CHAPTER FOUR

*In search of identity: Women in the writings of Bessie Head.*
SOUTH AFRICAN AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN LITERATURE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Earlier, we attempted to trace a brief account of the prevailing socio-economic-political situation in South Africa and Southern Africa, especially during the years of apartheid. The various legislations enacted by the white Government succeeded in crippling the lives of the natives in all respects, leaving them with no freedom at all. In the previous chapter we also discussed the response and resistance efforts of the blacks to such restrictions against the imperialist forces. A considerable part of the white colonisers' construct of pre-colonial Africa rested on the assumption that these countries had no civilisation, no culture, till the time that they were emancipated by colonisation. However, this was not true, as was seen in the previous chapter. In literature too, South Africa had a rich tradition of oral and folk literature - praise poems, riddles, proverbs etc. Literature therefore followed a tradition of being handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Stories were told in a conversational style, with repetition as a major mode of recollection. They were allowed to unfold by themselves, through the voice of the storyteller, and as a story was transmitted from one audience to another, it acquired new meanings and new freshness through individual interpretations and anecdotes. Oral story telling, with its capacity of ending at the most climactic moments also had the ability to sustain audience interest and retain their emotional involvement, although it did not necessarily "lead to a lulling of the...critical consciousness."1 One thing however cannot be denied. Colonialism, through missionary activity, succeeded in providing a major impetus to the growth of literacy, and consequently the increase in literary activity, particularly since the beginning of the twentieth century. The increased missionary activity therefore brought the written word to Africa, and also to South Africa. The first man ever to write a book in Xhosa was John Bennie, a Glasgow missionary and one of the three founders of Lovedale press. However, even before him, the story of Ntsikana, a pagan composer and singer, profoundly influenced by Christianity had been written down by his disciples, signalling the arrival of the 'story form' in Xhosa. It was such theological themes that dominated Xhosa literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These early Xhosa writers were therefore

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1 Janet Hodgson. 'The Image of Ntsikana.' in White and Couzens eds. South African literature and Culture. p. 21

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largely responsible for the blossoming of the written word in Xhosa. Even the Bible and the first part of The Pilgrim's Progress were entirely translated into the language by 1864, highlighting the effect of Christian missionary activity. The primary motive of missionaries was to convert the locals to Christianity, and this was a major problem in Africa and South Africa in the colonial period, which sought to neutralise the effects of the resistance movement. Ntsikana’s influence on Xhosa literature was manifold. Not only did his poetry act as a transitional bridge between the old and the new forms of Xhosa poetry, by using the traditional oral literary forms and images to interpret the present and integrating the new values and symbols with the old, his disciples also became the first literate Xhosa people, in a previously non-literate society, thus occupying a historically central position as “the first South Africans ever to express their thoughts in writing.”2 His major work, The Great Hymn is also often associated with the development of Xhosa nationalism – a kind of 'National Anthem' for special occasions. Furthermore, as the first literary composition given to individual formulations, it constitutes a bridge between the traditional and the new, and is thus of great historical importance.

Olive Schreiner, Stephen Black and Sol.T. Plaatje occupy central positions in the genesis and development of English writings from South Africa. Each of these writers, in their own way, has been the harbinger of new literary traditions. However, before these native writers began writing, other fictional works had emerged from South Africa. The first fictional works in the region were produced by immigrants who often felt alienated from the South African landscape. At the same time they were fascinated by its harsh beauty. These colonial writers were unsettled and intrigued by what they perceived to be the exotic elements of indigenous cultures. Their attitude to indigenous South Africans was, at best, ambivalent, if not outright hostile. This was especially true of the writers of adventure stories, in which colonial heroes were romanticised and the role of black South Africans consequently reduced to that of enemy or servant. One such writer was J. Rider Haggard, whose mythical and adventure stories, such as King Solomon's Mines (1886) Allan Quartermain and She (both 1887), had the hunter Allan Quartermain, Haggard's ideal of the colonial gentleman, as the central character. The novels follow his various adventures in the "darkest Africa" of the European imagination, fixated on mysterious white queens and

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2 A.C. Jordan. Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of literary forms in Xhosa. p.43
hidden treasures in ancient cities (built, of course, by non-black people). The viewpoint is of the heroic Englishman, and indigenous people are portrayed either as dangerous savages or as the faithful servant, (Quartermain’s Zulu retainer eventually gives his life for his master). The age-old construct of white master and black slave is followed faithfully, and it was images such as these that fortified the notions of hegemony and white superiority amongst the white colonisers. Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* is not only credited as being the first creative literary work in English by a South African; it also stands at a crucial point in the context of women’s writing and feminist criticism. Schreiner is today synonymous as an embattled, visionary feminist. Born in 1855, of a German father and an English mother, both missionaries, she spent her early childhood in the Cape colony of South Africa. She reacted against her parents’ intense religious practices, all the more provoked by the intense religious debates within which she had begun to get involved from her teenage years. She was a rebel in the true sense; continuously seeking an escape from the social prisons around her. This is also reflected in her various female protagonists like Undine (*Undine*, published posthumously in 1929) and Lyndall and Waldo (*The Story of an African Farm*, 1883). Schreiner aimed to work out a just and rational basis for human existence, and was strongly critical of the conventional Victorian forms of arranged marriage, which she saw simply as “the exchange of sexual services for economic support” as well as customs that forbade a woman from having any formal education. Instead, they were sent to “finishing schools” where in the words of Lyndall, they “finish everything but imbecility and weakness, and that they cultivate.” Lyndall is perhaps the most emblematic of Schreiner’s conceptions of womanhood. Here is a woman possessing indomitable energy and courage, unwilling to conform to stereotypes, a woman who has the courage to conceive a child outside wedlock. In a manner, *The Story of an African Farm*, for the first time, presented a picture of Africa that was different from those presented till date. It initiated a white South African literature in English, and at the same time, provided South Africans with the belief that there was something to cherish in their physical environment. Yet, somewhere down the line, Schreiner’s objectives were defeated by herself. *The Story of an African Farm* does not have a single major black character;

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3 C Brian Cox. *African Writers.* p.313
they remain on the periphery, just as they did in the society. Also, Schreiner did not publish the novel in her real name, preferring to use a male pseudonym instead – Ralph Iron, and this in a period when the novel had peaked as a genre and a number of women writers in the Victorian period had attained fame even while writing in their own names. This leads one to think that perhaps for Schreiner, it was not so easy after all, to flow against the tide and assert her individualism in such a strictly codified society. She was, in fact slightly hesitant about the reception of the book. As she wrote in the Preface to a later edition:

Dealing with a subject that is far removed from the round of English daily life, it of necessity lacks the charm that hangs about the ideal representation of familiar things, and its reception has therefore been the more kindly.

Nevertheless, she remains an iconic figure in the historiography of South African literature. Following publication of The Story of an African Farm, Schreiner was touted as “the only woman of genius South Africa has ever produced.” Her later works included two collections of short stories, Dreams (1891) and Dream Life and Real Life (1893) but two later novels, From Man to Man and Undine, were not published until after her death. Women and Labour was published in 1911. Although Schreiner was disappointed with the book, it was immediately acclaimed as an important statement on feminism and had a major influence on a large number of young women. A strong supporter of universal suffrage, Schreiner argued that the vote was “a weapon, by which the weak may be able to defend themselves against the strong, the poor against the weak.”

The second figure who made a tremendous impact on succeeding generations of African writers was Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, better known as Sol.T. Plaatje. Plaatje was one of South Africa’s most significant political figures and a crusader for his local Tswana and other native languages. He was at the forefront of public affairs of the African people for the greater part of his adult life as politician, writer and journalist, devoting his many talents to one overriding cause: the struggle of African

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/TL/schreiner.html
people against injustice and dispossession during the second half of the nineteenth and
the early part of the twentieth century. He belonged to a small group of mission-
educated African intelligentsia that in 1912 founded the South African Native
National Congress, which later became the African National Congress. In theme and
content, as well as the inherent notion of protest that one sees in his works, Plaatje
precedes many of the African writers of the 1950’s and 1960’s. His best-known works
are of course, *Mhudi: an Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago* and
*Native Life in South Africa*. *Mhudi* recounts events of a past century, of the war
between the Matabele and the Barolong in the times of Mzilikazi. It was the first
novel in English to be written by a black South African and thus occupies an
important space in the socio-historical agenda. The choice of language and an
historical setting indicates a political agenda in writing the book: to refute the
common fallacy of black people being “uncivilised” and at the same time presents a
serious indictment of segregation in general and land distribution in particular. Plaatje
uses English as the mode of communication, but often also uses typically African
proverbs and imagery. One such proverb states:

> A man who joins in a discussion with the facts of one side only, will often
> find himself in the wrong. In every grade of life, there are two sides to every
> matter.\(^8\)

This is also an effective refutation of South African documented history till
this time, which had indeed been a one-sided account, written from the perspective of
the whites by the whites. Plaatje thus became one of the first writers to present the
‘Other’ point of view. Indeed, blacks dominate the novel, unlike in Schreiner, the
whites are here on the margins, appearing for the first time only one-third into the
book, and in a negative light – as the harbingers of tension and conflict in the midst of
a relatively peace loving tribe. A clear contrast is presented between the war-like
Matebele (whites) and the peaceful Barolongs (blacks). Further, throughout the novel.
Plaatje aims at a successful defence of the traditional African customs, under threat
from the forces of Christianity in the changing times. This is significant, considering
the fact that Plaatje himself was a devout Christian, who believed that there were
some positive aspects to colonisation.

Native Life in South Africa, a response to the Native Lands Act of 1913, is one of South Africa's greatest political books and represents the political views of a past generation of African political activists. The work is a scathing indictment of the Act, the background to which has already been discussed in the previous chapter. It was one of the most important precursors to apartheid, creating overnight, a floating landless proletariat who could be oppressed and manipulated at will. However, the tract is not just useful for its critique of the act. Extremely well researched, it also provides a full portrait of the times as well as a historiographic account of the past five centuries. It also explores the political and historical contexts leading up to the Act and documents the steps taken by the colonisers to exclude blacks from the political and social sphere of the country. The text remains epoch-making, and it would not be wrong to say that it was the first documented protest against the apartheid regime.

Plaatje was also the first known black person to keep a diary during a protracted war. While working as a court interpreter in the office of the Civil Commissioner and Magistrate during the siege of Mafikeng, he wrote his Boer War Diary, only discovered many years after his death. His diary of the events is a valuable historical document, unique in its presentation of an African perspective. He was also an accomplished linguist, fluent in at least seven languages, but apart from writing in English he was preoccupied with the preservation of the Setswana language. He compiled the first Setswana phonetic reader titled A Sechuana Reader, a bilingual collection of Tswana folklore in collaboration with a well-known linguist, Daniel Jones, during his first trip to England. Also, his preoccupation with the writings of Shakespeare led to the translation of several of his plays into Setswana, exposing the local tribes to Shakespeare. However, only Diphosho-Phosho (Comedy of Errors) and Dikhontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara (Julius Caesar) have survived.

Overall, the works of Schreiner and Plaatje, among others, point towards a new direction in South African literature – strong portrayals of female characters, importance of black protagonists and an overwhelming sense of disapproval at the prevailing order of things. Their pioneering work was carried forward in the succeeding decades, by a later generation of black authors, living under the increasingly suffocating and crippling effects of apartheid society. And as the ANC
took black consciousness and protests to the streets, the writers began exercising their pen, to highlight the cruel practices of apartheid to a worldwide audience.

LITERATURE IN APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

It is the artists' responsibility to reshape a distorted history and portray a misjudged society honestly, without idealising it.9

Most South African writers, writing during the apartheid period attempted to do full justice to these words. If anything, the black South African writer has always felt an added sense of commitment and responsibility towards society, due to the repressive measures of apartheid. Truly, it is impossible to speak of any one aspect of South African life over the last fifty years, without apartheid policies playing a major role in the discourse. The notion of protest against the oppressive regime has perhaps been most potently expressed in South African literature. Writers here have literally wielded their pens as soldiers wield swords. In many cases, they have held a pen in one hand and a sword in the other. Their writings scream out their dissatisfaction at the prevailing situation in their country. Perhaps more than any other country of the world, one notices in South Africa, a direct link between politics and literature and between literature and society. Ngugi wa Thiongo's words could not be truer in this context:

Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics.10

South African writers have actively considered it their task and a mark of their commitment to society to protest against the various and conflictual differences imposed by society – against the various social absurdities and the brazenly open oppression that continued unabated in spite of overwhelming criticism from the whole world. The protest is certainly the strongest from the pens and voices of the black writers, both male and female, but also somewhat surprisingly, as in the case of Nadine Gordimer, from the pen of the white woman, who is placed at a curiously ambivalent position in South African hierarchy. As a white, she is expectedly

17 10 Ngugi wa Thiongo. Writers in Politics.
‘superior’ to the blacks, and at the same time, as a gendered woman, her position is seen as inferior to males, both black and white. Later in the chapter, in the character of Dan in *A Question of Power*, one sees a direct manifestation of this kind of power equation. ‘Protest’ writing as a genre generated from the disillusionment that followed in South Africa following the banning of various political institutions such as the ANC, in the aftermath of the Sharpville massacre. Literature during the period saw a direct shift away from the simple everyday stories of the past and the oral traditions towards a more realistic portrayal of the ugliness of South African society in all forms – the hypocrisy of the English ‘liberals’, the disillusionment of educated Africans and the extreme poverty that characterised South African life. The works of Dennis Brutus, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Can Themba, Bessie Head and Nadine Gordimer, among many others deal with various aspects of this theme, and fortify the links between politics and literature in South Africa. As Brutus puts it:

...to write once you are banned from writing – and it doesn't matter whether you write well or badly – constitutes a form of protest against apartheid in South Africa.\(^\text{11}\)

The audience for this literature was many. At one level, it was the white coloniser, with the supposition that “if the oppressor sees himself as evil, he will be revolted...and will try to change.”\(^\text{12}\) The target here is thus obviously the white, English-speaking individual, however, it must also be remembered that not too many of them were keen were reading the literature and reacted by banning them. Schooled under the Eurocentric tradition that had always inscribed their superiority, it was an insult for them to even comprehend the fact that they were being taught by the blacks. At another level of course, such literature can be read as a clarion call to the educated black, inspiring him/her to come out of their cocoon and participate fully in the ongoing struggle. Writers like Chinua Achebe have always maintained that in order to be able to truly fight and come out victorious against the white man, one needs to adopt their language – their powers of articulation, of language usage and the power of that language to control and subjugate. On the other hand, writers like Ngugi have reverted to writing in their native Gikuyu language, holding the view that to write in

\(^{11}\) Dennis Brutus. ‘Protest against Apartheid’ in Pieterse and Munro eds. *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*. p.94

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
the language of the coloniser is to ultimately participate in the system of colonisation. An excellent documentation of Achebe's view is seen in Things Fall Apart, in the tortoise allegory. The tortoise is the coloniser, who has all throughout used his language skills to subjugate the other birds, who can be seen as the colonised. At the end, however, one of the birds, the parrot alters a message to be given to the tortoise by his wife. As a result, he falls on a bed of machetes, spears and guns, his shell is broken and needs to be glued back on. He has effectively been taught a lesson, and the birds have gained a victory by virtue of their use of the same language skills that had till date only been used to subjugate them. As Barbara Harlow therefore states:

...the language skills of rhetoric along with armed struggle are essential to an oppressed people's resistance to domination and oppression, and to an organised liberation movement.13

South African authors too have adopted this same method. Along with the power wielded through their writings, they have also taken to the streets, organising and participating in marches and agitations and even going to prison, or worse, getting exiled from the country. Inspired by the likes of Mandela, they have themselves become inspirations for others. The writer has thus merged with the common man; he no longer remains a simple, objective spectator to happenings around him. The unfortunate reality of South African society however has been such that for one writer who has succeeded in defying the odds of society, many others have given up writing altogether, or have gone into self-exile, or even moved to other countries, from where they could make their voices heard more freely, especially to international audiences. The number of famous names who have gone into exile in South Africa are staggering – Dennis Brutus, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Lewis Nkosi, Bessie Head etc. For many, like Brutus and Head, their ambivalent identity as ‘coloureds’ within South Africa provided them with an added desire to carve out a separate identity for themselves, as they were alienated and marginalised even within traditional South African society. Within South Africa, the situation of the black writer was further handicapped by legal procedures. Perceiving a threat that literature could pose to their policies, the Government initiated a process of legal censorship through laws such as the Publications Act of 1963, which crippled the writer even before s/he got started.

Ezkiel Mphahlele believed, like many others that creative writing could not reach its desired heights with such censorship, stating that:

...as long as the white man’s policies continue to impose on us a ghetto existence, so long shall the culture and therefore literature of South Africa continue to shrivel up, to shrink lower and lower, and for so long shall we in our writing continue to reflect only a minute portion of life.¹⁴

Censorship has thus been one of the most vicious and crippling factors that has stifled the voices and limited the flow of creative writing in apartheid-ridden South Africa. Books of exiled authors were banned for no reason – this was proved by the fact that such books were automatically unbanned if the author decided to return to the country, or if s/he passed away! While black authors naturally faced the brunt of these attacks, the white were not spared either. For instance, Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter* and *The Late Bourgeois World* and Andre Brink’s *A Dry White Season* were banned, for making anti-white statements. However, the banning of the white authors forced the Censorship directorate to review the laws of censorship, which led to the formulation of new rules. Undesirability now had to be much more clearly defined, it was not possible to simply ban books anymore, merely on the basis of certain isolated passages or the whims of individuals.

However, South African creative writers have not been daunted by the hegemonic powers of society. Their voice has refused to be subdued. They have continued to write and express themselves – whether in exile, in jail, from the slums and even the rich white suburbs. From Peter Abraham’s *Mine Boy* dealing with black men confronted with the dual experiences of industrialisation and racial discrimination to *A Wreath for Udomo*, about the rise of a young Negro student to power to Ezekiel Mphahlele’s moving autobiographical account of his upbringing in the Pretoria slums in *Down Second Avenue*, all deal with the various experiences of black labourers and the repression of their basic right to freedom, and the evident links between politics and literature. In fact, the protest against apartheid has been such a dominant theme in South African literature of the period that it has overridden all other thematic concerns. All writers deal in some way or the other with the

oppressive regime, and the struggle of the protagonists against this system and their desire for freedom, independence and their own identity.

In the writings of women writers in South Africa, this quest for identity becomes even more paramount. Apart from Nadine Gordimer, a number of other women writers also made their mark during this period – Sheila Roberts, Bessie Head, and Miriam Tlali, the first black South African woman novelist to be published, among others. Women writers in South Africa have had to write against the backdrop of the two most crucial and unchangeable aspect of their lives – being born a South African and a woman. In addition, they have also been writing amidst the intensely political situation in South Africa, but unfortunately, their writings have not received the same attention as that of the male writers. The definition of gender has clearly overlapped here with the conceptualising of other social hierarchies. For instance, black women constitute important and crucial subject matters for the white feminists. Over the last three decades, plenty has been written on the lack of independence of the black woman, her gendered and racialised identity and her body, which is a slave to traditional customs and rituals. Black women continue to be presented in terms of binary and hierarchical oppositions, where opposites such as activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, head/emotions, intelligible/sensitive, logos/pathos etc. are all said to correspond to the most primary opposition of man/woman, and are heavily integrated into the patriarchal value system. The ‘feminine’ side is always the negative, powerless entity in the hierarchy of oppositions, and as already mentioned, in the context of South African society, the white woman takes on a unique position, occupying, as she does, the middle rung in this hierarchy. Desiree Lewis writes:

... ‘woman’ in ‘white woman’ becomes normative and ‘woman’ in ‘black woman’ deviant,...in ‘middle class’ becomes ‘standard’...while ‘working class’ has to qualify ‘woman’. White middle class woman provides the basis for defining gender identity, establishing feminist goals... 15(my emphasis)

As discussed in the introductory chapter, most feminist criticism and theory have taken the white middle class woman as the centre point of definition of the woman and the woman’s situation. It is this identity that is always constructed as the ‘Self’ with all other definitions of woman across the globe being constructed as the

15 Desiree Lewis. ‘The politics of feminism in South Africa’ Staffrider. Vol X. No. 3 p.16
‘Other’. Such compartmentalisations only succeed in creating further opportunities for exploitation in society, and reveal the biases of ‘double oppression’ (black women) and ‘triple oppression’ (black working class women). It is only in recent times, especially in the post-apartheid period that a number of hidden women’s voices have emerged on the South African literary spectrum. Cherry Clayton comments:

...it is only recently that a sufficient spectrum of writing by white and black women has emerged that can flesh out the complex positions and lived experience of all women in South Africa. This spectrum has been apparent in the appearance of anthologies of women’s writing, journals and perhaps most significantly, the publication of a whole new generation of women's voices forged in the recent struggles around gender and race. These South African women have argued that gender and racial oppression go together and should be contested simultaneously. Recent writings testify to many subtle forms of silencing, an internalising of male norms, a depiction of conventional colonial marriage as a prison, as well as testimony to the brutal control of black women by traditional African patriarchy and arranged marriages...16

With such rigid biases and opinions in force in society, it is perhaps not surprising that very few black women writers of note have emerged in South Africa. The credit for becoming the first black woman to be published in South Africa goes to Miriam Tlali and her novel Muriel at Metropolitan. Largely autobiographical, Tlali’s experiences as a bookkeeper in Johannesburg foreground many of the events of the narrative. However, even though first published in 1969, the novel became more widely available to South African readers in a highly censored format, only in 1975. The same was the case with her second novel Amadello. The main feature of Tlali’s work deals with the black South African woman confronting different situations in her everyday life, and the realisation that “the real problem is not so much a question of sexism as it is the issue of power.”17 It is the assuming of power that lies at the root of patriarchy and seeks to stifle the voice of the woman. In the writings of Ellen Kuzwayo, one notices an attempt to educate the audience, and incite them to listen and then fight for their rights. Fondly known as the ‘mother of Soweto’, over the years, Kuzwayo attempted to educate the women of Johannesburg and teach them to

fight and resist racial discrimination and their second-class status. Her autobiography *Call Me Woman* and her collection of short stories *Sit Down and Listen* are directed towards a western audience, teaching them about the various experiences that inform the politics of black South African identities and the woman’s identity in particular. Writing both as a woman and a ‘womanist’, her writings define the personal in relation to the communal, showing women constantly having to negotiate between self and community and struggling for a sense of autonomy within the community. As she states:

> My motivation for writing (it) was born out of the negative image about black African women in South Africa... promoted by... in particular the women in the white community who employ (them) as domestic workers.  

*Call Me Woman* has often been categorised as autoethnography, as more than just individual experiences, it provides a portrayal of the contribution of South African woman towards the advancement of their society. Till her recent death (19th April, 2006), Kuzwayo had been the longest serving South African parliamentarian and an active member of the ANC from her childhood days. Having been president of the ANC Youth League in the 1960s, she was detained for five months for her work with the Soweto Committee of Ten in 1976, shortly after the bloody events of June 16. Her time in prison only heightened her resolve to tell the story of the South African woman, and in *Sit Down and Listen* Kuzwayo therefore goes back to children, whom she perceives to be the most cut-off from their roots and past history. The collection, which is deliberately pedagogical and didactic, reveals the encounter between past and present, tradition and change, official and alternative histories.

As already mentioned, Nadine Gordimer, even today, is arguably South Africa’s best-known literary name, and as a white who has unequivocally spoken out against the apartheid regime, she remains one of the strongest critics of the system. As a minority within a minority – a white woman who has openly opposed the prevailing ethos of the politically and economically powerful white South African minority – she has felt the limitations that sought to be poised on artistic creativity in such a situation. As she writes:

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Living in a society that has been as deeply and calculatedly compartmentalised as South Africa's has been under the colour bar, the writer's potential has insurmountable limitations.¹⁹ (my emphasis)

These limitations are clearly visible in Gordimer, most particularly in the reactions that her writings have provoked among her own community. Her political commitment has been her greatest strength and this is most vividly reflected in her depiction of interracial relationships. It has already been stated that in apartheid South Africa, legislation was enacted to ensure that blacks and whites could not interact or have sexual relations. Choice of partner was thus conditioned and controlled by law. A number of novels by Gordimer such as *Occasion for Loving* (1963), *A Sport of Nature* (1987) and *My Son's Story* (1990) written at various phases of the apartheid era deal with this theme, in particular the rarer forms of sexual relations between a white woman and a black man – the kind of relation of which Bessie Head was a product. In Gordimer's works, the lovers are courageous against the oppressive codes of society, challenging it at every step. There is also an increasing awareness and understanding of the black woman, who progresses from the silent onlooker in *Occasion for Loving* and *A Sport of Nature* to a militant independent woman, whose voice begins to emerge from the debris of racism, sexism and patriarchy in *My Son's Story*, where Aila

...emanates a stilling atmosphere as she makes her diminished domesticity into the perfect cover for gun-running: suddenly the home turns into another world...²⁰

It is also significant to note the difference in attitude of the white woman towards the black man and the black woman. In her relationship with the black man, the white woman feels a sense of power that comes from the position that she enjoys in society that gives her unabated control over the black, male or female. In such a relationship where she is in control over the male, the white woman feels a strange sense of empowerment. However, Gordimer's portrayal of black female characters has never been more than superficial, except in her more recent works such as *My Son's Story* or *None to Accompany Me*. In her earlier works, black women are often

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²⁰ Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture.* p.10
left out of her vision of social reality. She has been criticised for rendering them silent and invisible in revitalising and liberating white women through their attachments to African men as if to suggest that the issues of liberation may only be explored between white women and black men, and as if to endorse the assumption that matters of liberation within the non-white community are entirely masculine issues. Gordimer sees the emancipation of black women as secondary to national liberation within which black women's struggles are subsumed. She says:

As far as black women are concerned, their concern is the oppression under which all blacks live. The feminist battle must come afterwards....I feel that if the real battle for human rights is won, the kingdom of...feminine liberation follows. 21

It is only in her writings in the post-apartheid period, for instance, *None to Accompany Me* that Gordimer begins to deal with the black women in any kind of detail. The novel presents a definite shift of perspective in the way black female characters are represented. Here there is more concern than ever with the empowerment of black women in politics. The novel explores both black and white women's empowerment within South Africa's national transformation during the period of dramatic change in political power from white dominance to the first democratically elected government. In Gordimer's previous novels, the whole idea of liberation and the possibilities of liberation have been conceived of as a masculine form, and liberation and nationhood have been contextualised within the male domain. It is no longer so in this case. It presents a perspective of black women's political roles and struggles within the actual progression of an emergent nation with both positive and negative implications. The possibilities, fulfillments and dangers of Sibongile's new power significantly affect and re-organise her relationship with her husband, Didymus, an old fighter in the liberation movement. Sibongile and her daughter, Mpho, are far more capable than male characters of creating a new home and adjusting themselves to home politics. Sibongile plays a more overtly political role as a deputy director of the Movement's regional redeployment programme for returnees and is later elected as a member of the central executive of the post-apartheid movement. The conventional subordinate position of black women is here

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subverted in the relationship of the couple not only in politicizing Sibongile but also in the actual delineation of this process of her empowerment which is represented in a gradual process of discovery for the reader that recognises the anxieties, worries, and dangers that delineate her political life.22 The novel thus provides us with an emerging picture of South Africa in transit, where neither blacks nor whites are very sure of what the future holds for them. Liberalism, which has always been espoused as an essential ingredient of a politically and racially tolerant and egalitarian society, has in apartheid South Africa been seen as espousing the cause of the blacks. However, within the changing dynamics of post-apartheid society, the question that is asked is “Where Do Whites Fit In?” This is also the title of one of Gordimer’s well-known essays, in which she discusses the role of whites in the changing milieu of South Africa. She is clear that to fit into the new society, whites will have to “forget the old impulses and the temptation to give advice.”23 If they feel white first and South African second, “it would be better not to stay in Africa.”24

In the remaining section of this chapter, I will undertake a detailed analysis of the writings of Bessie Head, within the context of South African and Southern African history and the experiences of her own life and consequent search for an identity, that is manifested in various ways across her writings.

THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN BESSIE HEAD

The writings of Bessie Head signify in many ways, her own quest for an individual identity. Carved out of her experiences, as a coloured born and brought up in South Africa, Bessie Head, perhaps more than many of her other South African and Southern African contemporaries was able to understand what the question of identity ultimately signified. Bessie Head was born of a white mother and a black father on 6th July, 1937, in a mental asylum in Pietermaritzburg, where her mother had been placed following her illegal relationship with a black man. Till 1950, Bessie remained in foster care, with a woman she presumed to be her own mother, till she was placed in an Anglican orphanage at the age of thirteen. She was therefore an ‘archetypal outsider’ right from birth, and throughout her childhood, she was therefore made

22 Ibid.
23 Nadine Gordimer. Essential Gestures. p. 36
24 Ibid.
aware that her very existence was an “affront to racial laws.” \(^\text{25}\) As a “first generation child of bi racial origin” she had to bear the “full brunt of South Africa’s discriminatory legislation.” \(^\text{26}\) Her childhood experiences played a crucial part in the fashioning of her adult personality. The principal at the orphanage made no bones about pointing out Bessie’s past to her, as poignantly recorded in *A Woman Alone*:

> 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. \(^\text{27}\)

Having no relatives, Head remained an isolated individual throughout her early years. It was perhaps this lack of roots, history and identity that led her to later comment that “I have always been me, with no frame of reference beyond myself.” \(^\text{28}\)

The experiences of her childhood pre empted a lifelong hatred of missionaries and Christianity as organised religions, a fact that becomes startlingly clear in the course of her writings. It also put into place the first questions about place and identity, which continued to haunt her throughout her life. Her upbringing made it clear that there was no place for her in apartheid-ridden South Africa, neither with the numerically superior blacks nor the socially superior whites. In fact, it was not until her migration to Botswana on an exit permit – meaning that she could never return back to South Africa that she was finally able to carve out roots for herself and experience a state of belonging among the midst of 40,000 villagers in the little village of Serowe. Head writes evocatively of her stay in Botswana:

> I took an obscure and almost unknown village in Southern Africa and made it my own hallowed ground. Here in the steadiness and peace of my own world, I could dream a little ahead of the somewhat vicious clamour of revolution and the horrible stench of evil social systems.... Everyone had a place in my work. **But nothing can take away the fact that I have never had a**


\(^{26}\) Bessie Head. *A Woman Alone*. Introduction. p.x

\(^{27}\) Ibid., p.4

\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 3
country, not in South Africa or in Botswana where I now live as a stateless person.29 (my emphasis)

Similarly, at another point Head comments:

I have liked Botswana very much although I have got nothing out of loving a country that didn't want me.30

Ultimately, Bessie Head's entire life remained a legacy of loneliness and rejection. Her writings, therefore reflect the prevailing sense of homelessness that the exile continually has to face, of the state of alienation and rootlessness and are autobiographical to a large extent. They are intensely private works, a cathartic outpouring of all her inner turmoil and anguish. They are charged with an honesty and power that arise from a deep experience and bonding with the issues that are explored. The other unique feature of her works is that unlike many of her other contemporaries who were exiled, Head chose her adopted locale - Botswana - as the scene of her writings. At the same time, although the theme of political protest is relatively muted in her writings, the brutality of the whites and the consequent dehumanisation of the blacks are continually stressed. Her works, therefore,

...draw significantly upon the experience of being a non-white in South Africa, for the denial of civil rights to the South African non-white encourages Head's sense of homelessness in much the same way that the system of apartheid fragments the individual's sense of personal integrity.31

The writings of Bessie Head "chronicle tribal, rural and semi urban life" and usually have as their protagonists outsiders, alienated from mainstrem society in some form or other, who, like Head, come to a new land and attempt to make a home for themselves. They deal essentially with discrimination in society, both racial and sexual, and her characters portray various aspects of injustice and inequality, while trying to retain their own individualism. It is significant that, like Head, most of these characters are also women. Many of them, like the Masarwa tribal Margaret in *Maru*, or more potently, Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* are clearly sketched from her own

29 Ibid., p.28
30 Jean Marquard. 'Bessie Head: Exile and community in Southern Africa.' pp. 51-52
life. Yet they all differ in some respect, and this gives them a degree of individuality. She aims at creating a ‘new world’ of men and women, far removed from the existing status quo of society, a world free from the power centred brutishness and manipulative violence that she had experienced in apartheid South Africa. In a way, Head derives a new ideology of the world, of peace, of unity, and at the same time, she demonstrates a new breed of feminism and a new vision of the world. Although most of her protagonists are women, men also play an important role in the novels of Bessie Head. Characters such as Makhaya, Maru, Gilbert, Thalo, Paul and others in various works are symbolic of an ideal new world in which men and women work and live together in harmony. They are contrasted against the men whom Head considers the undesirable elements in society – like Dan, Sello, Gaserego, to name just a few.

There is a third category of men in Head’s writings – those destroyed by the women around them – like Lesogo or Rra Mompati. Head has her sympathies for these men, but they are ultimately portrayed as outsiders, who have no place in her idyllic world. The impact of colonialism and apartheid on various aspects of traditional African life – education, religion, and community affairs are highlighted and critiqued in her writings. The outsider motif is predominant in her works as are issues related to religion and Christianity. The primary focus however is on the roles and identities of women. She deals with the moral and political ideals of women’s equality and female individuality and explores the power conflicts that function in all domains of man-woman relationships.

In her relatively short life, Bessie Head produced a considerable volume of literary work. Her oeuvre includes six full–length works and about 25 short stories, many of which were published posthumously. Most of her writings are concentrated around her years in Botswana, in particular the earlier ones. Her first two novels, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969) and *Maru* (1971) were received enthusiastically by the critics, but it was not until the publication of her third and most intensely autobiographical novel, *A Question of Power* (1974) that Bessie Head was acknowledged as a great writer. The novel was short listed for the Booker Prize in 1974. After completing her three novels, Head began her Serowe project, a semi-documentary account of the history of the village which she had made her home, and this resulted in the publication of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. It was also out of the interviews and dialogues with different individuals undertaken during the Serowe
project that provided Bessie Head with material for her collection of short stories *The Collector of Treasures* (1977). The collection focuses chiefly on village women and the different problems faced by them. Head wrote her last book *A Bewitched Crossroad* in 1984. The book is a history of Africa, seen not from the colonial perspective, but from the black point of view, and particularly focuses on the Bamangwato tribe and its famous chieftain Khama III and his grandson, Seretse Khama, an inspiring figure in African history. Another collection of short stories and other writings from Bessie Head’s life in Botswana was published as a collection *Tales of Tenderness and Power*. Some of the tales are descriptive statements, some historical and some others fictional. What binds them together is the fact that all the stories are closely rooted in actual events, though Head may have shaped them to suit her purposes. A *Woman Alone: Autobiographical writings*, a collection of Bessie Head’s personal thoughts and an indispensable tool for understanding her and her works was collected and published posthumously in 1990. Her writings have seen increased scholarly and critical acclaim in the period after her death. Desiree Lewis comments that her “recently elevated status in literary studies” has actually inspired a “veritable industry of scholarship.”

For the colonised world, a major part of the question of identity was linked to land. Land is crucial to survival, as Fanon says, it is land that brings “bread, and above all, dignity” to the colonised world. Naturally, questions of identity then centre on the creation of space for the individual which later translates into voice and power. Place, power, identity and the Other are all therefore related concepts. The most general definition is that of places, that are related to all other places (spaces) but form a certain opposition to these. In general, they are embedded in a system of spatial effects of power and are located in a society where all places are in a certain relation to power and to each other. This idea has already been discussed in the introductory chapter. In patriarchal societies and in their reflections in African writings in particular, these links become even more obvious, with power having clear connotations with “male” and “masculine.” In South Africa, the prevalence of the apartheid system till recent times made things even more difficult. As discussed, let alone black women, even black male authors found it difficult to make their voices of

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33 Desiree Lewis. *World Literature Today*. p.73
34 Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. p. 34

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protest heard – crippled as they were by the intolerant political system, tough censorship laws and the fear of exile. Head’s protagonists, like her, are generally ‘outsiders’, alienated from mainstream society. With few exceptions such as Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, they are also women, thus placing on them a double burden. All of her characters are placed within traditional societal frames. Having arrived at a new place, their challenge is to first establish and then consolidate their identities within such a society. The landscape therefore here circulates as a “medium of exchange...a site of visual appropriation, a focus for the formation of identity.” Colonialism also meant that areas that were simply geographical territory are imbibed with new inputs and gradually transformed into a culturally defined landscape. As Erica Carter states:

> It is not spaces which ground identification but places. How then does space become place? By being named... and by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investment of a population. **Place is space to which meaning is ascribed.** (my emphasis)

*When Rain Clouds Gather* is written against the backdrop of two crucial events of the year– a terrible drought and an impending general election. Botswana provides Head with a glimpse of a different life – one that she could not even have imagined in South Africa. A large part of this is due to its history, which as discussed earlier, was different from other Southern African nations by virtue of its lesser intensity in the colonial project, and its largely peaceful post colonial history. There was considerable unity amongst the population, who worked together for the future of the nation. One such method was through the formation of village cooperatives. The idea of forming small village cooperatives particularly intrigued Head. She wrote of the period:

> I think only a South African born black person could fully understand the situation. It meant that black people... could form little cooperatives to resolve their distress; a cooperative of any kind in South Africa would cause

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35 Kate Darian Smith et al eds. *Text, Theory, Space*. Introduction. p. 3
36 Erica Carter, cited in Kate Darian Smith et al. Ibid.
a riot of hysteria among white people— their wealth and privilege are
dependent on the poverty and distress of black people.37

The protagonist of the novel is Makhaya, a Zulu refugee, who crosses over
from South Africa into Botswana and the village of Golema Mmidi in search of a new
life. His exile is provoked by the South African political system. The novel thus
becomes a record of “a South African political exile’s determination to take root in a
foreign land.”38 In his quest for peace of mind, sadly missing in the South African
landscape, Makhaya declares:

I just want to step on free ground. I don’t care about people... 39

Right at the beginning, he is introduced to the wise old man Dinoerego, who
along with his protégé, the Englishman Gilbert Balfour has been trying to establish a
village cooperative in Golema Mmidi. The main plot of the novel centres on the
development and success of the cooperative, in spite of the many obstacles placed in
its path by the village Chief and his younger brother, for whom the cooperative is
representative of the loss of power. Makhaya gets involved in the cooperative and the
community life of the village. The village of Golema Mmidi is the ideal replica of
Bessie Head’s “new worlds”— a harbinger of development— a village where natives,
foreigners and refugees are shown to harmoniously occupy the same space, while
retaining their individuality.

The village of Golema Mmidi, representing land, is central to the entire
narrative of the novel. It is a village made up of a motley of refugees, numbering
about 400. The landscape of the village is initially bleak and harsh, and Lloyd W
Brown suggests that this nothingness is a parallel to the “destructiveness of the
refugees’ past.”40 Unlike many of the other villages of Botswana, where the
inhabitants would “migrate in November to their lands on the outskirts of their
villages to help with the ploughing and the planting”41 and return to their homes in
January, Golema Mmidi is unique, as the residents live in the village throughout the
year and earn their daily living through crop growing, making it the very pivot of their

37 Bessie Head op cit. p. 27
38 Robert L Ross. p. 559
39 Ibid.
40 Lloyd W Brown. op cit. p. 161
41 Bessie Head. When Rain Clouds gather p.22
existence. There is an inherent determination within the village to survive at all cost and the cooperative provides the gateway towards a new beginning. The circumstances of their migration and the lack of any traditional wealth force the villagers to break with tradition and become progressive. Furthermore, as the villagers are not members of any one particular tribe, but rather, refugees who have set up home in this village, it is therefore “one of the very few areas in the country where people were permanently settled on the land.”

At the beginning of the novel, the landscape of the village is bleak, dry and harsh due to the failure of the rain clouds. In such a situation death, destruction and desolation reign supreme, making the place a haven for vultures. The rain clouds are symbolic of hope and all things good, and the title of the novel is therefore symbolic of a vision of hope for the future in South Africa, and the village is a microcosmic view of Head’s dream of how things ought to be. In a way, the villagers of Golema Mmiddi are willing to learn afresh and embrace modernity. Critics have argued that the novel is ultimately a case study of capitalist development. Gilbert Balfour’s declaration that if all the villagers grew a bit of Turkish Tobacco and marketed it cooperatively, they could all become rich “in no time” points towards this valourisation of capitalism. Simon Simone writes:

... Bessie Head does believe in the emancipatory potential of capitalist development. It is her contention that small scale capitalism on a co-op basis offers a realistic opportunity for revolutionising the stagnated relations of production in the countryside.

Makhaya’s changed worldview by the conclusion is also reflective of a new sense of purpose in the community, replacing the original bleak landscape. He is able to find a sense of belonging, purpose and identity by working in the cooperative, far removed from the hatred-filled world of apartheid-ridden South Africa from where he has escaped. Initially, he regards even his name as part of the old world that he is trying to leave behind him. Perhaps that is why he initially scoffs at his Zulu identity:

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42 Ibid.
43 Simon Simone.
... I'm a Zulu.... But look here old man. I'm no tribalist. My parents are -- that's why they saddled me with this foolish name. Why not call me Samuel or Johnson because I'm no tribalist. 44

The change in Makhaya is distinct; from this position of an alienated individual desperate to shake off his old baggage, including his name– the primary marker of his identity– he becomes a person concerned about the welfare of others, and intensely involved in community life. His initial statelessness is thus replaced by a full–fledged sense of commitment to Golema Mmidi, the co–operative, and above all, to Paulina.

Golema Mmidi thus plays an important role in the transformation of Makhaya and in the process allowing him and many others before him to acquire a sense of belonging and identity. It is naturally a utopia, even in a country as little colonised as Botswana, it is perhaps impossible to find a replica of this village. Makhaya is quick to realise this fact, and during his stay at the village he is able to garner a dual perspective, wherein the utopia of Golema Mmidi co–exists along with the harsh realities outside the village, of the kind Makhaya has left behind in South Africa. At a larger level, it is also symbolic of a possible new world order, in the post-colonial world, a glimpse of Head’s ideal world, sadly far removed from reality. Golema Mmidi also represents a healing ground for a wide range of people, each escaping from their own set of problems. One such person is Paulina Seboso.

Paulina Seboso has come to Golema Mmidi with her small ten year old son as a refugee, escaping from the brutalities of a disastrous marriage in North Botswana. Once again, one cannot fail to notice the clear parallels Paulina has with Bessie Head. Like Paulina, one of the major reasons behind Head’s exit from South Africa, apart from the racial aspect, was to escape from her marriage to Harold Head, a journalist from whom she had recently got a divorce, and like Paulina, Head too came into Botswana with nothing except a small son. The circumstances were however different. In spite of an unhappy marriage, it is not divorce, but widowhood that brings Paulina to the village. She is an independent, strong-minded woman, and her ex-husband, Head mentions, was not a very “remarkable” man, of a “mild, passive,

44 Bessie Head. op cit. p. 9
stay-at-home temperament.” 45 She soon settles down in the village, and gets involved
in the work of the village cooperative. At the same time, she is the kind who does not
brood about the past, but looks forward to a happy future. Therefore, “part of her
plans also included a man, as she was a passionate and impetuous woman with a
warm heart” 46, and wished to have a house and husband to whom she could give all
her love and loyalty. Paulina’s main success lies in getting the women of Golema
Mmidi fully involved in the workings of the cooperative, thereby contributing in a
major degree to its ultimate success. A “new” woman inhabiting Head’s “new world”,
she embodies the ideals of feminist thought and her assertiveness and leadership
qualities mark her out and distinguish her from what the narrator terms as “effeminate
shadows of men who really feared women.” 47

When one thinks about it, and as already discussed, there can be no more
natural thing than women working in the farmlands. African women have traditionally
worked on the farms, making the continent a space of “female farming par
excellence.” 48 Accounts of the pre-colonial period tell us that African women
interacted with their societies, worked alongside men in the fields and were
economically independent. There was reciprocal division of labour and women were
given the independence and liberty to put forth their own point of view. In a similar
vein, Bessie Head comments in When Rain Clouds Gather:

The women were the natural tillers of the earth, not the men. The women
were the backbone of agriculture while the men on the whole were cattle
drovers…. Why give training to a section of the population who may never
use it but leave it to their wives to erode the soil by unsound agricultural
practices? Why start talking about development and food production without
taking into account who is really producing the food? 49

Being a village of primarily women, where men spend a large part of the year
at the cattle posts, the equal participation of women in the cooperative is not only
essential, it also gives the cooperative a sense of unity. Further, it provides proof of
the fact that no gender can work in isolation by adopting power for itself. A

45 Bessie Head. When Rain Clouds Gather. p.76
46 Ibid., p. 77
47 Ibid.
48 Esther Boserup. Women’s role in economic development. cited in Hafkin and Bay op cit. p. 15
49 Bessie Head. op cit. p. 34
harmonious community can be developed when both men and women work together in unison. Head's ideal of feminism also progresses along similar lines. For her, an ideal world would have equal contributions of both men and women. It is perhaps significant that When Rain Clouds Gather was written at the height of the feminist movement in Europe, where feminist thinkers borrowed and adopted modes of critical thought from various disciplines such as philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, Marxism etc. to frame new theoretical positions, which varied from the liberal humanist to the radical. What Bessie Head does is to combine the different strands of feminism to create one of her own – developing out of her personal experiences and leading to the creation of a personal utopia, or what she terms “new worlds out of nothing.”

Yet, in spite of all her feminist stakes, Paulina is not entirely a hard-core feminist and a “new” woman in that sense of the term. In many respects her personality still bears the residues of the old ways of life and the age-old theories of women’s subordination. These ideas manifest themselves at certain moments during the novel. For instance, Paulina cannot help but feel disturbed when Makhaya chooses to do some of the housework after their marriage, traditionally the woman’s domain. Her union and marriage with Makhaya is a “symbolic integration of sexual revolt with political rebellion.” Paulina’s contempt for the over-aggressive and sexual male is matched by Makhaya’s hatred for the spineless woman; it is a union that allows for a certain degree of adjustment and compromise on both sides, and thus

...not only celebrates the individual maturity into which they are both growing, it also represents the kind of broader social harmony that their relationship promises for future society.

Paulina does not fit into the age-old stereotypes related to women – of the ideal “mother figure” or conversely, the “city girl”, who, more often than not, in African literature is a prostitute. It is but natural that both Paulina and Makhaya are drawn towards each other. Both recognise in the other qualities that are similar, and at the same time, both also conform to the ideas of the opposite sex that they have in

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50 Bessie Head. A Woman Alone.
51 Lloyd W Brown. op cit. p. 171
52 Ibid.
their minds. Makhaya sees the customary notions of female submissiveness as part of the divisive societal mores that he is desperately trying to escape from. He truly believes that both the sexes ought to operate on ideas of cooperation and independence, rather than on ideas of masculine privilege and feminine submissiveness. He is therefore the novel’s “feminist ideal of manhood.” However, it is perhaps natural that like Paulina, Makhaya too is at times confused between the contradictions that exist between his desires and societal conventions – for instance, he is relieved to discover that he is a foot taller than Paulina, a subtle manifestation of male power. The ambiguities within both Makhaya and Paulina are not unexpected in a society caught in a flux, and in the middle of transition – a society where “the idealist’s vision of a new world of sexual equality is tempered by a wryly realistic insistence on the fact that old values can persist into the new world while it is being created.”

The second major woman character portrayed by Head in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is unique. Of the four major protagonists of the novel, Maria is the only one who is an original resident of Golema Mmidi; the remaining three – Paulina, Makhaya and Gilbert are all outsiders. In that respect, Maria, unlike the others, does not really have the problem of carving out a space for herself in the village. She is posited as a direct contrast to Paulina, and truly, Paulina's leadership qualities stand in sharp contrast to the more soft-spoken Maria. Yet, Maria is perhaps a far more difficult character to comprehend:

There were two women in her– one was soft and meditative and the other was full of ruthless common sense, and these two uncongenial personalities clashed and contradicted with each other all the time.

Yet, although she is not afraid to speak her own mind, ultimately, Maria still cannot overcome the obstacles of conventionality and female submissiveness. For instance, she tells Gilbert that “I won’t feel free in England” but faced with his attitude, she recoils immediately. This fact cannot help but further intensify the stark differences between Maria and Paulina. Her statement however, reveals another

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53 Ibid
54 Ibid., p.168
55 Bessie Head. *op cit.* p.101
56 Ibid., p.102
dimension between the space-land-identity concepts. Unlike the others, for Maria, the village of Golema Mmidi is home, where she has lived since her childhood, where she feels comfortable and has the liberty to be her own individual. England here represents a new and alien world, where her blackness will make her conspicuous and will seriously hamper her freedom of speech, of movement and perhaps even of existence. The subtle oppression that she would face there from various sources would become an extension of the colonial oppression that Africans face in their own land, from which Golema Mmidi represents a blissful exception. A subtle crossing of physical boundaries would then take on much larger ramifications, with far more invisible, socially-constructed boundaries needing to be crossed. Both Paulina and Maria, with their ambivalent roles, exemplify the “ambiguities of the state of becoming”\(^57\), where the “influence of conventional roles persists side by side with a questioning, assertive sense of self and equality.”\(^58\)

On the other hand, Maria’s husband Gilbert has no such problems. In spite of being a white outsider, he is quickly accepted into the society of Golema Mmidi within a short period of time. It is ironic that having come to Botswana from England after feeling suffocated with the feudal structures of society in his own country; Gilbert too does not hesitate to quickly revert back to hegemonic attitudes time and again. Like Makhaya, his inner self too has to continually fight the contradictions within himself. He is a powerful and imposing personality, no doubt, and truly interested in doing some good for the village community, as evident in the success of the cooperative, but like Makhaya, Gilbert too retains traces of his ambiguous nature, unable to totally sever his ties with the old way of life. Through characters like Gilbert and Makhaya, Bessie Head initiates her characterisation of new men in a new world, and these are developed further in her succeeding novels. Head’s success in her characterisation lies in getting them amalgamated into the village community. It was the community that was integral to Head, and in Golema Mmidi too, it is seen how the community as a whole joins together during occasions such as marriages and funerals. The marriage of Maria and Gilbert underscores this point. Under the leadership of Mma-Millipede, the female equivalent of the village elder, Dinwego, the women of the village prepare the wedding feast. In the midst of normal talk, there is also the odd

\(^{57}\) Lloyd W Brown. \textit{op cit.} p. 166
\(^{58}\) Ibid.
sarcastic remark and bitchiness. Makhaya, the newest inhabitant of the village is certainly a hot topic of discussion. At the same time, Paulina, as the only woman in the village without a lover or a husband is also the object of much attention. However, what is made apparent in such scenes of village banter is the importance of community life, and the privileged position the community always holds over the individual in Head’s view of the world. As she remarks:

Communal goodness is the root and foundation of African religion and the individual within this community derives his entire spiritual needs from participating in the entire life of the community. 59

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the women of the village are pivotal to the village. The women of the village furthermore, seem to have two different personalities, one for when they are among their own group and the other for public occasions. Therefore, Head remarks:

The women of the village put on constrained masks as they walked about serving the food in silence. They only let themselves go when they were a group together with no men present.60

*When Rain Clouds Gather* however, is not a narrative without any tensions. The village of Golema Mmidi too has its tormentors; not the whites, but the tribal chief of the village Sekoto and his younger brother Matenge, who are representative of the power-centred brutishness so common in Africa. The only difference lies in the fact that while elsewhere it would be the white colonisers practising such torture, here it is a member of the community. Matenge reinforces the “rigid class distinction between royalty and commoner… [and] becomes a force for evil in the novel.”61 The image of the Chief as portrayed here is slightly different from the image of the Chief in African societies per se. In most African societies during the colonial regime, the Chief was appointed by the Government, and as such acted as the mouthpiece of the coloniser government in all matters. The well-being of the tribe members was of little importance to them. Furthermore, they used their power and hierarchy to further propagate discrimination and hegemony in their indigenous societies. Matenge in the

59 Bessie Head. *A Woman Alone*. p.52
60 Bessie Head. *When Rain Clouds Gather*. p. 96
61 Robert Ross. op cit.
novel is largely a prototype of this power-hungry Chief, and as a result is naturally highly unpopular among his community. He is also unpopular in his own household, due to his "overwhelming avariciousness and unpleasant personality." His elder brother Sekoto wields his power in much more subtle ways. He is a self-proclaimed Chief who has claimed the village of Golema Mmidi as his own. As Head writes:

(He)... had built a school here, a reservoir there. But because he was a Chief he lived off the slave labour of the poor. His lands were ploughed free of charge... he was washed, bathed and clothed by the poor, in return for which he handed out old clothes and maize rations. 

Both Sekoto and Matenge are symbolic of the "African oppressors" – different only in race from the white colonisers, and perhaps equally, if not more vicious. And as oppressors, they continually try and outdo each other. It is in the hitherto two-tier power set up that Gilbert Balfour makes his entry into the village. His utopian ideas immediately constitute a threat for both the brothers, who are quick to realise that Gilbert's ideas have the potential to get the entire village on his side, thereby leading to a loss in their own political clout and power. Naturally, as the villagers become self-sufficient, they would begin to question the power and hegemonic space occupied by the Chief. The ultimate success of the village cooperative is therefore symbolic in more ways than one. Not only does it allow the women of the village to participate fully in the set up and execution, it also ensures that Gilbert Balfour emerges the winner in the three-way power tussle. Both Sekoto and Matenge are destroyed, their plans of feudal domination are replaced by total defeat, symbolised by Matenge's suicide at the conclusion of the novel.

*When Rain Clouds Gather*, Bessie Head's first major work therefore initiates many of the themes that recur in her succeeding novels – space, identity, power, race and gender tensions and alliances against the abuse of power. It has been regarded by many critics as the opening of a sequential trilogy that's moves from a broader external perspective to an inner psychic one. Craig Mackenzie writes:

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62 Ibid., p.24  
63 Ibid., p.23
The problems displayed on a flat Botswanan landscape in *Rain Clouds* are embodied by individual characters in *Maru* and finally internalised completely in *A Question of Power*. This progression traces the sequence of events in the author’s life: from deracination in Francistown to alienation and finally, mental breakdown in Serowe.64

At the same time, the novel at times also exhibits signs of rawness and simplicity. Head’s moral didacticism and sense of utopia about her “new worlds” at times seem uni-dimensional, wherein for instance, the rise of racial self-awareness is here equated with the image of tribal feudalism and the “African oppressor” while tribal traditions are seen simply as parochial backwardness and in wholly negative terms of narrow conservatism and stultifying oppressiveness.65 However, although *When Rain Clouds Gather* may depict signs of such simplicity at times, Bessie Head certainly does not hold tribal customs in total contempt, a fact amply demonstrated in her later works, especially *The Collector of Treasures*.

In her next work *Maru*, published in 1971, Bessie Head takes a more incisive look at the specific theme of racial tension or ‘racialism’66 as she terms it. A clearly didactic novel, *Maru* is a parable against racial prejudice, and Head’s condemnation of racism is unequivocal, stemming from her personal experiences from her birth. The protagonist of the story is Margaret Cadmore, a Masarwa, one of the most hated tribes, and discriminated against in Botswana almost in the manner that the Dalits are in India. Margaret Cadmore has her roots in Head’s own life, and has been based upon a missionary whom she admired a lot in her younger days, especially for her ability to react against the prevailing norms of society. Furthermore, like Bessie’s own life, the two Margarets – mother and daughter – have the same name, but belong to different races. The novel was born out of a desire to write a novel on the “hideousness of racial prejudice”67, a situation that Bessie Head had obviously been familiar with since her birth. Throughout her life, she not only faced the racial oppression that came out of being born an illegitimate South African, but also the

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64 Craig Mackenzie. *Bessie Head*.
65 This idea is put forward by Lloyd W Brown who states in his work that in spite of the vision of Head’s new world, it does raise uncomfortable questions about her historical sense or the depth of social perspectives. He believes that such judgements are based on a limited perspective of the world that defines institutions and traditions solely on the basis on which they have historically been corrupted.
66 Bessie Head. *A Woman Alone.* p.68
67 Bessie Head. ‘Social and political pressures that shape literature in South Africa.’ p.14
added disadvantage of being a coloured and therefore not fitting in with either the whites or the blacks. As already mentioned, it was a situation that prompted her to migrate to Botswana, but once there she realised that the “language of hatred... was not exclusively practised by white people” and that “exploitation and evil is dependent on a lack of communication between the oppressor and the people he oppresses.” In Botswana, Head realised that the language of oppression was universal, all that changed was the perception of the ‘Other’. For the white man, anyone who looked different was viewed as the ‘Other’, but the concept of asserting racial superiority is far more complex:

And if the white man thought that Asians were a low, filthy nations, Asians could still smile with relief – at least they were not Africans. And if the white man thought that Africans were a low, filthy nation, Africans in Southern Africa could still smile – at least they were not Bushmen.

This is an extension of Chidi Amuta’s idea, discussed in the opening chapter, of how the Western mind perceives the African and the African continent. In the novel therefore, the concept of race is explored as a cultural narrative. Margaret, the outsider in Dilepe village, is the primary narrator of the tale, marking a change from the multi-person narrative of When Rain Clouds Gather. Margaret is not afraid of asserting her Masarwa identity right from the start – “I am not afraid of being a Masarwa” – she says, a departure from Makhaya, who clearly is running away from his roots at the start of When Rain Clouds Gather. Stan Galloway compares Margaret to Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, a girl who was brought up with a sense of isolation from the outside world. Margaret, in a similar vein as been brought up as a ‘doll-child’ by her foster mother, the elder Margaret Cadmore, who even invested the young girl with her own name, perhaps to shield her from the harshness of racial prejudice that her racial identity would otherwise have generated. Margaret’s

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68 Bessie Head. A Woman Alone. p.69
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., p.24
72 Stan Galloway. ‘San Culture in Bessie Head’s Maru.’ Galloway states that Margaret Cadmore was brought up by her missionary mother to believe that heredity was “nothing” and refers to Nora Helmer’s revelation to her husband in Doll’s House to affirm his point. Nora remarks to her husband that “When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion on everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed the fact, because he would not have liked it. He called me his doll—child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls.”
missionary training therefore strips her of her cultural heritage and leaves her with only the physical trappings of a Bushman.\(^73\) She therefore becomes a “non-scientific clone of herself, a Bushman on the outside but more likely a peevish Englishwoman on the inside.”\(^74\) Margaret therefore has been brought up with no real notion of the cultural significance and politics of being a ‘Masarwa’ and it is only when she comes to Dilepe village that she has to contend with the real question of her identity for the first time. She comes to realise the extent of racial prejudice in her country. Being a Bushwoman, she is expected to behave in a certain manner, but she does not have a clue as to how to do so. There exists a deep vacuum in her mind regarding her relationship with the bushmen, with whom she was identified, and in spite of all efforts of her foster mother, “no one by shouting, screaming, or spitting could un-Bushman her.”\(^75\) There is a clear distinction between Margaret’s appearance, which is that of a Masarwa and her upbringing and culture, which is very typically un-Bushmanlike. This causes conflict in Margaret’s mind, and in spite of her assertions about identity, the truth is that Margaret too, like Head is the ‘archetypal outsider’ and does not fit in, either with the members of her tribe nor with the other communities. The novel *Maru* is therefore also, in a way, a quest for Margaret to search for and achieve her own identity.

Margaret is undoubtedly the most educated person in Dilepe village, along with being a gifted artist with visionary powers and a person with kind feelings towards both humans and animals. It is not surprising therefore, that in spite of all their prejudices both Maru and Moleka fall in love with her, thereby challenging the whole concept of racial superiority. The fact that both of them are powerful personalities in line for the chieftaincy of the tribe, and given Margaret’s background, this is no ordinary thing. Margaret ultimately becomes a catalyst for change in Dilepe village, her personality forcing the villagers to revise their opinions of the Masarwas. The friendship of Maru, his sister Dikeledi and Moleka with Margaret therefore has far-reaching ramifications, wherein the narrator comments:

\(^73\) Ibid.
\(^74\) Ibid.
\(^75\) Ibid., p.14
... in the end are themselves are forced to revise their attitudes toward the Masarwa tribes they own, even to the point of abandoning the institution altogether. 76

This is indeed a great leap forward for villagers who previously could not have conceived of the Masarwa as anything other than slaves. Maru and Margaret’s marriage is therefore a symbolic union in more ways than one – not only does it suggest a diminishing of racial hatred, it also provides hope for a more harmonious and better future. A marriage between a Masarwa woman and a man who would otherwise have been Chief also changes the perception of the remaining Masarwa people. As Head writes:

a door silently opened on the small, dark, airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom, which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. As they breathed in the fresh, clean air, their humanity awakened... how had they fallen into this condition when, they indeed, were as human as everyone else? 77

On the other hand, the Batswana are unable to accept their Chief’s ‘fall in standard’ by marrying a Masarwa woman, but “how were they to know that many people shared Maru’s overall ideals that this was not the end of him, but a beginning?“ 78

Head’s view, expressed through the narratorial voice is categorically clear. The marriage of Margaret and Maru may indeed be a “fairy tale” of “racial prejudice conquered by idealistic love” 79 where the Tswana prince and his lady love live happily ever after. The ending of the novel has also been seen by a number of critics as a positive affirmation of racial and gender identity and equality, where the two protagonists become harbingers of a new world order. 80 Margaret’s liberation is seen

76 Lewis Nkosi. ‘Southern Africa: Protest and commitment’ in Tasks and Masks. p.101
77 Bessie Head. op cit. pp. 126-127
75 Ibid., p 123
80 Horace Goddard, in his essay “Imagery in Bessie Head’s work” claims that in the character of Maru, good is made to triumph over evil due to Maru’s choice to marry a member of a despised tribe group. Margaret becomes a symbol of female liberation and power. Similarly, Virginia Ola has contended that by the end of the novel Margaret is Maru’s equal.
not just in terms of the “colonial past but also from the African male’s racialistic, sexist and power-seeking tendencies.” Craig Mackenzie cites the last paragraph of the book (quoted above) to state that the novel brings about a new sense of assertiveness in the Masarwa people and therefore, the novel ends on a triumphal note. For him, “through the union of two equal souls, Maru and Margaret defy the prejudiced world and point to a new world of true racial equality.”

Yet, questions persist. Does the marriage of Maru and Margaret really liberate the Batswana? Is the question of freedom from oppression really such a simplistic notion? Is Margaret truly imbued with a new sense of ‘identity’ and belonging as a result of her marriage to Maru? Because the fact remains that Maru and Margaret cannot set up home in Dilepe village. They have to head for a new home, a new world, thousands of miles away, and Maru has to abdicate his right to Chiefdom. Unlike Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, who becomes and continues to remain an integral part of affairs in the village of Golema Mmidi, the same cannot be said off Margaret and Dilepe village. Margaret had probably found a sense of home in Dilepe village for the first time in her life, calling it “the most beautiful village in the world.” She makes friends there and is no longer as lonely as she has been throughout her life. During the course of her stay, she also succeeds in changing opinions of the local villagers about the Masarwa through her personality, and carves out an independent identity for herself separate from her “bushy” identity. However, marriage to Maru means that she will again have to carve out a new identity and beginning for herself in a new place, once again perhaps having to deal with the issues of hatred and prejudice. It is in this context therefore, that many critics have read the ending of *Maru* as weak, wherein the conclusion actually is symbolic of the defeat of Margaret. In the chronological end of the novel, which takes place at the end of Part 1, Margaret is seen to be speaking no words with the narration being entirely one-sided, from Maru’s point of view. Stan Galloway comments that by the end of the novel, the reader suspects that the smile on Margaret’s face is not perhaps one of ecstasy, as stated by the narrator, but rather one of resignation and despair, where she seems to have been “sacrificed as an individual for the greater good of the Masarwa

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81 Horace I Goddard. op cit.
82 Craig Mackenzie. *Bessie Head*.
83 Bessie Head. *Maru*. p.41
people."\(^{84}\) It is the sacrifice of individual identity for the larger political end. And therefore, while the marriage may prove to be beneficial for the Masarwa community, there is at the same time no indication that Margaret "will ever leave her speechless place in a house of exile... and the connection between the plight of the Masarwa and Margaret's marriage to Maru is more syntactic than real."\(^{85}\) For Maru, marriage to Margaret is symbolic of a victory, a prize won, or rather snatched away from the hands of his closest friend. He achieves a sense of triumph in marrying Margaret. This may be due to two reasons. First, he sees the marriage as a personal victory over Moleka and second, he views his marriage to Margaret as a political deed by means of which he would be benefitting the Masarwa community.

Seen in this context therefore, it seems as though Margaret's search for identity remains an unfulfilled quest even at the conclusion of the novel. However, there are positive aspects that arise out of her stay in Dilepe village. It has already been mentioned that Dikeledi, Maru's sister, along with Maru and Moleka befriend Margaret at her arrival in the village. All the three are members of the ruling elite class, and their friendship with Margaret is depicted as "a personal extension of their fight against social prejudices and political privileges in their community."\(^{86}\) And in spite of all prejudices, both Maru and Moleka fall in love with her, leading to two love triangles in the novel – between Maru, Moleka and Margaret on the one hand, and between Margaret, Dikeledi and Moleka on the other. This is testimony to the fact that in spite of being regarded as socially inferior, Margaret is actually far superior to everyone in the village, a fact emphasised throughout. She loves Moleka and not Maru, but the latter uses his prestige and power to remove Moleka from his path, by conveniently arranging his marriage with his sister Dikeledi, who is also in love with Moleka, and thus, paving the way for his ultimate union with Margaret. Margaret is more or less bullied into marriage with Maru through his exercising of his political power with all people around him – he does not even spare his sister and his best friend. Yet, Maru, in many ways is the "magical, fairy-tale hero"\(^{87}\) of the text, who is unpredictable and strange and who is able to look beyond the conventional norms of

\(^{84}\) Ketu, K. Katrak. 'This Englishness will kill you: Colonial(ist) education and female socialisation in Merle Hodge's *Crack, Crack Monkey* and Bessie Head's *Maru*. pp. 62-67 cited in Stan Galloway op cit.

\(^{85}\) Stan Galloway. op cit.

\(^{86}\) Lloyd W Brown. op cit. p. 170

\(^{87}\) Craig Mackenzie and Cherry Clayton eds. Bessie Head interview. *Between the lines*. p.23

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the world to understand the troubles of people like Margaret, who have been continually oppressed by people of his ilk. This two-tiered personality in Maru marks him out as an ambivalent and ambiguous character, a trait that seems to be common to all of Bessie Head’s male protagonists. Margaret, on the other hand has spent her life with no illusions about herself, and very consciously aware that her education has only served to isolate her further from her own people, while not bringing her any closer to the others. As a Masarawa she has always lived in extreme isolation from her environment, and has continuously struggled to assert herself and her personality. She does this in various ways – her drawings are a mode through which she expresses her innermost feelings, and yet, paradoxically, they also serve to further silence her verbally – “that was the last link she had with coherent human communication.”

Through her actions, the contradictions within Margaret become more evident and her quest for identity has to encompass all the inherent complexities in her life and personality. Ultimately, Margaret’s individualism and art are intertwined with her perceptions as a woman, and Head portrays the central paradox between art and individualism through her characterisation of Margaret.

In contrast to Margaret, Dikeledi is much less individualistic, and more aware of the racial and social obstacles of being a Masarwa. That is why, when first learning that Margaret is a Masarwa, she offers her the option of calling herself a ‘coloured’, but at the same time, she is able to understand Margaret’s refusal to do so. Like her brother Maru, she too displays a strong contempt for tribal and feudal practices and customs. In many ways, Dikeledi too is a path breaker in Dilepe village. She has put her teacher’s training to practical use, and having a job gives her a certain degree of independence and does not bind her financially either to Maru, or to Moleka, whom she marries. Yet, she too is at times hampered by a limited awareness about sexual identity and roles, and this makes her easy prey for Moleka, who is a ruthless sexual exploiter. However, like Maria in When Rain Clouds Gather, Dikeledi too finds herself continually in Margaret’s shadow. Once again, a similar trait is noticed in Head’s characterisation. The ‘outsider’ women, whether Paulina or Margaret, are headstrong and determined and their strong personality overpower the local women.

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88 Bessie Head. Maru. p. 96
89 Lloyd W Brown. op cit. p.171
The depiction of love and sexual relationships often pose a problem for Bessie Head. Exercising sexual power and authority over a woman, often considered meek and vulnerable, is often taken as a sign of male prowess, and the manner in which Maru proceeds to remove Moleka from his path and marry Margaret is clearly a manifestation of his male power and authority. *Maru* is dominated by sexual relationships and emotions, and through this area, Head is clearly interested in depicting the hegemonic relationships that exist in all power battles. Lloyd W. Brown states that the “dominance of sexual relationships in *Maru* does conform to Head’s more direct interest in sexual perception and identity – especially the woman’s.”

And therefore, Margaret may live in isolation from her surroundings as an exile, but this feeling is further intensified by her personality and education, which serve to further distance the villagers from her.

It is Moleka who is portrayed in the novel as Head’s notion of the negative aspects of male power. He is strong- willed and has a forceful personality that runs parallel to Margaret and this is one of the reasons that attract them both towards each other. Their attraction is in many respects one of equals; both see traces of themselves in the other. As they both fall in love with each other, Moleka’s energy is channelised into a “surge of power.” His power is latent, an unknown quantity, a manifestation “of the exploitative power that Head invariably locates in the male ago, and by extension, in the entrenched structures of feudal privilege, racism and tribalism.”

Lloyd W Brown writes:

... mutual attraction confirms their similarities... but the absence of any consummation underscores their differences. Margaret’s self-awareness is intrinsic to the ideal womanhood that Head envisions... and contrasts with Moleka’s conventional notions of masculinity as possessive power.

Margaret’s attraction for Moleka is also partly due to this rugged maleness within him, and even after marriage to Maru, she continues to love Moleka, a fact even acknowledged by her husband:

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90 Ibid., p.171
91 Craig Mackenzie, op cit, p.117
92 Lloyd W Brown, op cit, p.172
93 Ibid.
There were two rooms. In one his wife totally loved him; in another, she totally loved Moleka. 94

The contrast between Maru and Moleka is pointed. There is also competition between them as the two most eligible men in the village. Head writes that “they were kings of opposing kingdoms.” 95 While both rely on their trappings of power, Maru’s personality is endowed with a certain degree of humaneness and concern, while Moleka seems to represent the conventional notions of masculinity as possessive power and exploitation. Maru’s name, meaning clouds is also symbolic of hope and all things good, as testified by Paulina in When Rain Clouds Gather, when she asserts that the rain clouds are significant of something positive and good. Therefore, it is through these acts of exploitation that Moleka seems able to assert his identity and satisfy his ego as one area in which he may have surpassed Maru.

_A Question of Power_, Bessie Head’s third and last novel, and also arguably her most complex carries forward the questions of identity and belonging raised in the earlier novels much further. It is also the most clearly autobiographical of all her novels, with the protagonist Elizabeth having clear parallels with Head’s own life. Head describes _A Question of Power_ as “totally autobiographical”, going even further to state that “Elizabeth and I are one.” Both were born ‘coloured’ in South Africa, had a tortured childhood and subsequently in life, a broken marriage; both ultimately left South Africa with their small sons on exit permits. Like Bessie Head who settled as a stateless person in the village of Serowe, Elizabeth lives as a stateless person in the village of Motabeng. The novel traces the course of Elizabeth’s mental breakdown, again an event reproduced from Bessie Head’s own life. In addition, it provides a strong indictment of the inherent power structures in society and their abuse that cripple the desires of individuals. For Head, this novel had an entirely different discourse, and she has commented that it was an “intensely personal and private dialogue” and a “private philosophical journey into the sources of evil.” 96 The entire focus of the novel is on this journey - the conflict between the outer ‘space’ of society and the inner ‘space’ of the mind - and it is here that the quest for identity becomes paramount.

94 Bessie Head. _Maru_. p. 8
95 Ibid., p. 37
96 Bessie Head. _A Woman Alone_. p. 69
The novel covers one year in the life of the protagonist, Elizabeth, a time when she has a mental breakdown and has to be committed to a mental asylum. The real world thus provides the entry point into the exploration of Elizabeth’s inner struggle. Elizabeth spends the larger part of the novel grappling with mental traumas and hallucinations, in which the two figures of Dan and Sello are constant factors. She confronts and interacts with them throughout the text and these confrontations provide the clues to the identity crises within Elizabeth, and also provide the clues towards the end of this crisis. There is no clear demarcation between what is real and what is imagined, and “indeed the novel suggests that there may not be much of a difference.”

Sello and Dan are alter egos of each other, and both are symbolic of male power, in particular sexual power. While Sello is the symbol of love and compassion, Dan is the epitome of destructive male egotism. It is also significant that the real-life figures of Sello and Dan are more or less strangers to Elizabeth. Dan’s power over Elizabeth is clearly sexual – he has a captivating, erotic, male presence that is able to penetrate through to Elizabeth’s sexual desires, in spite of her continual negation of the same. Throughout her life, Elizabeth preferred to see sex as dirty, shrouding her sexual desires by these means. To respond to Dan would therefore amount to a betrayal and expose her vulnerability to his exploitative power, while to reject him would mean a denial of her own needs, thereby encouraging the very kind of longing that makes her susceptible to Dan’s sexuality in the first place. Dan also reminds Elizabeth of her estranged husband, a sex-crazed man who had continuous affairs with others – both men and women – while married to her. For her therefore, sex always held associations of sadism child molestation, incest, homosexuality and even intercourse with animals. Her repressed sexual desires find their outlet through her nightmares. For her, sex is not just a union of two bodies, but both body and soul and thus, she finds it unable to agree with Tom when he says that “Men just sleep with women and that’s all there is to it.”

Dan makes things further difficult for Elizabeth. He does not hesitate to undertake powerful visual descriptions of his sexuality - for instance his gross act of “flaying his powerful penis in the air” or his persistent acts of sex and coupling a few feet away from Elizabeth’s tortured face. At

97 Alison Staudinger. ‘Sustainable Development: Identity and place in Bessie Head’s A Question of Power.’ Sajur. Vol 1, No 2. p.2
98 Lloyd W Brown. op cit. p.176
100 Bessie Head. A Question of Power. p.162
101 Ibid., p.13
the same time, Medusa taunts Elizabeth about not having a vagina, therefore clearly implying that any act of consummation between Elizabeth and Dan is not possible. These images are also clearly indicative of equating sexuality with violence and evil. Dan asserts his superiority over Elizabeth in other ways too. He taunts Elizabeth about her racial origins – and the implications are clear. As a black man, he is “doubly” superior to the coloured woman, and his racial “superiority” provides him with yet another excuse to display his male power. On the other hand, Sello is a milder figure, and his manipulation tactics much more subtle. Although he may seem to be representative of spiritual love totally antithetical to the vicious, vindictive authority of Dan, Sello represents a different kind of ambiguity. He engineers the morality play test between himself and Dan to test Elizabeth, and ultimately both Sello and Dan are manifestations of power, which for Elizabeth, are clearly associated with evil and Satan. As she says:

> Once you stared the important power maniac in the face you saw that he never saw people, humanity, compassion, tenderness. It was as though he had a total blank spot and only saw his own power, his influence, his self...\(^{103}\)

> On the other hand, love is associated with God and all things good and spiritual. It is “two people feeding each other” and not “living on the soul of the other”\(^{104}\) it consists of small everyday happenings – for instance, a little girl walking with wonder-struck eyes with the wind blowing through her hair. By the end of the novel, Sello and Dan, who are largely representative of the forces of evil and good, merge into one, suggesting that they are perhaps manifestations of the forces of good and evil within the protagonist herself.

> Throughout the novel, Elizabeth is therefore continually in conflict with these two images in her inner world, and as images they

> ... emphasise 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.

> More specifically, these male images represent the extent to which

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102 Alison Staudinger, op cit. p. 6
103 Bessie Head, op cit. p.19
104 Ibid., p.13
Elizabeth's self-awareness as a woman has internalised and must now deal with the various nuances of male symbols as the essence of power.\textsuperscript{105}

As in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, land offers a powerful medium through which one can hope to find identity in *A Question of Power* as well. However, the village cooperative described in Motabeng is much more complex than at Golema Mmidi. While Gilbert Balfour represented the white man alone in the earlier novel, *A Question of Power* depicts a community where there are a large number of workers of different races and communities who work together for the success of the village cooperative. A large amount of her knowledge about farming is gained from these foreigners. The use of foreigners in Head's narratives, whether Gilbert, Tom or anyone else is in tune with her conception of the 'new world' where all humankind may live and work in harmony and forces one to acknowledge that the white man may also have positive qualities. Ultimately, "there is only one God and his name is Man" and human goodness is intrinsic to the development of the individual and the community. The manner in which identity is clearly linked to land in Head’s worldview symbolises a gesture of belonging with the world around the individual and a means of accepting the complex social, gender and racial relations in society. The first place where Elizabeth is able to develop an identity and reconnect with people around her is through the community garden. It is here that she makes her first local friend Konesi, her saviour. Together, they work on the garden till it is filled with various vegetables, and ultimately the villagers also volunteer their help, signalling their acceptance of Elizabeth, in some ways at least. It is significant that the villagers nickname her 'Cape Gooseberry'. And as Alison Staudinger points out, Head's description of the berry as a "complete stranger... settling down and becoming a part of the village life of Motabeng"\textsuperscript{106} is certainly a telling comment. At the conclusion of the novel, she finally feels a sense of belonging with the land and the community. At a much larger level, she has also now claimed her place in the world and has "reaffirmed her faith in human potential". In doing so, she has asserted her identity "as a human, rather than only a coloured person, a South African or a woman."\textsuperscript{107} The demons of the past have been exorcised and she can look forward to a much more

\textsuperscript{105} Lloyd W Brown. op cit. p.177
\textsuperscript{106} Bessie Head. op cit. p.153
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., p.11

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secure and happier future. Bessie Head evocatively expresses these sentiments in the closing lines of the novel:

... as she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging.\textsuperscript{108} (my emphasis)

The other primary lack of identity that Elizabeth has had to contend with throughout her life is that of her racial origin. It has already been mentioned that Elizabeth, like Bessie Head, was a coloured, which meant that there was no place for her in apartheid-ridden South Africa, either with the socially superior whites, or the numerically superior blacks. The circumstances of her birth made things even tougher. Elizabeth describes life as a coloured as full of “permanent nervous tensions” where a “black man or woman was just born to be hated.”\textsuperscript{109} Consequently, the “only place she has ever known is within the de humanised world of post-colonial apartheid.”\textsuperscript{110} Even in Botswana, she initially finds it difficult as being a stateless person and a refugee, she is deprived from the identity of citizenship as well along with the political benefits that are associated with it. Further, she finds herself alienated in Motabeng, not being a part of the everyday conversations unique to the village, and not being able to progress beyond everyday greetings. The novel clearly shows Elizabeth struggling with her racial identity. As a half-European and conditioned by South African politics, she too betrays a hatred for black Africans in her subconscious:

You don’t really like Africans. You see his face? Its vacant and stupid – he’s slow-moving... you never really liked Africans, you only pretended to... She sprang to her feet...and shouted “Oh, you bloody bastard... Batswana”\textsuperscript{111}

The voices within also torment and jeer at her for the alleged sense of superiority at being half-European and therefore not ‘genuinely African’:

We don’t want you here. This is my land. These are my people.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{108} Bessie Head. op cit. p. 206
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Alison Staudinger. op cit. p. 3
\textsuperscript{111} Bessie Head. op cit. p.51
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., p.159
Ketu Katrak points out that "Elizabeth is doomed to be an outsider by coir, language and nationality." And to top it all, she is a woman, therefore, completing the extent of marginalisation in its entirety, and it is this that drags her "into a self-destructive tailspin." It is through her gradual process of recovery in Botswana and her involvement with the community garden that ultimately culminates in the gesture of belonging at the conclusion of the novel. It shows that she has finally made her identification with her racial identity as an African, but in the larger context, she has also made her peace with the whole of mankind and its power, which is not exclusionist, but one in which everyone can share. The village of sand – Motabeng – is ironically the place where Elizabeth is finally able to put down her roots and gain an identity for herself. As Eldred Jones has expressed: "'Power' has been understood; identity accepted and extended...”

After completing her three novels, Head deliberately moved away from the subjectivity, introspection and fantasy associated with them and turned her attention towards writing a history of Serowe, the village where she had taken up residence. She interviewed a number of people for her recording of the history of the Bamangwata tribe and in particular, the history of Khama, the Great. Out of the interviews that Head undertook for this project, she developed her collection of short stories, The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana village tales. The conflict between the old and the new world, along with Head's vision of her moral utopia, is perhaps brought out most clearly in this collection. The linking theme in the stories is "the status and position of women in Africa... being used as sexual objects... the difficulty of bringing up children in extreme poverty." The last four stories, and particularly, the title story focus closely on the breakdown of family life in Botswana, and the decision of women to fight back for their rights, their space in society and most importantly, their identity as women, but more importantly, as humans. Head uses the familiar concept of theme and exile and combines it deftly with the oral tradition of story telling to explore the various realms of female experience and creates a vision of society where women would be able to live with dignity and

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113 Ketu K Katrak. op cit. p. 23
114 Ibid.
115 See Alison Staudinger's article for explanation.
116 Eldred Jones. op cit. p. 88
117 Ibid.
honour. The arrangement of the stories is such that the women undertake two simultaneous journeys. While on the one hand, at the microcosmic level, they undertake an invisible, eternal journey within their souls, at a macrocosmic level, all the stories come together to form a unified whole, depicting women at various stages of the journey. The growth and development within themselves, as well as the changes they bring about in society allows their voice to be heard and assists in the ultimate creation of Head’s moral utopia – her mythical paradise.

The first two stories in the collection work around a refashioning of popular cultural myths, the next eight “examine the institutions and forces that shape the lives of villagers in Botswana”\textsuperscript{118} while the final four place a special emphasis on women, faced with situations when they have had to take direct responsibilities for their lives. Throughout the collection, Head manages a subtle juxtaposition between the old and the new – not only are the subtleties of the oral tradition easily and fluently transformed into the written form, within the stories too, the contrasts between the old and the new world are carefully woven into the narrative. The first and last stories of the collection signify the beginning and culminating stations of a journey. ‘The Deep River: A Story of ancient tribal migration’ is set in the pre-colonial period and serves as the prologue to the entire collection. It initiates many of the themes that go on to find greater expression in the succeeding stories. The decision of the village Chief, Sebemble to marry Rankwana, previously married to his father splits the conservative village into two, one supporting the Chief with courage and the other rejecting this new face. Sebemble’s decision to migrate to a new place with his wife and followers highlights the theme of exile and journey. Head draws parallels between Sebemble’s banishment from the village and the banishment of Adam and Eve from Paradise, but one is here led to believe that Sebemble’s new world will be a new Paradise, and the old world left behind, the so-called Paradise will “turn into a garden of evil ruled by his two evil brothers.”\textsuperscript{119} Head therefore reworks the old Biblical myth in her own way, where Paradise is symbolic of any corner of the world imparting love and goodness. In the succeeding stories, the tussle between the old and the new world is highlighted further, especially as the onset of colonialism brings about unparalleled changes in the lives of the villagers. The dichotomy is amply evident in matters of

\textsuperscript{118} C Brian Cox. \textit{African Writers.} p.313
religion, with a constant tug of war taking place between traditional Tsetwana custom and Christianity. Her personal life history made it impossible for Head to have any kind of liking or even sympathy for Christianity and missionary activity, and the antipathy is obvious in her works. As Head writes:

For years and years... I harboured a terrible and blind hatred for missionaries and Christianity which they represented. and once I left the mission I never set foot in a Christian Church again. \(^{120}\)

Head’s opinion of the Church is certainly not an isolated one. In apartheid South Africa, the Christian Church with all its associated symbols is white. and white is “the symbol of political domination and racial superiority.”\(^{121}\) The inherent dislike for the Christian Church is made obvious in stories like ‘Heaven is Not Closed’, where Heaven is seemingly closed to Ralaoke as he is an unbeliever in Christianity. The Christian missionary refuses to marry him to Galathebege, a Christian convert. Ralaoke’s preference for indigenous Setswana customs and the havoc the conflict between religions causes in his personal life, leads the old man Modise to comment:

... had Christian custom been so intolerant of Setswana custom that it could not bear the holiness of Setswana custom? Wasn’t there a place in Heaven too for Setswana custom?\(^ {122}\)

However, Head’s dislike of Christianity does not extend to the concept of faith per se. Her world view, in fact, is based on faith – in particular, in the goodness of humankind, and nowhere does this become more clearly manifest than in the story of Jacob. While Lebojang uses the name of God for business and capitalistic enterprises, Jacob transcends his troubles in life by a strong belief in his faith. His religion works on the basis of community cooperation, which for Head reflected “the root and foundation of African religion.”\(^ {123}\) No one is turned away from Jacob’s doors – man or woman, rich or poor. In fact, the exiled children are the first to enter his world and they become his faithful disciples. Ultimately true faith and belief win over activities of organised religion.

\(^{120}\) Bessie Head. *A Woman Alone.* p. 4
\(^{121}\) Bloke Modisane. *Blame me on history.* p.185
\(^{122}\) Bessie Head. ‘Heaven is not closed.’ *The Collector of Treasures.* p. 12
\(^{123}\) Bessie Head.*A Woman Alone.* p.52
The other stories in the collection depict both the positive and the negative aspects of the changing world. While education, especially female education is seen as a necessary tool for their emancipation, at the same time, Head stresses on the fact that positive change can only take place if women use their education for positive ends. Many of the villagers actually feel that education of women will cause destruction and harm the community. This view partly emanates from a fear that a disturbance in the existing status quo would cause to their well-settled lives, yet, on the other hand, it also transpires out of some eye-witness accounts where women have indeed destroyed the community by making a wrong use of their education, as seen in the characters of Life and Neo. By highlighting both the positive aspects as well as the negative pitfalls, Head attempts to present a balanced viewpoint, while never compromising on her view that female education is a must. The traditional villagers, ironically, never question the decision of the men, like Lesogo or Kegolithele to marry “women who were big money-earners.”

As Sara Chetin points out:

The villagers never question their own contradictory attitudes to money and status, a by-product of colonial education, but channel their malaise into an overzealous attachment to traditional ways, their defensiveness exposing their own vulnerability to change.

The education of women in Southern Africa is therefore considered by many to still be a privilege – at the most, educated women may get jobs as typists, bookkeepers or secretaries. The necessity of women’s education is paramount, for the development of both the individual and the community. It is also necessary to give the future generation a better standard of living. Literate women can go beyond traditional occupations of farming and housework and do other jobs. Education is also important in achieving a balance between male-female relationships. As Thato tells Tholo in ‘Hunting’:

Uneducated women... they are just there to be misused by men... those women work for them and support them and get them and get no happiness out of marriage.

124 Bessie Head. ‘Snapshots of a wedding.’ The Collector of Treasures. p.78
125 Sara Chetin. op cit p.133
126 Bessie Head. ‘Hunting.’ The Collector of Treasures. p.103
Anjum Katyal too notes that the asymmetrical power balance that exists in male-female relationships results out of illiteracy in women and leads to a loss of self-worth—"women become hard and callous with no values of tenderness and respect."

This is significant, because in apartheid-ridden South Africa, a "disproportionately large number of women were consigned to the impoverished bantustans."  

However, Head is also clear that the negative use of education is not to be tolerated. Neo uses her educational qualifications to abuse and taunt the villagers, and as a result is disliked by all. Life too, uses her experience of life in the city of Johannesburg to negative use. Instead of returning and educating the natives, she "pollutes" the village by setting up shop as the first prostitute of the village, destroying lives and families in the process. It is the final four or five stories in the collection that actually depict a positive change in the attitude towards women. ‘Kgotla’ is a story highlighting the positive aspects of education, as well as dealing with issues of petty jealousy and polygamy. Rose uses her education not only to pay back the money owed to Tsietsio, but to also publicly challenge the system of polygamy. The final two stories in the collection succeed in bringing together all the themes and issues related with women and their role and position in society. The protagonist in ‘The Collector of Treasures’ is Dikeledi Mokopi, in jail for murdering her husband by chopping off his genitals. This is a graphic portrayal of women’s challenge to the authorities of patriarchy and portrays a society wherein they are sick of being regarded as dogs in society and as sub-humans. Dikeledi refuses to be used as a doormat by her long-estranged husband, whose patriarchal conditioning not only allows him to flaunt his various conquests in front of his wife, but also leads him to demand pertinent displays of conjugal alliance from her. He uses sex to blackmail her, and finally when she cannot take it any more, Dikeledi kills him. Like the other women who are in prison with her for the same crime, Dikeledi is not sorry. Having viewed the marital relationship between her neighbours Paul and Kenalepe, so much in contrast to hers, Dikeledi has been exposed to male-female relationships of "bonding" rather than "bondage" and is made painfully aware that another more
harmonious world can exist. Barbara Harlow locates Dikeledi’s actions in a historical framework, determined by African history and at the same time, a challenge to it. This is a major step forward that will perhaps lead to a better life for women in the long run. The men are really the victims of their historical heritage, who use women as scapegoats for their destructiveness.¹³⁰ Dikeledi’s husband is thus compared to the stray dogs who run after the same bitch, the man accused of being “responsible for the complete breakdown of family life”¹³¹ in South Africa.

The relationship shared by Paul and Kenalepe in this story and by Thalo and Thato in the concluding story ‘Hunting’ embody a ‘love idealism’ combined with a ‘sexual idealism’ and offer a glimpse of a possibly glorious future, if only one is able to transcend the miserable reality of the present times. It is a society where survival is guaranteed and people can choose how to lead their lives. Thalo’s choice of Thato as wife is based on this principle of choice. What sets her apart from many of the other women is that “she could think” rather than being a “gay and frivolous plaything with an empty head.”¹³² Although she has undergone hardship and suffering, with an illegitimate child being a direct manifestation of her past, she is portrayed as a strong character, who has the ability to live with various conflicts and to “sift and sort out all the calamities”¹³³ of life. It is an ideal relationship in every sense – Thalo and Thato are both endearingly ‘good’ people, two sides of the same coin who “merge together to create one vision of how people could live.”¹³⁴ The mythical paradise that Head has been searching is found here – a world, which accepts and does not exclude, which does not blame but understands. Moreover, even the Chiefs are not power-hungry exploiters, but ordinary people who live and work with everyone else.¹³⁵ The “tender compromise” has been achieved:

Head is no longer reconstructing a world based on men’s memories, but is creating “what could be” through the lively voice of the female storyteller....

¹³⁰ Ibid.
¹³¹ Bessie Head. ‘Hunting’. The Collector of Treasures. P 91
¹³² Ibid., p.108
¹³³ Ibid.
¹³⁴ Sara Chetin. op cit. p.132
¹³⁵ Ibid., p.136
Head has created new symbols, a new mythology ... a paradise based on an ideal compromise between the "individual" face and the "one face."\[^{136}\]

During the course of the journey however, we meet a wide variety of women, many of whom, contribute, in their own ways, to the gradually evolving face of women in the community. It is significant that in spite of being treated as an inferior form of life, many of the women in Head's stories do enjoy a position of respect in the community. Galathebege, in many ways, is like Thato, a thinking woman, but ironically, she is denied the privilege to think for herself until her death. Against her better judgement, her conditioning has taught her to follow the dictates of men, and thus she tells Ralaoke:

What you mean... is that I must choose you over my life with the Church. I have a great love in my heart for you, so I choose you.\[^{137}\]

She therefore emerges as a victim of society and its practices, and is forced to stifle the real desires of her heart. Johanna, as the wife of Jacob in the story 'Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing priest' is one further step ahead. She brings stability into Jacob's life, running his house with clockwork precision and according to traditional custom, bringing him back a childhood he had never experienced. She is a perfect companion to her partner, and in their constructed paradise, children for the pillars from which the paradise derives its strength.

However, other women in the village are responsible for losing the political and cultural space that has been given to them, for instance, Mma-Mompati and Life Morapedi. Mma-Mompati, in spite of earning the mask of the village saint is, in reality exposed as a power-hungry woman, interested only in her material comforts. Her façade as the wronged wife is the mask behind which she conceals her true self, in the process fooling the community. The only person who can see through the façade is her daughter in law, Mary Pule, whose thin, lanky frame also "concealed a tenacious will."\[^{138}\] Mary, equally power-hungry as her mother-in-law, plays and beats her at her own game, and emerges as the winner by not only destroying Mma-Mompati, but covertly assuming her place in the power set up, mask et al. Both these

\[^{136}\] Ibid.
\[^{137}\] Bessie Head. 'Heaven is not Closed.' The Collector of Treasures. p.11
\[^{138}\] Bessie Head. 'The Village Saint.' The Collector of Treasures: p.17
women are symbolic of backward regression instead of forward progress, and are in the quest of a world based on power, instead of the shared ideals of love, and that is the reason, why, for Head, these women ultimately need to be destroyed.

*Tales of Tenderness and Power,* another collection of short stories by Head, was published posthumously in 1991. The collection contains three unpublished stories, with the remainder having previously appeared in various journals and magazines. As the title indicates, the stories of the collection juxtapose moments of tenderness within the community, with strains of power struggle, which may affect the entire existence of the community. “Power is an effect of the hierarchical system which structures even the most intimate personal relations. It creates the positions of authority and of subservience which people assume.” 139

The most common manifestation of the power struggle can be seen in the relationships between men and women, a fact amply demonstrated in all of Head’s works. In this collection, the strain of tenderness is most apparent in pieces like ‘The Old Woman’ or ‘The Woman from America’ or even ‘Snowball’. In most of the others, the tenderness alternates with visions of power- battles, and have their roots in Head’s earlier characters. For instance, the wife in ‘Property’, who enjoys the looks in her husband’s eye as she moves about like “the tall, cool grasses that swayed in the summer wind”, and hides her real self behind a mask of subservience as that is what society expects of her. Gradually, however, she begins to take advantage of her husband’s tenderness, misinterprets it for weakness, and assumes the dominant role in the household, forcing the husband to exert his authority as man and husband over her. The moment he does so, his magic disappears. As Annette Horn remarks, “tenderness and magic seem incompatible with the clearly defined duties of the marriage contract”, 140 which, in the story is compared to a slave contract. The use of authority, comments the narrator, turns this into a “normal” marriage at last. 141 Many years later, the story comes full circle, as the son refuses to marry a woman chosen by the village elders:

I have a different view of my future wife... For one thing, I shall choose her for myself. For another, my wife shall never be my property. She will never be purchased to be the slave in my mother’s house. She will never carry a pot

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139 Annette Horn. *op cit.* p.1
140 Ibid.
141 Bessie Head. ‘Property.’ *Tales of tenderness and power.* p.70
of water on her Head and will never collect firewood in the bush. As for the cattle which belong to me, you may all do with them as you wish.\textsuperscript{142}

The education of the son has enabled him to hold a different and more humanistic viewpoint, where his wife will be a human being with an identity rather than an object. It is the illiterate villagers, who still hold on to the traditional ways of life. The son is in many ways, a reincarnation of his father, a fact realised by his grandmother, who smiles with the acknowledgement that “he has this tendency to know his own mind.”\textsuperscript{143} ‘Property’ also presents the conflicts that are prevalent in society. By depriving her son of education, the mother attempts to shield him from progress and emancipation. This will enable her to exert her authority over him. In many ways, she is like Mary Pule, the only difference being that Mary exerted her dominance and authority over her husband. ‘Power Struggle’ is also reminiscent of the struggles seen between two Chiefs in many of Head’s works, whether it is \textit{When Rain Clouds Gather} or \textit{Maru} or even the opening story in \textit{The Collector of Treasures}. Head sees pre-colonial history as a dialogue between the Chiefs and their people, based on a choice between good and evil, a fact amply demonstrated in ‘The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration’. As colonialism sets in, this dialogue is gradually replaced by slavery and exploitation, and in the changing scenario, it is the women who are the most affected, constrained as they are by social, racial and gender boundaries. Colonialism therefore aggravates the hegemonic set up society and naturally, this leads to the use and abuse of power. In ‘The Power Struggle’ Head describes the rivalry between two brothers for their father’s throne. While Davhana is the rightful heir to the throne, his brother Baeli, whose personality “turned inwards into a whirlpool of darkness”\textsuperscript{144} is jealous of his brother’s popularity and imminent power and conspires with other members of the clan to usurp his position. Ultimately, Davhana, like Sebemble chooses to leave his village and seek refuge elsewhere. He is reunited with former members of his clan, and once again, Head’s clear message is that it is here that the real moral utopia may be achieved. Other stories dealing with the use and abuse of power in the collection are ‘The General’ and ‘A Period of Darkness.’ In the post-colonial period, the abuse of power multiplies and “unchecked

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., p. 71
\textsuperscript{144} Bessie Head. ‘A Power struggle’ \textit{Tales of tenderness and power}, p. 74
individualism seems to take over from the communal structures of the pre-colonial era." The wheel has therefore turned full circle. The post-colonial world has led to the creation of a new breed of power mongers – the neo-colonial elite. To achieve harmony in society however and truly achieve democracy, it is imperative that individualistic needs work in unison with those of the community – a “synthesis” - and this is the moral of ‘The General’ where Head portrays a “utopian vision of the professor and the general both abdicating from power and tilling the earth together.”

The common theme that joins together the works of Bessie Head therefore are related to the theme of journey, exile, a marked distaste for ancient tribal practices, especially those that negate the value of a woman in society. The theme of journey is linked to the larger concept of boundaries, both territorial and metaphorical. In her first work When Rain Clouds Gather, Makhaya is seen to be physically crossing over from South Africa to Botswana, in the hope of a better and less racial world. In Maru, the marriage between Margaret and Maru, suggesting a merger of boundaries, in spite of all its problems is seen as a sign of racial acceptance of the Masarwa, bringing them freedom. Maru therefore sees the crossing of many layers of boundaries. Margaret coming to Dilepe, her name, which is distinctly English, her initial lack of identification with her fellow tribespeople later converted to their gradual acceptance of her and finally constructing her marriage as a symbolic freedom for all of them. During the course of the novel, all the restrictive borders are therefore broken down. In A Question of Power, Elizabeth too makes the physical journey from South Africa to the village of Motabeng, a journey that, as already mentioned, has clear parallels with Head’s own life. It involved the encountering and crossing of a number of physical boundaries – from the hospital to the foster home, to the orphanage and the mission school and ultimately towards marriage, divorce and the final crossing over to Serowe on an ‘exit permit’. At the mental level, Head had to deal with the demons inside her and overcome her antipathy for the opposite sex. One notices a vibrant description of this mental journey through the medium of Elizabeth in A Question of Power, as she grapples with her nervous breakdown and aims to regain her sanity. The

145 The term communal is here used, not in the sectarian terms that we associate with it today, but in the larger context of the entire community without any differences. 
146 Annette Horn. op cit. p. 2
147 Ibid.
Collector of Treasures too, it has already been mentioned, is chronologically arranged as a journey, crossing borders and boundaries, with many small journeys within. While the opening story depicts a physical movement, a 'migration', as stated in the title of the story itself, other stories show the protagonists on the journey of life, making mistakes and learning from them in the process.

As discussed in detail above and previously. South African literary history during the apartheid regime has numerous examples of writers who were either exiled from the country, or who chose to leave on their own accord, crippled as they were by rigid censorship laws that aimed to define what they could or could not write. Bessie Head was one of the writers who chose the latter option. But much before leaving, she writes of life in South Africa:

One is constantly losing friends these days. Some of the refugees, like my friend, ‘D.B.’ (Dennis Brutus) did not want to leave... For those of us who are still here, life becomes lonelier and intensely isolated. South Africa is an intensely lonely, intensely sad country. It must have always been, but you only begin to notice the loneliness when all your friends are gone... 148

Head’s departure to Botswana is also a journey from the inhuman world of racial hatred experienced in South Africa to a country that had been so lightly colonised that many of its pre-colonial traditions remained intact. As one of the few writers to choose their adopted locale as the location of her texts, Head is also perhaps the only writer who moves from the city to the village and produced fiction grounded in the rural, communal world. Her writings are therefore a reversal of the common motif of ‘Jim comes to Jo’burg’, signifying the movement of the protagonist from the village to the city. Simultaneously, therefore, they also provide a link between “South African literature’s amnesia towards rural space and its amnesia towards the experience of women.” 149 Head’s writings therefore seek to deal with this amnesia, and provide treatment for the same. The women in her novels who move from the town to the city are generally shown to settle down well in the village community, by grounding roots through an attachment with land and marking a clear break from their past. In cases, where borders clash, there can be only chaos and destruction. Life

148 Bessie Head. A Woman Alone. p. 2
149 Erica Carter. op cit. p.250
Morapedi seeks to replicate the glitz and glamour of the city as she sets up shop as the first prostitute in her village. In doing so, she causes excitement and curiosity no doubt in the minds of men who were fascinated with having to pay for sex for the first time, but ultimately, she causes destruction to all those around her, especially Lesogo, a good man, but driven to despair and murder as a result of Life's actions. In making sex a purely commercial activity working on the dynamics of demand and supply, Life adds a new dimension to this side of human relationships, where previously sex had been regarded as simply being a part and parcel of everyday life, as essential to survival as food and water. Similarly, in the tale 'The Wind and the Boy', boundaries and borders keep merging – the pre-colonial and neo-colonial, the Western and the indigenous. The boy 'Friedman' is named after a foreign doctor, his mother cannot take care of him as she is working in the city, leaving him in the care of his grandmother. The name Friedman itself is allegorical – with clear associations with 'freed man'; the suggestion being that the boy has become a free man simply by hearing stories of Western progress, especially of Robinson Crusoe. Crusoe's world is constructed by the child’s grandmother as a paradise, where brave warriors achieve heroic deeds and become masters of technology. But when Friedman attempts the same deeds, he is destroyed. The erstwhile Friday here attempts to take on the role of the 'master' and educate the villagers. He succeeds in teaching the other boys minor details but as he tries to master technology he is destroyed. Head is not however, declaring that any use of technology is bad. She is of the firm opinion that it should be used, but depending on the situation and circumstances. The western myth of Robinson Crusoe is clearly a misfit in the African context, especially as the novel Robinson Crusoe is regarded as symbolic of the assertion of colonial hegemony. Indiscriminate and unnatural merging of borders, therefore can only lead to chaos and destruction. The ending of the story makes it clear that neo-colonialism and ardent individualism would be destructive if not dealt with sensitively and properly. When it is done so, there can be peace and happiness, as depicted in 'Hunting', which, as has already been pointed out, forms the cornerstone of Head's moral utopia.

The question of boundaries becomes even more crucial in the context of the women, who in addition to all other boundaries, are also faced with gender boundaries, one that is the most difficult to overcome. While women in many African

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150 Sara Chetin. op cit.
countries enjoyed equal status with men in pre-colonial times, colonialism reduced them to being limited within the four walls of the house. Head’s stories show women characters in a continuous struggle for identity through land. Paulina, Margaret and Elizabeth have all undertaken the physical journeys from one locale to another, they are now faced with the much more difficult task of asserting their identity in the new land. As they attempt to do so, the tension between their agricultural authority and the subordination to local patriarchy becomes apparent. Paulina, in spite of her leadership qualities, cannot help but feel uncomfortable when Makhaya volunteers to do the housework. Similarly, the mental trauma within Elizabeth is partly due to her perceived lack of womanhood. Her husband, it is stated, has affairs with other women as well as men, an ample demonstration of his male prowess. Sex therefore becomes a dirty word for her, and unlike many other women, she loses the one way in which she can exercise power over men. As Elizabeth begins to regain her sanity, she simultaneously begins to find identification with the land. It is significant that the people who help her are all foreigners from across the world, suggesting yet another merging of borders and boundaries in the post-colonial context, making the world a smaller, but in this case, a more harmonious place to live in. While Paulina, Margaret and Elizabeth ultimately succeed in carving out an identity with the land and the community around them in spite of the gender obstacles, the women who use the body simply as a tool of power are destroyed, whether Life or Mma-Mompati. The identity of women as mothers is also significantly present in Head’s writings, and once again there is a wide panorama of women as mothers. Paulina may be said to be an uncaring mother, who sends her son out to live at the cattle-post and does not have the time to think about him before it is too late. It is only when her daughter tells her that her brother has been complaining of feeling unwell that Paulina’s maternal instincts are roused, and she completes the half-knit sweater to send to him. Unfortunately, by then, it is too late. Margaret Cadmore is not a biological mother, but nevertheless, she has the qualities associated with being a mother, primarily those of tenderness and compassion. Horace Goddard writes that

In Maru, Margaret … becomes a symbol of motherhood (though she bears no children) and one of female liberation and power. Head writes about a
liberation not only from a colonial past but also from the African male's racialistic, sexist and power-seeking tendencies.151

Goddard perhaps sees Margaret’s marriage to Maru and the consequent sense of freedom felt by the Masarwa as being equivalent to virtual motherhood, with the roles reversed. It is the woman here who breaks free, cutting off the umbilical cord that has hitherto bound and made her subordinate to men. Elizabeth too, is not a good mother. In fact, in this novel, the son is not even named, suggesting impersonality and a distance created in the relationship between mother and child. In many of the stories, we see women taking on the role of mothers, in the absence of the biological mothers. Johanna becomes mother to all the exiled children who enter her house, Sejonseye takes on the job of bringing up Friedman in the absence of his mother, Paul and Kenalepe undertake the responsibility of bringing up Dikeledi’s children when she is in jail and Mma-Millipede has acted as a surrogate mother to Maria in *When Rain Clouds Gather* ever since the death of her natural mother. Traditionally, becoming a mother is seen as the easiest way of giving a woman identity and respectability in society. By portraying a wide range of women characters, Head shows that ultimately, it is possible to retain one’s womanhood (of which becoming a mother is one of the symbols) while carving out a place and identity for oneself in society - thereby succeeding in achieving the perfect compromise.

Therefore, one can see the many ways that Bessie Head’s women characters attempt to carve out an identity for themselves. It is clear that Head is here propagating an African vision of feminism in Southern Africa, not a radical, exclusionist vision of the world, but one in which men and women are equal partners, and work together in harmony. African feminism is a strategy that the women in Africa have had to consciously adopt for their own survival and identity in the face of race, class and gender oppression. The necessity to be self-reliant, resourceful, and to some extent, even militant, forms the core of their feminism. There is the realisation and the acceptance that the world is inherently patriarchal, but also the belief that the private growth of both men and women is a pre-requisite to social change. While Head wrote all her stories from Botswana, the tales on the whole take their inspiration from her early years in South Africa and the brutal experiences of apartheid, which

151 Horace Goddard, op cit. p.108
sought to create more and more boundaries in society on purely racial and legal lines. It is therefore perhaps significant that Head preferred to call herself a Southern African writer, encapsulating a much larger world than the rigid confines of either South Africa or Botswana. The various journeys that Head undertook in her life – from one country to another, from the city to the village, from mental trauma to spiritual acceptance have all contributed to her own growth as an individual, and furthermore, succeeded in challenging South African literature’s traditional obsession with the male, urban space. And indeed, her writings, though located within a small village community and their everyday lives deal with themes that are universal – of oppression, abuse and misuse of power and gender discrimination. The postcolonial vision of the world that Head sees would have all artificial divides disappear – just as in Motabeng, men and women of different countries and communities would live and work in unity. There will definitely be people to provide leadership to the community; they however will not be power hungry leaders, but rather the first among equals in the community. It is the desire for power that becomes the source of all evil - therefore, if this desire can be negated by reworking the rules within which society operates, the worlds, according to Bessie Head will indeed become a much better place to live in. the women in Head’s novels do realise that in order to make their individuality complete, they require the presence of the male. Similarly, characters like Gilbert, Makhaya and Maru also hold progressive notions about women, encouraging them to come out of the confines of the house and participate in all aspects of community life. While retaining the traditional privileging of family and community, Bessie Head’s women characters nevertheless succeed in asserting their own individualism and independence, and this enables them to carve out an independent identity for themselves in society.