of Power* (1974). Bessie Head's first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, originally published in 1969, too provides fertile material in which the complex intersection of her autobiographical approach with her perspectives on feminism can be examined. This autobiographical novel narrates circumstances of the work's protagonist, Elizabeth, modeled on the author's real life. In her own life Head was a troubled woman persecuted by South African and Botswana whites for being black, and discriminated against by blacks for being coloured. She was

born out of an illicit love affair between a black man and a white woman. 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 only natural then for someone like Head, whose circumstances of birth resulted in acute social abuse like this, the oppression and discrimination of women will be felt poignantly and fictionalized with commensurate vigour and vividness. Head’s novels portray 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. Thus, as evinced in her narratives, the functions of Head’s psychological processes appear to not only be her vacillating feelings towards Africans (attitudes that one might opine give rise to questions about her sense of belonging) but also a unique identity with her refracted position on feminism.

Conclusively, it is needless to iterate that Head’s novels explore women’s challenges, illustrating their strengths as well as the dilemmas that characterize their daily existence. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head looks at rural semi-literate women through Paulina Sebeso, Maria and Mma Millipede. Dikeledi and Margaret in *Maru* represent educated modern black women. In *A Question of Power*, Head deals with these groups through Kenosi and Elizabeth respectively. Through Margaret Cadmore and Elizabeth, Head also explores the link between ethnicity/race and womanhood. Head challenges the male-oriented social discourse that relegates black women to peripherality but despite the universality of the concerns her texts explore, a remarkable aspect of these women is that each character is an individual in her own right. Head shows them engaged in industry side-by-side with men to engender a new community of humanity. Regardless of the

confines of their rural setting, the women demonstrate politicization and resilience, thereby revolting against subjugating traditions in their communal realms. However, as well as showing women's dynamism and industry, Head's narrative highlights issues of ambivalence in her position on feminism which this paper attempts to trace. Such evidence of disorientation in Head's vacillating feminist discourse, 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. Arguably then, as this paper examines, Head's discourse on feminism is inflected by her stand on womanism, her decidedly paternalistic Afrocentric approach and her psychological processes which guide her frame of reference with regard to her autobiographical writing.

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