

BESSIE HEAD SYMPOSIUM
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GABORONE, BOTSWANA

ABSTRACTS

Cecil Abrahams, Syracuse University, “Bessie Head, Peacemaking, and Conflict in Southern Africa”

As a longtime friend and critic of Bessie Head’s work, I intend to explore her solutions to the conflicts in Southern Africa and to reflect on how her views have influenced the peacemakers in our part of Africa.

Bobana Badisang, University of Botswana, “‘Women at Point Zero’: A Comparative Analysis of Prison Narratives in Nawal El Saadawi’s Work and Bessie Head’s ‘The Collector of Treasures’”

This paper analyses two works based on stories of murder-accused common-law women prisoners set in different African regions, Egypt and Botswana. The narratives depict women in incarceration, Firdaus and Dikeledi, who have been captives of social structures. Firdaus murders her pimp in self defense, when she can no longer cope with his demands for unlimited rights to share her prostitution proceeds, while Dikeledi murders her estranged husband to escape his demands for unlimited conjugal rights and humiliation at his hands although he has abandoned her and their three young sons for eight years, will not grant her a divorce and has moved in with another woman. The paper identifies a number of commonalities between the two inmates, Firdaus on death row and Dikeledi, a lifer, their social class and cultural backgrounds. After trial and conviction, both women appear indifferent and far from remorseful regarding their crimes; both surrender to the police without any struggle and for the first time hold their heads high as if to celebrate some emancipation, although they have been convicted of murder. The paper further looks at circumstances that have led to their crimes as narrated by the two incarcerated women, some paradox in their lives. Orphaned at a tender age, poor and downtrodden, both are brought up by their uncles and married off primarily for ridding the families of liabilities and for economic gain. While Firdaus, a secondary school graduate, is married off to her aunt’s retired and disabled pensioner uncle, Dikeledi, a semi-literate young woman, is married off to her uncle’s civil servant friend. They are both stuck in loveless and abusive marriages. In her short-lived escape, Firdaus faces life’s choppy journey of seek honour through paid employment, languishes in poverty, experiences a “love” stint, goes through a struggle complicated by having to fight oppressive structures. Dikeledi, the collector of treasures, possesses a combination of rare skills. As a seamstress and the village roof-thatching expert, she has earned a modest, decent but gratifying living as a single parent, until crisis hits the family.

Linda-Susan Beard, Bryn Mawr College, “Bessie Head’s Epistolary Art”

The 2,000 extant items of correspondence that constitute the epistolary component of Bessie Head’s literary estate are indispensable tools, treasured artifacts, and provocative representatives of a genre too little discussed in African Studies. Available to an extraordinarily limited audience outside South Africa and Botswana, these texts—which

pass along a continuum from bookkeeping and royalty inquiries to articulations of personal struggles and intellectual discovery—are integral to the study of Head’s life, her artistic experimentation, and her ongoing iconoclastic explosion of genre categories and expectation. The letters, in and of themselves, come close to an unmediated autobiographical voice, one as far as possible removed from the biographical voice over and quasi-psychological ventriloquism of too much Head criticism. An unconscious, perhaps, antidote to the persistent attempts at a mental autopsy in the guise of literary criticism, the letters offer a window on the developing mystical sensibility of a world soul. They do provide first-hand and first person experience of Head’s struggle with an undiagnosed and untreated manic depression, but in terms which render the disease, like the writer’s exilic consciousness, components of a fecund contemplative intelligence; she ceases to be reduced to medical terminology or passport status in the epistolary world of her own making.

The correspondence collection reveals Bessie-as-reader of the texts she found paradigmatic in her own formation as a writer in sometimes lengthy exercises of critical and theoretical practice. In these handwritten and typed pages, the Serowe writer’s own history is interwoven with that of the legendary and mythical Botswana she initially encounters and then reinvents in her exploration of the chronicle. Head provides us with the hidden evidence of textual interpolation imposed on we know not how many African writers by Heinemann and others; her commentary offers a narrative history of response to editorial colonization we have not had much access to thus far. Head-as-critic surfaces in the analysis of her own works she provides for several of her correspondents. The identification of Margaret Cadmore as an unveiled autobiographical referent occurs in a letter to someone enquiring about an individual by the very same name. Head’s personal terror in the face of “power maniacs” such as “D.B.” enriches our understanding of their omnipresence in the second and third novels of the trilogy.

Bessie’s vulnerable tenderness finds voice as well in the lengthy exchanges with some who begin as total strangers, meeting her initially in print and then in the growth of a friendship built on letter exchange. Several of these bonds of shared ideas and sentiment end with death leaving in their wake hundreds of conversations captured for posterity on thin pieces of paper or aerogramme.

Bessie makes yet another contribution to African literary study by insisting that the epistolary be given its due alongside fiction, chronicle, and the sermonic. Tied to the letter as a conduit to the life of the mind and the spirit of residents of four continents, Bessie breathes life into a medium that is not merely functional, but mimetic of so much of her speech-in-writing.

Bruce Bennett, University of Botswana, “Ecumenical Readings of Bessie Head”

[NOTE: The paper is still at a fairly early draft stage, and the ideas as summarized here may not correspond exactly with the final production.]

Bessie Head's work was profoundly influenced by her religious thought. This paper looks briefly at some of the ways in which Hindu/Buddhist and Christian ideas interrelate in her work. As is well known, her own religious identification was with Hinduism and perhaps also to some extent with Buddhism, and she was critical of Christianity. However, she had had a Christian education, and Christian references play an important part in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. (If only this text existed, Bessie Head would probably be categorized as a Christian writer.) In *A Question of Power*,

Hindu/Buddhist concepts are central, and Bessie Head makes her crucial critique of Christianity on the grounds that "man is not holy to man", but in fact simultaneously shows awareness of the problems of her argument.

Maitseo Bolaane, University of Botswana, “*Maru* and Contemporary Basarwa Identity”

In her novel *Maru*, Bessie Head explores the situation of a Mosarwa woman who moves into mainstream Tswana society. I will argue that Head’s novel provides a model for understanding the status of many young Basarwa today: young people who are breaking into the mainstream of the society and who are now beginning to assert their own identity as Basarwa. The University of Botswana/University of Tromsø Collaborative Programme for San Capacity Building facilitates San youth access to tertiary education through scholarships. The issue of San identity and assertiveness is becoming equally important to these young people. The aim of this paper is to provide a comparison between Margret Cadmore and contemporary San youth on issues of identity as they interact with the main Tswana group.

Charlotte Broad, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, “Translating/Writing/Gendering Cultures”

This paper proposes to challenge the premise that Bessie Head’s *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* “speaks for itself”, as one critic put it, by focussing on the interrelated issues of translating, writing and gendering cultures. I contend that these issues are central to the understanding of this text, which differs greatly from its alleged model, Ronald Blythe’s *Akenfield* (1967), written from the heart of the former British empire. In order to demonstrate my contention, I shall firstly explore and question the many different roles Head plays as a cultural mediator in this work, particularly in the context of the interviews she conducted with local people, in which the act of translation, although central to the Histories/histories narrated here, is hardly ever mentioned. Translation, inevitably a fraught enterprise, includes transporting knowledge from one language to another, from one culture to another, and teaches, among many other things, that we have to learn and respect other sign systems and differences of every kind. Generally speaking, the act of reading invites us, if against our will, to translate stories from other lands into our own worlds, but what so often happens is that they appropriate us. My second concern focuses on the so-called source and authentication for postcolonial texts. The birdcall at dawn is Head’s inspiration for her act of writing; it articulates her dream that every African should be a storyteller—a player and a dancer. Does every storyteller in this text hear this call? Given that Ronald Blythe wrote the “authenticating” Foreword to Head’s text, I propose to challenge the connection of *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*, a postcolonial text written from a gendered perspective, to Blythe’s text, and to demonstrate the ways in which Head has also politicised her narration of village life in *Serowe*.

Sonja Darlington, Beloit College, “Bessie Head’s Response to ‘The Call of the Global Green’”

William Slaymaker in “Echoing the Other (*PMLA* Special Topic: Globalizing Literary Studies, vol. 115, no. 1, January 2001), identifies the few black African writers and critics who write ecological literature and criticism. His argument is that “the choral response to the green global call is not static noise (140),” rather there are promising

signals that a general concern for the health of the earth and its resources is beginning to prevail. By analyzing fifteen undergraduate papers at a small liberal arts college in Wisconsin on Bessie Head's writing on land and nature in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the case can be made that Bessie Head has an understanding and commitment to environmental issues, that lays claims to larger than local issues. In Head's terms, the environment is able to shape lives and heal hearts and if it is utilized in good ways can be self-sustaining. Her utopian vision includes a cooperative agricultural venture, which transforms an otherwise drought-prone region, into a small scale green environment. Convincingly, Head presents a natural history of Golema Mmidi, privileges its open spaces for nonhumans, holds its people accountable for a healthy environment, and provides a chronicle of its environmental change. Head's attitudes towards the environment are equal to her writing craft. In other words, her careful observations of nature, her descriptive scientific details, her enthusiasm for cooperative farm management, her desire for a sustainable environment, and her unreserved demand for more fitting resources, serve as the magnets to which her writing craft is boldly attached. Head hears the call of the Global Green, at a time when few writers recognize the importance of the limited global environment, which encircles everything nonhuman and human. In this paper, my goal is to hold up to the light the effective story telling by Bessie Head, which continues to transform readers, so that they are able to see the environment from her perspective in Botswana, a distant but also a global place. As part of my presentation, I am hoping to bring one of the fifteen undergraduate students to the symposium at Gaborone. She will address students' interpretations, while I will put their work into a larger perspective on Head's contribution to so-called ecological literature, a term which has been limited to writers such as the Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare. My argument is that Bessie Head was ecologically aware and her novel addresses environmental conditions, which are generalizable to a global audience.

Gillian Stead Eilersen, Denmark, "Miss Marpling Around Southern Africa: The Confessions of an Amateur Researcher"

As it's a festive occasion and probably the last chance I'll ever have of telling it, I'd like to give an account of how I traced Bessie Head's white family and rescued, at the last moment, all the material relating to her school years at St Monica's.

Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, Miami University of Ohio, "'Raising Hell': Body Politics in the Letters of Bessie Head"

"I enjoy raising hell. If there is no hell to raise I get out of style. Most times it is I who take the most blows and learn the deepest lessons."—Bessie Head (in a letter to Randolph Vigne, Nov. 14, 1968)

This paper explores configurations of the black female body in Bessie Head's letters, particularly those written to Randolph Vigne between 1965–1979. Approaching this collection of letters as autobiography, I examine Head's narrative construction of her "self" as an embodied catalyst for change and controversy. She writes: "I'm a hell of an ugly woman...Not the kind of woman men take a second look at but HERE I've created chaos and confusion..." (Nov. 27, 1965). In this and other letters Head repeatedly casts her body in a negative framework. Is this "tongue in cheek" or an actual reflection of her personal perspective? Whatever the case, this critical view of "self" suggests that her body is a text that writes and is written upon by internal and external forces intricately tied to Head's sense of belonging and estrangement.

Tom Holzinger, Serowe, “Bessie Head’s Black Antecedents”

I wish to whack a wasps’ nest about Bessie Head’s parentage. I will begin with Mr Kenneth Stanley Birch’s recollections about his family (he is Bessie’s maternal uncle); these were published in *The Birch Family: An Introduction to the White Antecedents of the Late Bessie Amelia Head*. I believe that this pamphlet contains circumstantial evidence that two people – Alice Birch, Bessie’s grandmother, and Morison Abel, a lawyer who did some work for the Birch family – conspired to cover up all evidence related to the liaison between Bessie’s mother Toby Birch and an unidentified man of colour that led to Bessie’s birth.

I believe that Toby later told Alice Birch the identity of Bessie’s father. Perhaps because this man had worked for Abel, or perhaps because Abel was Toby’s legal counsel, Alice told (and threatened?) Morison Abel and no one else. Before her death she seems to have told at least part of the story to her son Kenneth Birch, who is now the family caretaker. I would like to give details of the circumstantial evidence – including two first-hand interviews with Mr Birch – and consider the possibility of identifying candidates for Bessie Head’s black paternity.

Nono Kgafela, University of Botswana, “The Depiction of the Caste System in Bessie Head’s *Maru* and Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*”

Maru and *Untouchable* depict the caste system as a blot on religious and social institutions across societies of different racial background. The system perpetrates structural and moral sins committed against the marginalized groups in the society, which leads to physical and moral barriers between the “upper” caste and the “lower” caste: between the Tswana and Basarwa in *Maru* and the Brahmin and untouchables in *Untouchable*. How does the system impact on the lives of the underdog socially, religiously, and psychologically?

Ann Langwadt, University of Copenhagen, “Continuity & Roots: Narrative Identity in Fiction and Autobiography”

A standard view of narrative identity suggests that identity is constructed like a narrative and that we live our lives like a story we construct about ourselves, a story which shares many features with literature (such as continuity, causality and chronology). This paper will present theories of strategies of self-representation within and beyond the limits of fictional and autobiographical genres and focus on Bessie Head’s writings as a case study of a writer’s search for continuity and roots. Bessie Head described herself as a person whose background and origins had been obliterated by history and her writings can be read as a serial take on self-representation and an attempt to construct a narrative identity for herself both personally and historically.

Grant Lilford, Uganda Christian University, “Motswana ke mang? Tswana Culture and Values in Plaatje, Head and McCall Smith”

These three very different writers define Tswana culture and values as central to their writing. Sol Plaatje, the only Motswana among the three, sets the dignity and inclusiveness of the Barolong as a counterpoint to the uncivilised values of both the Ndebele and the Boers in his novel *Mhudi*. Even as a seminal South African nationalist and pan-Africanist, Plaatje celebrates the uniqueness and even superiority of Tswana values. Alexander McCall-Smith echoes Plaatje’s plaudits. As an outsider, McCall-Smith could be identified perhaps as a Tswana-phile. In his *Number One Ladies’*

Detective Agency, he asserts the superiority of the “old Batswana ways” of doing things. By contrast, his Scottish writings are very critical of contemporary European society and its values, and it is clear that he believes that the Batswana have something to teach the world. While Bessie Head is more critical, particularly in *A Question of Power* and *Maru*, she also found a great deal to admire. Her admiration is most pronounced in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* but also surfaces in her other writings. Head spent most of her adult life as an intimate outsider in Botswana, by turns celebrating the hospitality of the society and lamenting its narrowness. This paper will explore concurrences and differences in the three writers, questioning whether it is possible for literature to define culture and noting whether the novels reflect changes and consistencies in Tswana society.

Sarah Mandow, England, “Boundaries and Beyond: The Dynamics of Resistance and Control in the Work of Bessie Head”

The paper I would like to present is based on my reading of the work of Bessie Head, in particular *A Question of Power*, that takes as its starting point the inherent problem of being a white woman reading the literary works of a woman of colour. Bessie Head was a woman of mixed parentage, denied her white mother from birth, living and writing in exile from apartheid South Africa, experiences that structure her writing and in so doing, undermine and lay bare the dualisms of oppression.

Strategies used in the work of some African women writers, often referred to as resistance literature, can be said to “Africanise” their texts, thereby achieving a subjective voice. In Bessie Head’s work, this is only half a process. There is no simple access to African identity. Rather than experience exclusion from the text as a white woman, with Bessie Head, there is no escape. But inclusion is a dubious honour, however, as the reader is drawn into a nightmare world where there is no omniscient narrator and no overarching explanation. Instead, Bessie Head’s writing out the obscenity and degradation of centuries of domination and exploitation is a terrible journey that has to be endured, one that tests the capacity for transformation (of author, text and reader) to the limit.

I want to show how the reader’s relationship to the text and author is crucial to these concerns, in that a lack of reflexive awareness—in particular, the “invisibility” of whiteness—has tended to compel critics to repeat the abusive power relations that the text exposes. My aim is to discover through Bessie Head’s writing how the nature of literary knowledge can be transformed from invasion and conquest to revelation and choice (Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Basingstoke: Picador, 1992).

I argue that, through an examination of critics’ responses to the ambiguities of the text and of the dynamics of resistance and control (in both text and reader) that ensue, we can establish the profound need to understand and resist the impulse to “conquer” the text by recourse to definitive explanation. By sustaining the imperative to “not know”—a wager Bessie Head invites her reader to take—a humbling and illuminating series of truths emerges, restoring a vision of hope for the future that retrospectively bestows a wholeness on the writer’s persona, something denied Bessie Head throughout her troubled life.

Amina Mansour, Mills College, “*Maru*’s Utopia in Absence”

Maru does not offer resolve; instead, it portrays the mechanics of oppression as a confounded nightmare too dense for any human to awake from. The novel’s subtle, yet

overbearingly, frightening quality primarily stems from the tension that arises between the portrayals of real conditions that plague humanity (e.g. racial violence), and, in turn, the subsistence of these conditions within the immature genre of the fairytale. Within the narrative's paranormal atmosphere, problematic issues manage to *dissolve* themselves in an absence unwilling to dispense with real-life solution. As a result, the reader is left to grapple, alone, with the pertinent remains of a socio-politically corrupt narrative, as the novel miraculously absolves its protagonists, Margaret and Maru, in *utopia in absence*, in which they arrive at, by escaping into.

In my paper, I discuss several ideas:

1. That by removing Margaret's and Maru's union from the reader's imagination, Bessie Head subliminally communicates that evil's solutions, not only exist outside Batswana Society, but, more importantly, the reader's very own.
2. An analysis of the image of the "dogs with cans" as a brilliant expression of Frantz Fanon's Nervous Condition.
3. According to critic Huma Ibrahim: "When one no longer understands racism as an external inscription on the identity or self but begins to recognize its familiarity and interiority to the self, 'the problems of identity and desire multiply'" (Ibrahim, 9). I discuss how a fractured self that continuously multiplies, like Margaret's, finds a semblance of peace from a self-in-exile, within *utopia in absence*. Her self communes with *utopia in absence*, due to its not having an overarching fantasy that defines its parameters (in this case, utopia becomes a "no-place"). And because *utopia in absence* is not defined by a dominant, controlling fantasy, it becomes an organic space, in which, visionaries, like Margaret, are able to generate a multiplicity of dreams. If so, Margaret's future home, *utopia in absence*, is a Janus-faced space, in that it houses "a series of Beginnings" (Janus, OED). Furthermore, I pose the idea that the imagery of the daisies, which are consistently alluded to, throughout the novel, act as a metaphor for Margaret's organic visions produced in *utopia in absence*.
4. Lastly, I question whether the melodic sameness of the daisies, in *Maru*, once they have entered utopia in absence, shed their artificial similarity and expose their dissonance (staccato), and in turn make their way into *A Question of Power's* narrative, as the short, surreally cinematic passages that rhythmically surface in *A Question of Power's* narrative.

Motsomi Marobela, University of Botswana, "Homage to Bessie"

I would like to talk a bit about the Bessie Head I remember from my time in Serowe, and to reflect on the legacy of her life and writing in contemporary Botswana.

Barulaganye Modongo, Serowe, "*Fa Maru a Pula a Kokoana*: Translation of Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* into Setswana"

As we are aware, works of literature are meant to convey messages which would normally be interpreted in various ways by different readers. This concept cuts across generations; thus making the particular work either contemporary for one generation, or declaring it something of the past for others.

The language that the work of literature is presented in contributes tremendously to the way the text is received and perceived by the readership. It becomes a serious challenge when the same piece of work is translated into another language.

This presentation will try to indicate obstacles encountered during the task of translating Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* into Setswana. It will also bring out common factors which connect both the author and the translator.

Leloba Molema, University of Botswana, "The Politics of Naming in *When Rain Clouds Gather*"

This paper takes into consideration the use of the word "name" as a verb and as a noun. As a verb it has social meaning as an act of self-definition, legitimation, and authority. As a noun it leaves room for comment on the symbolic (including the political) import of place names and characters' names. The paper is indebted to Simone de Beauvoir's idea of the "reciprocity" that ought to characterize relations between what she was the first to call "the one" and "the other" in her 1947 book, *The Second Sex* (English translation 1953).

F.-K. Omoregie, University of Botswana, "The Narcissistic Personality in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*"

Narcissism, derived from Greek mythology, describes the character of self-love. Narcissus was a handsome Greek youth who rejected the desperate advances of the nymph, Echo. As punishment, he was doomed to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Unable to consummate his love, Narcissus pined away and changed into a flower that bears his name, the narcissus. However, narcissism has come to imply more than just self-love. Though self-love may be their premise, narcissistic characters in works of fiction, as in real life, have other traits. This essay will look at such traits using Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*. For instance, narcissistic characters have little or no capacity for empathy. They are unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings of others. It is unlikely they will comprehend or recognize (let alone soothe) others' emotions. Elizabeth says Dan understands "... the mechanics of power. From his gestures, he clearly thought he had a wilting puppet in his hands" (Head p.13). For Narcissists, their interpersonal relationships are largely marked by exploitation. They take advantage of others to achieve their own ends. In Head's novel, Elizabeth is "... entirely dependent on Sello for direction and equally helpless, like a patient on his doctor for survival..." (Head p.35). Along with their lack of empathy, and use of exploitation, is the complete lack of guilt or concern for their over-exploitative manner. Head writes that at the hands of Camilla the students at the vegetable garden "... had simply become humiliated little boys shoved around by a hysterical white woman who never saw black people as people, but as objects of permanent idiocy." (Head p.76). Camilla never apologizes for the way she treats the students, after all, they are Africans. The opposite end of the spectrum is much the same. If they bestow affection, it is merely because that is the most expedient method to manipulate others to provide for their needs. Dan, like most narcissists, uses sex to advance his social status and misunderstanding with Sello at Elizabeth's expense. Elizabeth describes Dan as a "... short, black and handsome ..." (Head p.104), whose kiss makes her feel like "an ancient and knowledgeable Queen of love" (Head p.106), but he is an insatiable sexual predator, with a score of (symbolic) anatomically named women. Though Dan uses his phallus to intimidate and threaten Elizabeth, what is more narcissistic is the fact that, "Dan went as far as the hawk's eye. He saw in her a violent pride that could not endure humiliation of any kind. He saw the year behind of continuous unprovoked assault by Medusa and Sello of the brown suit. He saw the hidden molten lava within, the victim who is unreasonably tortured." (Head p.136).

Maria Rytter, University of Southern Denmark, “Origins of the Bessie Head Archive”

From 1984 to 1986, I was the first curator of the Khama III Memorial Museum, and I knew Bessie Head during that time. I was involved in Bessie’s funeral and in the establishment of the Bessie Head Archive (and the Khama Archive). I would like to contribute a paper about Bessie Head’s last year and the thoughts behind the Bessie Head Archive.

Tiro Sebina, University of Botswana, “Discarding the Encumbrance of Tradition: Libertarian Impulses in Bessie Head’s Botswana Village Tales”

The paper examines eight short stories from Bessie Head’s short story collection entitled *The Collector of Treasures*. The stories treated in the paper are “Heaven is not Closed”, “The Village Saint”, “Jacob-the Story of a Faith Healer”, “Witchcraft”, “Looking for a Rain God”, “Kgotla”, “The Wind and a Boy” and “The Special One”. The paper highlights the narrative technology used by Head to depict fortitude and resilience of the human spirit in the face of powerfully entrenched and repressive social forces as well as jaded ideological rigidities.

Head’s stories evince emergent forms of social consciousness that look beyond the constraints and restrictions of social custom to more democratic ‘structures of feeling’ that embrace change, diversity and difference. Each of the stories deals with the challenges faced by the various individual characters caught up in a vortex of change. The stories also reveal the social unconscious or the darkly uncongenial aspects of the seemingly placid Botswana society. The weight of ancient traditions, the political and psychological injuries associated with colonialism and the modern pressures of newly attained independence and nationalism conspire to elicit a variety of responses in Bessie Head’s characters. Head’s representation of Botswana village characters is distinguished in its concern and empathy for the subaltern people. The objective of the paper is to affirm libertarian impulses that feature in Bessie Head’s aesthetic.

Seatholo Tumedi, University of Botswana, “‘Mistress’ Who Smoked without End: Memories of Bessie Head’s Tshekedi Memorial School Pupils”

Through interviews with some of Bessie Head’s former pupils, I would like to create a picture of Bessie Head the teacher.