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UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG

"People is people": African personhood in the works of Bessie Head

by

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Supervisor: Professor Isabel Hofmeyr

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis titled, *"People is people": African personhood in the works of Bessie Head*, is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination by any other university.

Ethical Clearance Waiver number: HRECNMW23/03/03

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Signature Date 15 March 2023

ABSTRACT

From the vantage point of Bessie Head's oeuvre as a whole, I trace the development of her approach to personhood. Rooted in a post-oppositional view of love expressed as acts of ubuntu, she develops a new paradigm of African personhood distinct from western conceptions of the person. In Nguni languages, ubuntu is the term given to the view that personhood derives from a network of relationships, encapsulated in the saying "*I am because you are; we are because you are*" (Ogude, 2018, p. 1, emphasis in original). Rejecting the forms of literary and political protest of her time and focusing on the rural context, Head applies three narrative tools to lever change. These are, love-based relationships between individuals; love as acts of ubuntu between people; and sage philosophers who mediate history, embedding Head's view of personhood in Africa's history.

Chapter 1 places Head's works in context and sets out the parameters of the relationship between law and human rights. The chapter examines the post-oppositional approach which informs Head's attempts to deviate from binary-based views of tradition and progress, western and African, from which she proposes her particular view of African personhood. Chapter 2 examines Head's life, works and critical reception. Chapter 3 examines human rights with specific reference to South Africa's *Freedom Charter*. The *Charter* and the political pressures surrounding its generation were central to Head's contemporaries' protest literature. Head rejects this genre, so the chapter also surveys her political outlook.

In Chapter 4, the roots of Head's re-envisioning are examined in *The Cardinals* and *When Rain Clouds Gather*. In these early novels, Head uses love as the stimulus for personal and communal change. In *The Cardinals*, love is individual, and change is limited to two characters. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, love expands in scope and, realised through acts of ubuntu, provides the foundation for the marriages and other individual relationships. Together, these enable the realisation of personhood in the context of community.

In Chapter 5, the operation of love extends further in *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. In *Maru*, love is tasked with overturning the foundations of racism and reversing the tyranny of tribal, hereditary supremacy. In *A Question of Power*, love is set against its biggest foe: evil and Satan. By the end, however, it is clear it is unable to perform the transformative social work Head assigns it. Thus, in the last three books, she galvanizes a set of semi-fictional, semi-historical

sage philosophers whose words and actions typify her post-oppositional reconceptualisation of Serowe's history.

Chapter 6 examines the liminal position of *The Collector of Treasures* as it bridges the transition from the first four to the last two texts. In it, diverse storytellers debate the incongruities and ambiguities in the African and western traditions.

Chapter 7 examines how Head's sages become more overt spokespeople for her argument that change is essentially African and animated by love and ubuntu will give rise to an African personhood. In *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, Khama the Great, Tshekedi Khama and Patrick van Rensburg are actualised African persons as they effect love-grounded, ubuntu-motivated change, creating the basis of Africa's future. In *A Bewitched Crossroad,* Head uses the fictional interpolations of her most developed sage, Sebina, to mine both the 'real' history of Southern Africa and western ways to develop a post-oppositional African vision.

In the Chapter 8, Head's efforts to breathe life into a new 'race' of Africans are summed up. Head proposes that 'African' is not defined by race, colour or ethnic identity, but by post-oppositional responses, the ability to transform the lives of others, and leadership qualities needed for the future. Identifying the common thread across the texts clarifies Head's articulation personhood as embedded in Africanness and not in the western presumptions underpinning the novel form.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> *Writers … are mirrors of the times in which they live. Perhaps time and history will coin a special name for those who were the pioneers of African literature, and whose publication history coincided with African independence* (Eilersen, 2001, p. 33).

In 1993, I completed a thesis on Bessie Head (Castrillón, 1993) titled "Invention or reflection? Tradition and Orality in the Works of Bessie Head". In that thesis, I examined how Head used creatively invented conceptions of orality and of tradition "as the vehicles for her recreation of a sense of what she believes the essence of African life should be" (Castrillón, 1993, p. 183). In an article arising from the thesis, I argued that Head makes use of written resources (the diaries of the missionary J.D. Hepburn, for example) and other imaginative resources (such as presenting as 'oral' a history based predominantly on written sources) to create the vision of an Africa in which she would like to live (Castrillón, 2004). Embarking on this doctoral thesis many years later, having studied law and ethics in the intervening time, I had initially thought to embed this study in a human rights and literature framework. Such an approach made sense given the unique history of South Africa (where Head was born) and Bechuanaland's transition from British protectorate to independent Botswana, which Head experienced subsequent to moving there in 1964. In part, I initially thought I would examine Joseph Slaughter's assertion that new postcolonial modes of literature examine how law functions as culture, which would alert us to reading practices which contribute to the "world based on human rights" (Slaughter, 2009, p. 44). The history of the interwovenness of literature and law, and in particular of human rights and literature, is a long and extensive one and there is a deep, rich international scholarship on this form of activism which, it will later be shown, took on a particular form in South Africa's antiapartheid struggle.

Against the backdrop of the politics of her time, and given her stated dislike of binaries, Head sees the politics of her time as fundamentally divisive and seeks an entirely different frame of reference. In this thesis, I argue that, beginning with *When Rain Clouds Gather*, where we see

ubuntu[1] and love in operation in a rural community, and ending with *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head develops a post-oppositional, integrative 'African' approach to personhood. Her texts speak in various ways to the challenges of moving beyond binary boundaries (having rights/ not having rights; white/black; traditional/modern; African/Christian, among others) through a syncretic application of love, ubuntu and history.

From the vantage point of Bessie Head's oeuvre as a whole, this thesis traces her conceptualisation of a new paradigm of African personhood beginning with *The Cardinals* and ending with *A Bewitched Crossroad*. Importantly, she expressly rejects the forms of literary and political protest used by her contemporaries and most commonly associated with South African literary production at the time. She deploys as the narrative vehicle a post-oppositional construction of love expressed as acts of ubuntu and actualised in a series of love-referenced relationships. The thesis demonstrates the ways in which Head's conception of African personhood is premised on a particular conception of Africa's history and of African identity distinct from western conceptions of the person. Head shifts the locus of her stories (with the exception of the posthumously published *The Cardinals)* to a rural African context, applying three narrative tools to lever the change she believes is necessary for Africa's future. These are love-based relationships between individuals; love as acts of ubuntu between people; and the development of sage philosophers who mediate Head's view of personhood as embedded in Africa's history.

In Europe, overt links between literature and human rights date back most clearly to *A Memory of Solferino* (hereafter *Memory*), published in 1862. The text provided a "vivid depiction" of the battle between Austria-Hungary and a France-led coalition during the unification of Italy, describing in gory detail the day before the battle and the battle itself (Lofquist, 2017, p. 104). Although ostensibly journalistic, the text's "unvarnished accounts" detail the brutality with which the soldiers abandoned to die or had limbs amputated without anaesthesia (Barnett, 2011, np). The text played a critical role in recommending and realising the formation of charitable societies and international conventions which ensured protection for the wounded and for medics, whether uniformed and civilian (Barnett, 2011, np). *Memory* is unique in its success in this regard, as it led to the establishment of the International Red Cross and the adoption of

[1] James Ogude defines ubuntu as "a specific understanding of personhood and that is that the full development of personhood comes with a shared identity and the idea that an individual's humanity is fostered in a network of relationships – *I am because you are; we are because you are*" (Ogude, 2018, p. 1, emphasis in original).

the Geneva Convention in 1864.[2] Subsequently, as Kerry Byström points out, personal narratives and story-telling shaped "the stories of others in order to help these 'others' claim rights" (Byström, 2012, p. 638).

Claiming rights has long been part of South Africa's history, a fact that is directly referenced in the 2011 publication by Amnesty International of a collection of short stories: *Freedom: Short Stories Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Amnesty International, 2011). The book opens with two forewords, one by South Africa's late Archbishop Emeritus, Desmond Tutu, well known internationally as the Chairperson of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and the second by Vered Cohen-Barzilay of Amnesty International in Israel. Cohen-Barzilay's foreword is a personal account of the "tremendous power of literature" which, she says, moved her from 'warrior' to writer. She attributes this sea-change to the 2004 Italian novel, *Prima di lasciarsi* (*Before We Say Goodbye*). "Literature", she concludes "can inspire us to change our world and give us the comfort, hope, passion, and strength we need in order to fight to create a better future for us, as well as all humanity" (Amnesty International, 2011, pp. 11–12).

The view of literature as the driving force for political, social and personal change is not uncommon. Lynn Hunt (2007) argues that the novel, for example, provides the base for human rights in its sentimental form, and Byström points to the genre's ability to help people feel empathy for others, even when different to the reader (Byström, 2012, p. 641). In Slaughter's words, "everyone should know why human rights are important, that we do need a little human rights just now, and that literature does have a capacity to minister to that need" (Slaughter, 2009, p. 6). In the interdisciplinary spaces created in the 1970s in the United States, literature was seen as able to illuminate the "law's gaps, rhetoric, and moral stance", with proponents of this view arguing for the techniques of literary interpretation to be applied to the law (Baron, 1999, p. 1060). Two approaches emerged: law in literature, and law as literature. Law *in* literature is exemplified by the 1922 publication of "A List of One Hundred Legal novels" which lawyers were encouraged to read, given that legal principles are a "main part of the author's theme" (Wigmore, 1922, p. 26). Law *as* literature, more complexly, it was argued, presents "a common understanding of the process by which communities and communitarian values come to be formed" (West, 1988, pp. 129–130), and legal arguments are "cultural texts"

[2] Founding and early years of the ICRC (1863-1914) | International Committee of the Red Cross

(West, 1988, p. 130) which communicate the consensus of a community. Lenora Ledwon (2015, p. ix) argues that the approach makes clear an "awareness that the jurisdiction of both law and literature is the realm where language, story and human experience meet". Of course, not all critics agree. Richard Posner grumbles about the connection, saying that law and literature have been yoked together in ways indicative of "the obligation of idealizing humans and society" (Chang, 2008, p. 71) as part of the weaponry of a battle waged by those with a "pervasive left-liberal bias" in a "misconceived humanizing project" (Posner, 1998).

Slaughter's research in this area comprises an intense and nuanced picking apart of a specific sub-category of this relationship: the mutual interdependences between human rights (as expressed in codas such as the UDHR), and the novel form (particularly the Bildungsroman). In his work, he shows how these together achieve a common socialising project, adopting a particular, western view of the development of the human personality and the claimed universality of human rights (Slaughter, 2009, p. 9). This shared "egalitarian imaginary" (Slaughter, 2006, p. 1407) takes the form of a homogenising relationship encapsulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In a survey of texts spanning authors as diverse as Goethe (Slaughter, 2009, p. 97) and Kenyan author Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (Slaughter, 2009, p. 120), Slaughter concludes that the "idealist, third person *Bildungsroman* responds to the modern imperative to 'become civilised', or what Foucault terms 'self-regulating subjects'" (Slaughter, 2009, pp. 226–227).

Interrogating the complexity of the relationship between human rights and the novel form, Slaughter tells how the drafters of the UDHR drew on different interpretations of *Robinson Crusoe* in a debate on the extent of the individual's responsibility. At the core of the issue was the

> individual's debt to the community for having developed what the UDHR elsewhere calls the 'human personality' and the extent to which 'the community' can take responsibility for the development of human personality (Slaughter, 2006, p. 1406).

The original phrasing of the declaration was, "everyone has duties to the community which enables him to freely develop his personality". Subsequent to the invocation of *Robinson Crusoe,* this was reworded to read "everyone has duties to the community in which alone the

free and full development of his personality is possible". The rewording intended to moderate the excessive individualism of the Declaration (Slaughter, 2009, p. 46). Both sides used "literary proof" to reach consensus, which the committee's deliberations had been unable to resolve (Slaughter, 2006, p. 1407), and Daniel Defoe took his "official place among the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Slaughter, 2006, p. 1406). The tension between individual and community pointed to above signals a further concern with human rights: ostensibly universal, rights are seen as not having a cultural, political or historical context (Cheah, 2006, p. 152), and "cultural forms like the novel have cooperated with human rights to naturalize their common sense" (Slaughter, 2006, p. 1417) and emphasize their universal character.[3]

Against this mutually interdependent relationship between the human rights and literature, the novel (and in particular the *bildungsroman*) becomes a popular fictional form for "the literature of social outsiders" including women and other excluded groups with a surge in the publication of novels by indigenous peoples, diasporic and immigrant populations, and other minorities (Slaughter, 2006, p. 1411). The previously marginalised, "democratic citizen-subjects" tell their stories which are received as allegorical stories of 'third-world' culture and society (Slaughter, 2006, p. 1410). The result is that the *Bildungsroman* genre comes to be seen as having no "viable social work to perform for the Anglo European white male (the ostensibly already incorporated and capacitated citizen)" (Slaughter 2006, p. 1410). So-called third world literature wittingly and unwittingly serves to reinforce the sovereign interest of some in favour of the rights of the other (Ramji-Nogales, 2014, p. 699). Literature performs the sociocultural work that the law is unable to do for itself, providing the affective training needed for the deployment of human rights (Antaki, 2013, p. 978) enabling readers to critique existing social structures (Antaki, 2013, p. 976).

Of course, 'behind' the universality of human rights is the tautology that humans have rights because they are human, and as humans have rights (at minimum, to dignity). And behind this

[3] Contestations on universality of human rights occurred early in the drafting process. Sophia McLennan and Alexandra Moore tell of archival research which brought up a questionnaire administered by UNESCO in 1947. The questionnaire was designed to help the drafters of the UDHR to determine whether there was global consensus on human rights. The resulting report, written by the 'Philosopher's Committee' showed that UN members shared at least the view that all had "the right to live a life free from the haunting fear of poverty and insecurity" (UNESCO, 2014). As UN members deconstructed each article, challenges to the question of universality were temporarily assuaged. A universal declaration of human rights, it was argued, was not the means to resolve philosophical differences, but was a pragmatic solution to affect political and social practices (McClennen and Moore, 2018, p. 22).

tautology is another, prior question: "if human rights are the rights one has by virtue of being human, the definition of what it means to be human is of paramount concern" (Parikh, 2019, p. 8). Novels by "social outsiders" which expose the "disparities and paradoxes" of the "idealist vision of human personality development" either affirm or critique prevailing social structures and development discourse (Slaughter, 2009, p. 28). But it is here, at the "crossroads of human rights and literature" (Parikh, 2019, p. 2) that I realised that although a literature and human rights view of Head's works may yield value, my attention had by this time been drawn particularly to her views on what it means to be a person, and to how this view had morphed from her early to her later texts, moving the genre boundaries from fictional narrative to an intertwined fictional and historical narrative as her approach took form. Head's works can be read from a viewpoint identified by Eleni Coundouriotis as follows:

> In the effort to make Global South claims on the meaning of human rights more robust, African historians have moved beyond the relativism critique of rights to reclaim the universalism of rights in such a way that it does not exclude African meanings (Coundouriotis, 2021, p. 7).

In line with Sean Hawkins, Coundouriotis agrees that notice should be taken of Africans who are striving to create, imagine, define and defend how they view rights. The loss of meaning of human rights can be addressed by a "reworking of existing language so that it is rendered mutually comprehensible" (Coundouriotis, 2021, p. 7).

Head's membership of a lineage of South African and African writers who grapple with issues of African identity and in particular what it is to be a person is well-established, as the critical works surveyed in Chapter 2 show. However, her answer to the question of what it means to be African provides an often-unique perspective not traditionally associated with the South African anti-racist and protest writings of her generation. Although she clearly abhors all forms of discrimination and oppression, she persistently asserts that apartheid[4] is only one instance of the harm people can inflict on others. A close reading of her fictional texts indicates that she makes

[4] 'Apartheid' is the Afrikaans word for 'apartness' and was both the ideology and policy of the National Party which came to power in South Africa in 1948. Premised on 'separate development' of different 'races', it affected all aspects of people's personal and political lives, prohibiting integration between races, and significantly disadvantaging black African, 'coloured' and Indian South Africans.

no overt reference to a 'rights' paradigm in these, nor do her arguments against discrimination and oppression proceed from the equality of dignity the UDHR ascribes to all humans.

Nonetheless, she expressly examines and questions the workings of power and political systems especially where they are repressive and discriminatory. She sees abuses of power as fundamentally similar whether present in racism, slavery, the position of women, oppressive traditions, colonial domination, or the workings of 'evil'. She overtly rejects binaries, both those implicit in western superiority and racism, or those in African nationalism and seeks in the fiction and non-fiction she wrote to propose an alternative paradigm. In this thesis, I consider how we can think about her corpus by assessing the trajectory of her ideas in developing a new approach to defining personhood and how the redefinition she proposes takes form. She expresses repeatedly her view that *African* ideas will be the source of the new future for all people. In a 1984 piece, titled "A search for historical continuity and roots", she says:

> South Africa, with its sense of ravages and horror, has lost that image of an Africa, ancient and existing since time immemorial, but in Botswana the presence of the timeless and immemorial is everywhere - in people, in animals, in everyday life and in custom and tradition.
>
> I hope two disparate worlds could be considered to have combined harmoniously in me. I have never been able in my writing to represent South African society but the situation of black people in South Africa, their anguish and their struggles, made its deep impress on me. From an earlier background, I know of a deep commitment to people, an involvement in questions of poverty and exploitation and a commitment to illuminating the future for younger generations. I needed an eternal and continuous world against which to work out these preoccupations. One of my preoccupations was a search as an African for a sense of historical continuity, a sense of roots, but I remember how tentative and sketchy were my first efforts, not finding roots as such but rather putting on layer after layer of patchy clothing. This patchy clothing formed the background to most of my work (Head, 1990, p. 86).

Elsewhere she says that she wishes to write the "possibility that Africa can produce a lot of idealist young men … to solve centuries of exploitation and poverty" (Head, 1990, p. 73). For her, the positive attributes of her characters are in their "extreme willingness to abdicate from

positions of power and absorb themselves in activities which would be of immense benefit to people" (Head, 1990, p. 73). She is assertive in her declaration that she has

> built an horizon in which black men of talent were portrayed in activities which were 'a new beginning'. I wanted to widen the image on the horizon and to give young black men alternative choices. It was like a suggestion I hoped would move into the future while not too much could be done about the chaos of the present (Head, 1990, p. 73).

The rejection of binaries is core to Head's vision and in this crucial sense her texts constitute a profoundly complex, early example of South African post-oppositional thinking, distinct in its use of love and the rural from many of her vociferous and expressive anti-apartheid contemporaries. In this post-oppositional framework, Head applies the core constructs of ubuntu, evident so often in her texts as love, and embodied in a variety of different (and often completely opposing) systems. Whether African traditional religion, ubuntu, good and goodness, 'true' Christian or Jesus' love, Gandhi's Hinduism, and so on, she is continuously re-envisioning an African intellectual tradition that actively recalibrates the precepts of African nationalism using love as the persistent cipher.

Briefly, the problem is that 'love' – particularly as she envisions it in the first two books – is not able to go far enough in envisioning the change she wishes it to. In the early books, it is clear that love changes the lives of the individuals it impacts (as in *The Cardinals)* and, when it is the source of construed, familial relationships, the lives of those with whom they surround themselves (as in *When Rain Clouds Gather*). The early texts are clear creations of new, small, family-based circles in which love achieves some kind of change, taking into its control those included in its scope. The problem is, however, that even reading these love stories as allegorical love cannot go far enough towards achieving the fundamental changes to society Head believes are essential to subvert racism and end oppression. In *When Rain Clouds* Gather, for example, characters who fall outside (by their own choice) the scope of the workings of love are simply written out of the story. Thus, Matenge, through suicide, is simply removed from the community.

Head's portrayal of love and of acts of ubuntu shifts somewhat from its depiction in the first two texts to the next two: *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. In these, she consciously extends the reach of the power she accords to love and to the acts of ubuntu which serve to counteract the negative

forces of racism (as in *Maru)*. Giving love dominion over the whole of history – both good and evil – from its mythological sources to the question of racism in South Africa and the evils of Hitler (as in *A Question of Power*), love has a great deal of work to do. By the end of these two novels, and especially *A Question of Power*, although the power of love/ubuntu is felt by the individuals in profoundly transformative ways, it is restricted in its functional operation to these characters and their immediate circles. Thus the first four texts may be grouped together, and the conclusion reached that despite Head's attempt to write from a post-oppositional paradigm in which love and ubuntu do the philosophical work of addressing discrimination and oppression, its impact remains constrained to individuals and families and to a limited extent to communities and communal activities (cooperative gardening and farming projects). The novels are in many ways social and historical ethnographies, and some of her characters are depicted as sages, with the ability to embrace change and act in terms of ubuntu and love.

In the second set of texts, comprising *The Collector of Treasures, Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, and *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head plumbs the history of Serowe and Botswana for the re/sources she needs to present her Africanist view of the world. Her view is deeply syncretic and given her rejection of binaries contains multiple and contradictory strands of thinking. Unequivocally, however, she begins from the premise that despite the oppression of Africans by colonisers, African and western ideas were and are on an equal footing from the point of view of their value and meaning and she develops her sage philosophers, showing us how they find solutions to the problems of the village, how they recall and tell the stories and histories of the region and make sense of events for themselves and others.

Head's sages are 'true' Africans and, it becomes clear, that any idea or person, construct or value that does the positive work she sees as necessary for change and development is characterised as African by nature. Thus, white and black, male and female, Christian and traditional, western and African – are all African if they do the visionary work she seeks to have done. In this way, Head's place as an African writer is incontestable.

1.1. Head's work in context

Ngũgĩ argues that African literature "is an ever-continuing struggle to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space" (Ngũgĩ, 1992, p. 4). Defining the African self is at the core of this literary canon

which represents "the sum total of all the national and ethnic literatures of Africa" (Achebe, 2013, p. 429) and the arts have become an act of socio-political activism (Okpadah, 2020, p. 84). In southern Africa, the role played by the oral tradition has been key as, for example, in the critical work of Tim Couzens who wrote: "Africans have a continuous tradition of literature, oral and vernacular, adapting partly to written and European forms when history and inclination dictated" (cited in Heywood, 2004, p. 159). The scope of literature in South Africa ranges from the early contributions of A C Jordan's *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* in 1940 (translated into English and republished as *The Wrath of the Ancestors*), to Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa,* to *Drum* magazine edited by Es'kia Mphahlele (Heywood, 2004, p. 26), the critical works of Njabulo Ndebele (Driver, 1996, p. 228), and the musical compositions and writing of Todd Matshikiza. At *Drum*'s height, Head was one of only two African women who had published in English, Noni Jabavu was the other. (Driver, 1996, p. 227). Given the centrality of political protest to Southern African fiction, Head's works were often seen as problematically apolitical. I argue that their intent is to fundamentally shift the view of personhood prevalent at Head's time: whether that expressed by the racist/apartheid structures, or by the pan-Africanist antiapartheid discourses. While Head's writing is distinct in some ways from that of her contemporaries, it adopts a stance in respect of the politics of the time, as will be set out in Chapter 2. *Serowe* and *A Bewitched Crossroad* continue to attract far less critical attention than the earlier novels which may account for the undervaluing of Head's approach in the literature. Critics found Head's later texts especially difficult[5], but it is in these that Head actively begins to create an alternative to the binaries dominant in understandings of in/equality at the time, approaching the problem from the perspective of African personhood.

While the early texts make use of the typical novel form, the later texts are expressly historical-fictive in style and form. Head uses fictional narrative and historical and ethnographic writing styles so that these texts become a "site of struggle" about "interpretive control" (Lewis, 2007, p. 33). Although not linear, Head's understanding of the complexities of personhood, and of the individual's role in the broader social and political context in which s/he lives and by which s/he may be equally constrained and enabled becomes ever more complex as her texts move through time and place and through internal and external realities and forces. The tragedy of

[5] Early responses to *A Bewitched Crossroad* include Craig MacKenzie (1989a, p. 47) and Barry Ronge. MacKenzie saw value in its reappraisal of history but concluded that it does not succeed either as fiction or history as it is an idiosyncratic blend of both (1989a, p. 18). Ronge dismissed the text in the popular press primarily it seems because he found the names of the characters to be "tongue-twisting mind-benders" (Ronge, 1985, p. 27).

course, is that her death at 48 years old means that we will never know what the completed path would or could have looked like.

What Head terms her "Southern African preoccupations" (Head, 1990, p. 67) include refugeeism, racialism, patterns of evil, and the ancient Southern African historical dialogue. Through these she provides a complicated and enriching reframing of African personhood and community in a rural African context through an intense engagement with the particular history of this specific locale. As a result, "literature speaks to the possibilities of freedom that political systems are often blind to" (Potter and Stonebridge, 2014, p. 2). Using ubuntu and love expressed through reconstructed and reconstituted forms of kinship structures, Head moves her characters from alienation to personhood, and from exclusion to inclusion. The move from a traditional novel to more ethnographic and historiographic forms of storytelling (such as in the gathering of oral testimony, and the use of archival and other materials) is part of Head's efforts to redefine and rearticulate the history of Serowe in which the confluence of historical and other forces impact the everyday lives of people. Her aim is to clarify and define 'Africanness' and African personhood as flexible and creative, engaged with the political and other pressures of the time. The texts elasticise time, forcing the reader to step back into the history of the village, to consider the present, and to explore an as yet undefined future. Making concrete the assertion that Africans were not the simple recipients of the forces of change imposed upon them, Head maintains a post-oppositional stance, rejecting simplistic binaries in favour of more complex and tonal understandings of the aspects of the histories she presents.

Head's multidimensional additions to the southern African literary canon and to the ways in which the inherent binaries may be addressed speak to Ajayi's view of colonialism as an "episode" in and not the whole of Africa's history. Head's refusal to reject everything colonial and accept everything African is clear – she shows the two in continuous conversation with each other, as a new third way evolves before us. Ajaye's observation that the colonial "impact on Africa was very uneven" (Falola, 2000, p. 170) and that "Africans retained initiative, [such that] the ability of Europeans to make entirely new departures in African history was limited" (Falola, 2000, p. 171) is particularly evident in Serowe and A Bewitched Crossroad.

1.2. Contestations and contradictions – not all who are human are persons

In reconstituting African personhood, Head references three core constructs. First, she uses a post-oppositional approach to love as a cipher for preferred behaviours to counter racism. Second, love as ubuntu-like acts redefines the ways in which humans in Africa come to know their own personhood. And finally, applying some of the methods and approaches of ethnohistory, and of 'history from below', she creates her 'sage philosophers' through whose wisdom and ways we come to a new vision of Africa's past, present and future.

Head's post-oppositional stance allows her to draw on a wide range of sources for love, whether spiritual or intellectual resources. Key among these is ubuntu and African religion. In the earlier texts, it is acts of love and ubuntu which enable the creation of alternative kinship structures, independent from both colonial and state impositions, and also from the constraints of tradition. In the later texts, she carries these concepts through as 'watermarks', as she develops a set of characters who serve as sage philosophers through whose words and actions she exposes, grapples with, untangles, constructs and fictionally resolves some of the tensions implicit in the binaries of western/African; colonised/coloniser; free/unfree; colonial/African; Christian/African, etc. Referencing Africa and Africans of the past, she provides a response to the question of how to speak or think of African concepts given the history of the region:

> Modern African thought seems somehow to be basically a product of the West. What is more, since most African leaders and thinkers have received a Western education, their thought is at the crossroads of Western epistemological filiation and African ethnocentrism … The conceptual framework of African thinking has been both a mirror and a consequence of the experience of European hegemony (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 198).

In Head's depiction of the history, and notwithstanding the aggression and power of the colonial and apartheid states, it was Africans who received or rejected the ideas of the colonisers, integrating them into their way of life where they chose to (or where they had no choice) to either negative or positive effect. From her writings, Head addresses what Coundouriotis terms the need to "ward off received ideas" such as patterns of "representing Africa as a place of extremes of violence, poverty, and disorder" (Coundouriotis, 2021, p. 2). Her literary works offer her unique perspective on the interrelatedness of the personal and the

historical and actively assert her view of the changes needed to allow for the rebuilding of a "world of sweet and courteous exchanges between men" (Head, 1984, p. 75).

In an examination of two projects to decolonise human rights through transcultural dialogue, José-Manuel Barreto (2018) shows how Hindu dharma reveals how western conceptions of rights fail in respect of valuing the "complex connections of individuals with society and cosmos", while the west would perceive dharma as neglecting injustice and social conflict in favour of harmony (Barreto, 2018, p. 493). Similarly, Muslim Umma in the period of Mecca saw equality and dignity allocated to all, contrary to the Shari'a restrictions on non-Muslims and women. Umma thus contributes to views on the "collective rights and duties to the community" (Barreto, 2018, p. 494). Critically for Africa, "struggles against slavery, colonial racism and discrimination – ills or legacies of modern imperialism – have also been advanced in the name of natural rights, civil rights and human rights" as the examples of writing by Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano demonstrated in 1787 and 1789 respectively (Barreto, 2018, p. 497). Barreto does not characterise these as alternatives to human rights or as challenging their construction, but rather as part of a "history that runs alongside the history of modern colonialism and is elaborated from a Third World perspective" (Barreto, 2018, p. 499). Head's writing aligns with these broader moves as she seeks alternatives to contemporary constructions of rights. Katrina Powell examines a number of oral traditions (including Appalachian, Aboriginal, Māori and African), finding that these "resist linear plot lines" and stand in opposition to the western tradition of rationalism (Powell, 2018, p. 136). Religious and social codes which are transmitted orally and the values to which these refer may then be used as frames of reference from which to reconsider "universal human rights (as we conceive of the concept now)" now (Powell, 2018, p. 136):

> Oral traditions, steeped in indigenous rhetorics, more often than not focus on *communal histories*, *values of a society*, and lessons to be *learned by the larger community* through the trials of an individual. So while the goal may not be to draw international attention to a particular human rights violation, human rights issues such as violent interactions, land rights disputes, and debates over individual sovereignty do occur in oral texts. … recent convergences, then, suggest that human rights literary studies examined through an oral tradition lens might lend insight into the ways that stories are told and whether they are persuasive or effective in enacting change (Powell, 2018, p. 137, emphasis added).

Protest literature, broadly the mode with which South Africans writing under apartheid is most readily associated, was a response to the extreme depersonalisation and dehumanisation inherent in that system (Ndlovu, 2019, p. 111). Protest, designed to catalyse outrage, presents the most harrowing examples of human rights abuses in its call to action. As pointed out in Chapter 2, Head finds the narrowness provided by writing about apartheid constrictive, seeking rather to establish a form that relativises debates about personhood and problematising the core binaries upon which protest was premised.

1.3. A post-oppositional paradigm for change: Ubuntu and love

Can Africa do without human rights? Are there African alternatives to the discourse of human rights? According to Jack Donnelly (1982), discussing human rights in Africa, or human rights an Africa, is pointless. Even where rights can be said to exist in Africa, they "were not based on one's humanity per se but on membership in the community, status, or some other ascriptive characteristic" (Donnelly, 1982, p. 308). Secondly, attempts to show that rights are inherent in African thinking are irrelevant to human rights conversations and would destroy human rights as we know them because such approaches would seek to restore "the balance between the individual and society in this fashion" (Donnelly, 1982, p. 308). Individual human rights as the west has conceived of them are essential in his view because they are the "means for realizing human dignity" and protect against the "generally undesired, *reemergence of the traditional order*" which does nothing other than undermine rights (Donnelly, 1982, p. 312, emphasis added). Although he sees rights as the historical product of western thinking dating to 18th Century John Locke, he nonetheless vociferously asserts the need for their universal validity – rights "cannot be treated as merely a historical product without destroying the concept" (Donnelly, 1982, p. 314). In 2007, he follows this with "the idea of equal and inalienable rights that one has simply because one is a human being that was missing not only in traditional Asian, African, Islamic, but in traditional Western, societies as well". African views must thus support human rights given that there are no "significant bodies of human rights ideas or practices prior to the twentieth century" (Donnelly, 2007, p. 285). As Coundouriotis argues that Donnelly's definition of dignity is tied up with the notion of worthiness: human rights are not needed for life, but are needed for a life of dignity (Coundouriotis, 2021, p. 18). Head's texts demonstrate little congruence between the apparent primacy of rights and her view that: "No matter what kind of fool you made of yourself, people in southern Africa were still

oppressed" (Head, 2010, p. 87). In her fiction, Head creates new characters and contexts which realise dignity, addressing Coundouriotis's assertion that "Without the recognition of others (a crucial component of the African idea of dignity—Ubuntu…), dignity remains unrealized" (Coundouriotis, 2021, p. 24).

Recently, Caitlin Stobie (2022) has linked Head's context in Botswana and the legal, ethical and cultural norms relating to abortion, with the notion of choice within the larger language of rights. She argues that Head explores this issue in an approach "grounded in the traditional philosophies of Hunhu and ubuntu" (Stobie, 2022, p. 7). She contrasts the responses in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (Chief Sekoto, who is compassionate and understanding to Chief Matenge who is a masculinist bully) seeing in the actions of these men Head's uncoupling of power and tenderness from "gendered associations" (Stobie, 2022, p. 15). In Stobie's view, Head's approach to abortion is distinctively African, confronting readers "with images of bodies at all stages of life: foetal forms, stillbirths, abandoned children, virgins, sex workers, newlyweds, biogenetic and adoptive mothers, dying leaders, and more", with the result that "creativity and fermentation function synonymously in her fiction" (Stobie, 2022, p. 24).

The assumption that a western view of the person is the only supportable one makes no sense. Regardless of context, all individuals assume roles and attitudes redolent with the values of families, cultures and societies, which must be explored. Explicit in Donnelly's view is the assertion that whether Africans – amongst others – know it or not, it is better for 'them' that universal human rights be maintained. Many have argued against such a view whether held overtly or covertly (Bisong, 2019; Cobbah, 1987; Metz, 2007; Ndima, 2015) and have proposed that an entirely different set of assumptions is needed for Africa. Such alternatives must, they argue, be premised on the belief that African approaches to rights and obligations are at the very least as significant as non-African ones and we ought actively to seek to make sense of and judge these.

As indicated earlier, Slaughter's works elucidate the link between the novel and human rights discourses of the sort proffered by Donnelly. His book, *Human Rights Inc*. reflects the "multiple meanings of incorporation" one of which is the "notion that human personality development is a process of socialization, a process of enfranchisement" and through which the person is personified (Slaughter, 2009, p. 20). Sylvia Wynter (1984) had already asserted the need to see behind the personification of the human in her exploration of the history of

western thought, showing how the construction of the Other was part of essentialising the person as an economic entity. Wynter's (1984) argument substantiates the view that there is no 'universal' truth inherent in the western view of the person. These are, instead, "stories that iterate and normalize *homo oeconomicus*" and we live

> in a moment where the human is understood as a purely biological mechanism that is subordinated to a teleological economic script that governs our global well- being / ill- being - a script, therefore, whose macro- origin story calcifies the hero figure of *homo oeconomicus* who practices, indeed normalizes, accumulation in the name of (economic) freedom (McKittrick, 2015, p. 10).

Kwasi Wiredu (1998) asserts that African philosophy does not proceed from the same assumptions of the individual person that inform western philosophy, arguing that what is needed is an analysis of the "elements of culture that play significant roles in the constitution of meanings in the various African world views" (Wiredu, 1998, p. 23). He focuses on language as a way to disengage African "thought-formations" without making continent-wide generalisations about Africa. Wiredu shows that "the existential verb 'to be' does not occur in the Bantu group of languages", meaning that the "concept of being as existentially construed" is substantially different (Wiredu, 1998, p. 24). Although some have argued that this is a lack in African languages, the converse is equally true: that "this existential concept of being is a semantically defective concept, notwithstanding its great currency in Western metaphysics" (Wiredu, 1998, p. 24). Using the lessons from development studies, where implementing change in ways that "entail the abandonment of traditional orientations" or which are not "controlled by traditional perspectives" is ineffective and superficial (Anyadike, 2016, p. 1), literary analyses premised on fundamental human rights precepts may fail to glean from the narratives of alternative visions of the self.

Head's texts, set in a rural, African village, offer a completely different view of what the 'incorporation' of the person may mean. She sees in Botswana's specific history the potential for a new approach into the problem. Despite being a British protectorate, she says, Botswana remained independent in that

> its customs and traditions were left intact and people's traditional rulers had a large say in governing their people. Thus, the *real Southern African dialogues* took place

> in Botswana. Christianity was a dialogue here, as was black people's ownership of the land and the retention of the ancient African land tenure system, as was trade (Head, 1990, p. 55, emphasis added).

That Head sees multi-tonal conversations at the core of interactions between oppressors and the oppressed is clear. In emphasising the dialogues, she highlights Africans' agency as a 'way into' seeking alternatives to analyses of the past and as the basis for a future. From a post-oppositional paradigm in which she weaves together love with aspects of ubuntu she fictionalises an early basis of an approach to personhood which contains not only the foundations of change but does so outside of the binaries inherent in protest and protest literature.

Ubuntu is the Nguni word for "a specific understanding of personhood and that is that the full development of personhood comes with a shared identity and the idea that an individual's humanity is fostered in a network of relationships – *I am because you are; we are because you are*" (Ogude, 2018, p. 1, emphasis in original). The concept is not unique to South Africa, as similar terms and ideas are found in Bantu languages across the African continent. Examples include *umundu* (Kikuyu from Kenya), *umuntu* (Kimeru from Kenya), *bumuntu* (kiHaya and kiSukuma from Tanzania), *vumuntu* (shiTsonga and shiTswa from Mozambique), *bomoto* (Bobangi from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)), and *gimuntu* (kiKongo from DRC), and *giKwese* (from Angola) (Kamwangamalu, 1999, p. 25). Ubuntu as expressed in the Nguni aphorism above demonstrates the "universal bond that connects all people to each other and to all other types of existence in the universe, including currently living human and nonhuman beings, ancestors, the yet unborn, and the natural world" (Graness, 2018, p. 44). As early as 1969, John Mbiti, whose writings we know Head valued, demonstrated how ubuntu was central to African religions and philosophies, providing the foundations of an

> African morality [that is] … more 'societary' than 'spiritual'; it is a morality of 'conduct' rather than a morality of 'being.' This is what one might call 'dynamic ethics' rather than 'static ethics,' for it defines what a person does rather than what he is … Kindness is not a virtue unless someone is kind; murder is not evil until someone kills another person in his community. Man is not by nature either 'good' or 'bad' ('evil') except in terms of what he does or does not do (Mbiti, 1970, pp. 279–280).

Head says Mbiti's ideas appeal to her because they are "wide and generous enough to take in all the humble who shall, one day, unexpectedly, inherit the earth" finding in this approach that "it is easy to imagine a universe and a people instantly immersed in a religious way of life. There are trees in this universe … [and] Also chickens and birds and rivers and sunsets and everything that flows and lives (Head, 1990, p. 51).

Whether ubuntu is a value system, an ethical system, or a moral system is the subject of much debate among philosophers (Futter, 2016; Metz, 2007, 2014), and a detailed discussion is outside of the scope of this thesis. Peter Bisong (2019, p. 37) argues that there is confusion between African worldviews or cultures (which comprise religion, myth, philosophy and magic), and African philosophy. The problem as he sees it is that much of what constitutes African philosophy is seen as spiritualism (Bisong, 2019, p. 37) and it is consequently relegated to an inferior position. Thaddeus Metz (2007) argues forcefully for ubuntu to be seen as a moral theory. Canvassing several approaches to ubuntu in the literature, he shows that the distinct morality of ubuntu resides not in the individual "but rather in a relationship between individuals" (Metz, 2007, p. 333) which constitutes a shift of the definitional core of what it means to be a person. It is this definitional core which Head's narratives fictionalise.

The shift results, Metz argues, from the fact that ubuntu contains a core concept not found in western theories: "that interpersonal relationships of some kinds have basic moral status" which is more significant than the 'banality' of seeing African approaches as simply 'communitarian' (Metz, 2007, p. 333). Although Bisong criticises Metz for his portrayal of African philosophy as spirituality (Bisong, 2019, p. 491), asserting that it is essential to keep apart the religious from the philosophical to be able to see in Africa a true philosophy as opposed to a western endorsement of African superstition or mythology (Bisong, 2019). In Futter's (2016) assessment, he concludes that whatever ubuntu is, it reflects a multiplicity of ideals rather than an ideal which, given Head's post-oppositional stance, seems a useful place to begin. As Bhekizizwe Peterson indicates, ubuntu remains:

> one of the most salient and resonant indigenous moral concepts that African artists and intellectuals have wrestled with in attempts to think through the complexities of personhood, particularly in the aftermath of colonialism [as well as] one of the

> most used and abused terms in South Africa's public and political lexicon (Peterson, 2019, pp. 55–56).

In a discussion of ubuntu's provenance in South African history and literature, Peterson notes that the "most recent and sustained public recuperation of the notion of ubuntu can be traced to the early 1990s, particularly in relation to the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission" and was "much touted by adherents of the African Renaissance that was championed by President Thabo Mbeki" (Peterson, 2019, pp. 55–56). But ubuntu was also linked historically to the emergence of Black Consciousness and was a "key concept in much of black theology in South Africa" (Peterson, 2019, pp. 55–56). Although, for example, the *Freedom Charter* does not make direct reference to ubuntu, its communalistic language (for example, "The people shall share in the country's wealth" and "The Land Shall be Shared Among Those Who Work It!") aligns to ubuntu.

It is worth engaging with Tutu's views on ubuntu as there are connections between his and Mbiti's approach, and thus to Head's work. In the second foreword to the collection of short stories published under the title *Freedom* (Amnesty International, 2011), Archbishop Emeritus Desmon Tutu argues that stories and their telling allow us to see "into the world we live in, the people we are, the people we can be, and we understand that we are human" (Amnesty International, 2011, pp. 5–6). Ubuntu is:

> difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, 'Yu, u nobuntu'; 'Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu.' Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.' It is not, 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather: *'I am human because I belong. I participate, I share'* (Tutu, 2012, emphasis added).

Tutu argues that it is ubuntu and not rights themselves that drives humans to "work together to counter the effects of natural disasters" and it is in this sense it is universal (Tutu, 2012). For Tutu, Josiah Cobbah's question of whether Africans "need to 'modernize' to become

individuals in the Western sense" (Cobbah, 1987, p. 324) is answered. African perspectives such as ubuntu provide valid alternatives to the dominant discourse.

In Tutu's view, dignity and rights adhere to all people and although the UDHR is "like a fresh dawning sun" (Amnesty International, 2011, p. 7) it is nonetheless to the collective, to ubuntu, that he turns. Humans are not, Tutu says,

> single entities operating in a vacuum. No, we are all connected to each other, and our behaviour, whether good or bad, reverberates across society and down the generations ... If we dehumanise others, we dehumanise ourselves (Amnesty International, 2011, p. 7)

Tutu fuses ubuntu and Christianity, arguing that it is impossible to act in keeping with the one without the other. Forgiveness is Christian (Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you"). Apartheid's victims ought to forgive the perpetrators of abuses because of ubuntu (Murithi, 2006, p. 32).

Tutu's integration of ubuntu and forgiveness has been criticised, as it "individualized the victims", preventing apartheid from being seen as a crime against humanity despite its ethnic/racial basis (Mamdani, 2002, p. 33). As a counter to Mahmood Mamdani's critique, Michael Battle (2000, p. 178) asserts that Tutu's ubuntu captures a "relational spirituality" in opposition to "other social forms of communalism" (Battle, 2000, p. 178), overcoming "the tendency to discount personality for the sake of community" (Battle, 2000, p. 179), a tension. Nonetheless, Mamdani's point that the individualisation of victim and perpetrator places the suffering of individuals at a remove from the systemic, underpinning racism of apartheid stands. Head grapples with this tension between individual and systemic, saying that the writer has to have the "biggest … long-term view" possible if problems like racism are to be solved (MacKenzie and Clayton, 1989, p. 13). In *Maru,* Head depicts racism as universal and not about white and black people, asserting that "the language used to exploit Basarwa people, the methods used to exploit them, the juxtaposition between white and black in South Africa and black and Basarwa in Botswana is so exact" (MacKenzie and Clayton, 1989, p. 11).

How Head both universalises and personalises suffering is in the use of love and acts of ubuntu. It is important then, that the philosophical link between love and ubuntu put forward by Mpho

Tshivhase (2018), coincidentally South Africa's first black woman to obtain a doctorate in philosophy, is addressed. All moral theories, she points out, require a foundation, and proposes that the philosophical foundation for ubuntu is love. By love, Tshivhase does not mean romance nor even friendship. Rather, she argues, the love at the base of ubuntu is a "disinterested love" (Tshivhase, 2018, p. 198) which "exists for its own sake and not for the sake of causing something else to happen" (Tshivhase, 2018, p. 198). An ubuntu founded on 'disinterested' love moves it away from interactions between individuals and their specific interrelationships, and towards a more generalised view of human social interactions. In this construction neither love nor ubuntu require that people are known to one another, nor even that they are in contact with each other, as in a community (Tshivhase, 2018, p. 198). Grounding ubuntu in love ensures the move from the relational into humanity.

Tshivhase points out that several critics have like Tutu focused on the altruistic aspects of ubuntu and its value for society, while thinkers such as Metz and Mogobe Ramose have defended its validity as an ethical theory. Tshivhase is interested in ubuntu as a meaningful moral theory "regardless of whether humans take it seriously for a scholarship or find it beneficial for their status as social beings whose existence necessitates relationality of some form or another" (Tshivhase, 2018, p. 200). Placing humans rather than love at the centre of ubuntu renders it meaningless outside of people, notwithstanding the relationality of the human condition and the need for ubuntu in cases of moral deliberation, where it could provide "guiding principles for appropriate moral behaviour" (Tshivhase, 2018, p. 202) 1). Agreeing with the theorists cited above that ubuntu is ontological, epistemological, relational and an ethical theory, she seeks to identify the "grounding for ubuntu, where such grounding need not be instrumental to humans" (Tshivhase, 2018, p. 202).

In this construction, love is an "unattached theory" which "would avoid the centralisation of the (human) beloved" (Tshivhase, 2018, p. 203). Love is "valuable in and of itself", independent from how it is aspired to or diverged from. Ubuntu grounded in love is comparable to a tree's shade which "is there every day even if no-one or no-thing finds refuge in the shade, uses the shade or recognises that it is there, to begin with" (Tshivhase, 2018, p. 204). Although ubuntu might involve some kind of love for humanity, it is not this love on which it should be grounded. The love at the base of ubuntu includes the "'other' [which] could be any living being that one encounters, and whose presence necessarily invokes ubuntu as an appropriate response to that 'other'" (Tshivhase, 2018, p. 204). This love:

> [it] is not based on a single focus. Herein there is no beloved; there is simply love – a kind of love whose object is everything and nothing at the same time. The nature of this love is such because nothing in the universe stays the same and so the fluidity of existence requires a mode of love that is not fixated on the concrete aspect of anything since everything is at any one point something which becomes nothing at some moment or other. A love that is fixated on something is limiting and limited… The point is that this kind of possessive or attached love can be paralysing and it can prevent one from spreading the love, as it were... ubuntu, when founded on love, would not require reciprocity – the golden rule would not be an aspect of it … If we want to view ubuntu as the highest form of generality, then we cannot have it focused on maintaining a particular kind of social relationship (Tshivhase, 2018, p. 205).

In addition, she argues that the view of ubuntu *as personhood* per se is an error, only assuming once discussed in relation to humans (Tshivhase, 2018, p. 206).

In discussing alternatives to western rights constructs, Cobbah (1987) proposes an African approach to human dignity centred in kinship systems which, he notes, are not a source of distress for human rights activists. He points out that it is the "political and civil abuses perpetrated by African dictator regimes on their opposition" that is at the heart of the activists' concerns (Cobbah, 1987, p. 328). For Cobbah, as these regimes are not actually African but have taken the form of western liberal state structures in which human rights address abuses, these criticisms of 'African ways' are invalid. Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò (2022) is critical of such thinking, arguing that the scholarship of decolonisation inhibits African thought, restricting it to a history that has passed. He differentiates between two postcolonial types, the first of which is political independence or freedom which he argues should release in a polity "the capacity to become history-makers" (Táíwò, 2022). The second is an ideology that forces "an ex-colony to forswear, on pain of being forever under the yoke of colonisation, any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past" (Táíwò, 2022). Decolonisation in this second view equates with emancipation from all forms of colonialism, a flawed approach in his view. Of particular concern is that on decolonial narratives such as these, the "dominant conception of colonialism" is "stilted" and does not account for its historicity:

> Except for cases of genocide or the violent reduction of native populations to cultural and social insignificance, the epoch of colonisation was not sufficient, at least in Africa, to bring about any significant destruction or degradation of the essential elements of the culture and conditions of the colonised peoples (Táíwò, 2022).

Ezekial (Es'kia) Mphahlele – the reader will remember he is a contemporary of Head – picks up on this aspect of negritude when he argues that the struggle against white supremacy is needed to "assert our human and not African dignity. This latter we have always taken for granted" and that despite apartheid there "still survive the toughest elements of African humanism which keep us together and supply the moral force which we need in a life that rejects us" (Mphahlele, 1963, p. 82).

Head's fictional works pick up on several of these strands of thinking. Of her rejection of the black: good/white: evil binary she says, "… you can't say all white men are evil. ... You can't say African people, because they walk around in rags and tatters, are good" (Vigne, 1991, p. 54, emphasis in original). Mphahlele too asserts that he does not accept the romanticised Africa, a "symbol of innocence, purity and artless primitiveness", noting that violence is "often a healthy human state of mind" which negritude leaves out (Mphahlele, 1963, p. 83). The romanticised Africa means that we "are told only half - often even a falsified half - of the story of Africa … [the] synthesis of Europe and Africa does not necessarily reject the negro-ness of the African" (Mphahlele, 1963, p. 83).

Like Mphahlele, Táíwò argues that we should focus on the present and pay attention to crosscurrents in creative works in multiracial societies, citing South Africa as an example. The current postcolonial movement, he argues, sees as worthwhile only those cultures that are 'indigenous' or 'traditional'. Scholarly works should also open themselves up "to new ways of being human derived from the concepts and practices of those who imperialised us" especially as many Africans prefer "a more inclusive world which celebrates the entire range of human possibilities, including being other than African" (Táíwò, 2022, n.p.). After all, "'African' does not come in only one flavour". Scholars must heed the call to "take the agency of the colonised seriously and to pay attention to what they do with the legacy of colonisation" which has become almost absolutized. In line with Ajayi (2000), Táíwò argues that "especially in Africa,

colonialism is neither as powerful nor as profound in its impact as our decolonisers proclaim" (Táíwò, 2022). It is impossible thus to turn only to colonialism to explain African phenomena or to the "fractures, cleavages and different historicities" across the continent. Significantly, "putting colonisation at the centre of ex-colonised lives is historically suspect and has the unintended consequence of making less legible, if not rendering completely invisible, the autonomous lives (despite colonisation) led by the colonised even while colonialism lasted. It eviscerates the lives they led before colonialism was imposed on them, and the lives they have crafted since they threw off the colonial yoke" (Táíwò, 2022, n.p.).

The concept of ubuntu provides us with a useful paradigm from which to understand Head's underlying philosophical concerns and meets a number of the concerns raised above. Ubuntu "cannot be reduced to a racial category very much in the same way that Western individualism and discourses on individual agency, rationality and autonomy are not, even when they work to support certain racial stereotypes" (Ogude, 2018, p. 2). A communitarian definition of humanness based on a collective expression does not undermine or cancel out "human independence and individual personhood", in which 'the person' is detached from 'the community' (Ogude, 2018, p. 2). Rather, James Ogude argues, "personhood is attained through complex processes of exchange and engagement as people interact and communicate with those around them and with the totality of their environment". In this view, ubuntu is but one "strand" of personhood in Africa, and is expressed as an aspirational moral obligation (Ogude, 2018, p. 3). There is no absolute classification of behaviours and morals that 'adhere' to ubuntu – or that do not. Ubuntu suggests, rather, that "personhood is experienced and performed in the practical exercise of living and coming into being" in which relationality is the "primary condition of human existence" (Ogude, 2018, p. 5). Unlike the positioning of human rights in an inherent 'dignity', ubuntu is achieved, as is personhood.

1.4. Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 places Head in context for the reader by outlining the events of her life, setting out her body of work, and assessing the critical responses to these. Although Head's life story has been and continues to be the source of much fascination, I choose not to reference the events of Head's life in my textual analyses. The events of her life are offered simply to provide the backdrop for an appreciation of Head's time and context. A multitude of critical perspectives has been applied to her writing and she is shown through these to exploit a range of diverse paradigms,

anticipating and responding to debates about Africa and its future. A brief background to human rights in South Africa and the role of the *Freedom Charter* in the resistance movement in South Africa provides the setting against which Head's intellectual and political interests are established and which are evident in her works.

In Chapter 3, I examine how literature (particularly the novel form) and human rights have been intertwined with particular reference to South African literature. The chapter considers the impact of this relationship on literature and its criticism and examines creative expression as part of the struggle against apartheid. Although Head can be considered to write 'against' apartheid (as well as other forms of discrimination and inequity), she is not considered an 'anti-apartheid' or 'protest' writer making clear assertions against the national and systematised racism of the time informed by the lack of rights of black South Africans. Rather, and in her own words, Head 'protests' from the perspective of writing against all forms of exploitation and oppression, to find "an eternal and continuous world" from which her writing could be "illuminating the future for younger generations" (Head, 1990, p. 86). Through her writing she engages in a "search for as an African for a sense of historical continuity, a sense of roots" (Head, 1990, p. 86).

Chapter 4 turns directly to the literature, starting with a discussion of *The Cardinals* and *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The chapter looks at the ways in which these early books introduce Head's questioning of the binaries at the heart of the African intellectual tradition, using the traditional form. The urban setting predominates in South African protest writing. *The Cardinals* is the only one of Head's texts with an urban setting. Her first published novel, *Rain Clouds Gather*, takes us immediately into a rural setting which is where her texts will remain. In her move from urban to rural setting and in her rejection of the white/black views of colonialism/nationalism, Head is recalibrating nationalism. In order to do this, she draws not only on the rural context in which she finds herself, but on conceptions of tradition, development and progress. The chapter also examines how Head introduces the concepts of ubuntu and love which are examined as examples of post-oppositional thinking, linking to Head's overall purpose for writing as expressed in her letters and other texts.

In Chapter 5, attention turns to *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. The texts demonstrate Head's rejecting of dichotomous views, showing how she displaces especially racial binaries. The novels complicate 'race', replacing the old binary of black victim and white oppressor with a view in which it is the attributes or *type* of person that determines whether one is African or

not. ‘African’ is no longer defined by skin colour or other biological or human attributes, but by the extent to which one is a person in the fullness of the adoption and discharge of love and ubuntu. In rejecting “damn white, damn black” (Head, 1990, p. 6) Head creates her new ‘race’ with African values at the core.

Chapter 6 examines *The Collector of Treasures* as illustrative of the concerns which will inform the focus of her final two texts, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* and *A Bewitched Crossroad*. The interplay between traditional and colonial mores is evaluated through the lens of compassion, and of the ability of a person to embody the best of both value systems. The text presents the “painful muddle” of life in the village, sifting and sorting through the values from among which African villagers must choose (Head, 1977, p. 109).

In Chapter 7, the final chapter of the thesis, Head’s sage philosopher comes to the fore. Expressive of the values of love and ubuntu, the sage is aware of the inevitability of change to tradition. As the sages navigate physical and philosophical migrations from one place to another, they offer suggestions to their audience as to how problems may be solved and establish through their characters and narratives what Head argues is essential for change and development: a creole African tradition capable of setting out what *should* be. Head historicises fiction and fictionalises oral and written histories to bolster for the reader the view she argues for. The texts reflect her response to use the research she had done in original ways (Eilersen, 2001, p. 8).

Chapter 2: Bessie Head's life, works and critical reception

> *I have always just been me, with no frame of reference to anything beyond myself … I fear any biographer would be bored to tears by my own life story … and I look back on myself as a personality, plain and ordinary, without any glamour or mystery* (Head, 1990, pp. 3, 5).

The depth and degree of interest in Head's relatively small collection of works has not waned in the almost 40 years since her death in 1986. Similarly, neither has the curiosity about her mental state, her 'behaviour', and her treatment of others decreased with accounts of her conduct being published even decades after her death (Gardner, 1986; Gray, 2014; for example, Nazareth, 2006). At least part of the attraction to Head's works may be linked directly to the fact that so much of what she wrote about and how she wrote it is different to what was common in much South African writing at the time, particularly the later pieces, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (Head, 1981) and *A Bewitched Crossroad* (Head, 1984). This chapter sets out a brief biography of Head, lists the works that comprise her legacy, and offers a survey of relevant critical responses.

Head has been considered a protest writer, a feminist or woman/ist writer, a South African writer, a Botswanan writer, a colonial writer, and an African writer, among other categories with critics often applying one or more combinations of these categories to her oeuvre. Regardless of the labels, however, Head repeatedly claimed for herself the widest possible identity as a writer, stating that writing was:

> … a kind of participation in the thought of the whole world. No other occupation provides for such an international outlook as writing. I have my national, my African side but I am also very much an international kind of person (Head, 1990, p. 95).

Head justifies the choice of novel as her fictional vehicle in 1978 because it is

> like a large rag-bag into which one can stuff anything – all one's philosophical, social and romantic speculations. I have always reserved a special category for myself, as a writer – that of a pioneer blazing a new trail into the future (Head, 1990, p. 64).

In elucidating the role of her writing, Head aligns somewhat with acclaimed literary critic, F. R. Leavis, who required the novel to raise "uniquely and economically, questions about values, about judgments that are continuous with those we make in our daily lives" (Gregor, 1985, p. 437). Expressed in the 1940s, Leavis's expectations for a novel are interrogated by Slaughter who demonstrates the "sociocultural, formal, historical, and ideological conjunctions between human rights and the novel, particularly the coming of age genre" (Slaughter, 2009, p. 3). Given the scope and range of critical assessments of Head's novels, I argue that notwithstanding the available intricate and in-depth discussions of Head's works, there remains the possibility for an approach to her writing that locates her as part of a tradition of writing in southern Africa which grapples directly with questions of how to articulate what it is that defines African-ness and personhood.

It is the (roughly phrased) theme of personal development that is most overtly explored in critical responses to *When Rain Clouds Gather* (Head, 2010) and to an extent in *The Cardinals* (Head, 1993). Such a view of Head's texts is often also implicit in other views, such as in the focus on her 'madness' or her search for identity, or on the role of women, many of which proceed from the assumption that the texts in question are evidence of the 'growth' or coming to awareness of the protagonist. Makhaya's growing awareness in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, for example, or Elizabeth's in *A Question of Power* conform to the goal that we have as readers come to expect from a novel. In part, it is the envisioning of a personal transition that underlies the novel as a matter of form. Slaughter terms this as the process of "becoming what one already is by right" which serves as the abstract statement against which the "normative story of how the natural and the individual might become civil and social … without recourse to social coercion" (Slaughter, 2009, p. 26).

The lens of the novel – and in particular of the *Bildungsroman* – is the individual. It is she or he who is enmeshed in the establishment a culture of rights premised as bearer of such rights (Slaughter, 2009, p. 26). What Slaughter also notes, however, is that it is this same normative story that becomes the vehicle through which disenfranchised creative writers (those who are 'other', in the subaltern' or who are 'writing back') give expression to "the terms and

mechanics of enfranchisement" and over "the processes and prospects of incorporation" (Slaughter, 2009, p. 27). For the most part, however, such creative products tend to be "conservative of the prevailing egalitarian imaginary", given in particular to clarifying rights or citizenship, resulting in texts that are "reformist rather than revolutionary" (1995). The novel form can be "retooled" however, (Slaughter, 2009, p. 31), and in the discussion that follows the critical responses to how Head has done so are highlighted.

Alan Ramón Ward argues that Head's works can be read as the stories of individuals and allegorically as stories of communities. He argues that there is a distinction in Head's works

> between a belief in a set of ideas and living these ideas. Whereas the former is a reflective attitude, and thus prone to shifts, changes, distortions, and reversals, the latter is an accepted and, for the most part, an unquestioned orientation which directs the entirety of one's perceptions (Ward, 2013, p. 11).

Attempts to define or proscribe Head's political views result from Head's own vigorous rejection of "a duplication of colonial modes of power and self-definition in African nationalism" (Lewis, 2007, p. 74). Her works engage with racism and discrimination at both a personal and community level. Head views racism as inherent in humans and not as a white/black phenomenon as a result of which her narratives are deeply *politicised* (Ndebele, 1986) and develop "especially acute explorations of power and resistance" (Lewis, 2007, p. 2).

2.1. Bessie Head: a brief biography[6]

Early years

Bessie Amelia Head (born Emery) was born in a mental institution in South Africa on 6 July 1937. Her mother was a white woman (Bessie Amelia Emery, 'Toby' to her family) who had psychiatric issues subsequent to the death of her young son. Head's father's race only became apparent once she was born. It is worth noting that "since 1927 extramarital sexual intercourse between a white and black person in South Africa had been a punishable offence" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 8). Emery insisted that her daughter be given her name, and Bessie was given for adoption to a white couple. She was soon returned because she looked "strange", "quite black

[6] The biography below relies almost exclusively on Gillian Stead Eilersen's extensive work, *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears*. There is no other text as comprehensive as this one.

and native in appearance" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 9). She was then placed with foster parents, Nellie and George Heathcote, a poor 'coloured' (mixed race) couple (Eilersen, 1995, p. 9). On 13 September 1943, Toby died (Eilersen, 1995, p. 10) and around the same time, Head's foster father died which made life difficult (Eilersen, 1995, p. 14). Head loved her foster mother despite being "violently beaten for the slightest thing" (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 14–15) and the young child worked hard, cleaning, selling and foraging for food (Eilersen, 1995, p. 15).

At 13, Head was placed at St Monica's Home when a Mr Benjamin found that Head was made to "work hard" in a home "so bad that [he] had to report it and get [her] removed as soon as possible" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 18). Head had never questioned that her foster mother was her mother and the manner in which she learned of the truth was traumatic (Eilersen, 1995, p. 25). As a result of expressing that she missed her mother, one of the missionaries announced that Heathcote was not her mother and she could not return to her (Eilersen, 1995, p. 24). At the same time, at a hearing to determine whether she could visit her foster family, she was told that her real mother was "insane" and her real father was "a native" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 35), events which affected the rest of her life (Eilersen, 1995, p. 25). Head recalled that she "harboured a terrible and blind hatred for missionaries and the Christianity which they represented, and […] never set foot in a Christian church again" (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 25–26).

St Monica's

Head was made to abandon Catholicism and embrace Anglicanism. She escaped into reading (Eilersen, 1995, p. 26), her academic abilities making her part of an "elite group" at high school (Eilersen, 1995, p. 26). In 1953, the *Bantu Education Act* made it difficult for mission schools as government took control of African education (Eilersen, 1995, p. 29). Despite these developments, the new principal of St Monica's, Margaret Cadmore, "made a tremendous impression on Bessie" and encouraged her enormously (Eilersen, 1995, p. 30). Head took longer to complete her teacher's training certificate as she failed Physical Training and had to repeat (Eilersen, 1995, p. 33).

Aged 18, Head was discharged from the *Children's Act* and from St Monica's. She qualified in 1957 with a Natal Teachers' Senior Certificate (Eilersen, 1995, p. 33) and quickly realised how sheltered her life had been. The coloured community was engaged in a political tussle over the removal of their franchise in Natal and the Cape (Eilersen, 1995, p. 34) and, in the

previous year (1955), the *Freedom Charter* had been adopted at the Congress of the People. A few in her circle became politically active (Eilersen, 1995, p. 34):

> … many people from Bessie's circle of contacts vowed never to trust or support the white man again and a few became active in the resistance movement, Bessie herself observed but could not really identify with this cause … Once again she chose books (Eilersen, 1995, p. 34).

She became a member of the M L Sultan Library, and read extensively on Hinduism, Mahatma Gandhi, the Natal Indian Congress, and the Indian attack on South Africa's laws in the United Nations in 1948. She was inspired by the story of Gandhi, especially by his belief in Allah and Christ (Eilersen, 1995, p. 36), joined a Hindu sect and took lodgings with an Indian family. The extent and rapidity of the changes, the new religion and intellectual growth led to a near-breakdown making teaching difficult and in June 1958 she resigned and moved to Cape Town (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 37–38).

Cape Town and Johannesburg

Initially appointed as a freelance writer for the *Golden City Post*, Head was quickly appointed staff reporter. Surrounded by resistance to apartheid legislation designed to separate the races, Head was fully aware of these injustices saying that she worked in the "context of my early beginnings in South Africa as a South African black. Poverty has been with me all my life, but it was like a shared social problem" (MacKenzie and Clayton, 1989, p. 9). She also says that she knows of herself that she is "so good a writer that I am not torn by nationalistic arguments … these arguments just don't matter to me – it's all props and things that I have found unnecessary" (MacKenzie and Clayton, 1989, p. 11). Her journalistic work influenced her as a writer:

> I like a very clear precise style of communicating, with as much economy as possible. … I am not loose and baggy. I'm very concise and taut, and I intend saying as much as possible in the most economical way (MacKenzie and Clayton, 1989, p. 8).

In April 1959, Head accepted a position in Johannesburg at the *Golden City Post* and came to know Can Themba, Nat Nakasa and Lewis Nkosi from the offices shared with *Drum* (Eilersen,

1995, p. 46). The Pan-Africanists had begun to make themselves known, particularly African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) leaders Robert Sobukwe, Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu (Eilersen, 1995, p. 47). Sobukwe was particularly important for Head as he was "continually rejecting the concept of race and stressing instead the unifying idea of one human race" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 47) and "for the first time ever, [Head] involved herself in politics" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 48). She was attracted to a "fundamental unity of African thought that was inspiring some of Africa's leading statesmen of the late fifties" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 48). Head says her

> whole manner of speaking and thinking and walking changed. It totally unsuited me for living in such a climate and environment as South Africa. It gave me a new skin and a new life that was totally unacceptable to conditions down there … (cited in Garrett, 1999, p. 122).

In 1960, Head joined the Pan-African Congress (PAC) and was introduced to Robert Sobukwe (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 50–51). At a protest on 21 March 1960, several prominent PAC members were arrested (Eilersen, 1995, p. 51), not for burning their passes (identity books) as planned, but on the more serious charge of incitement. Head was arrested as part of a separate raid when a letter from a PAC member (ironically bemoaning the PAC) was found on her. Eilersen reports that little can be traced about the trial but that the stress coupled with an unpleasant sexual experience triggered a suicide attempt (Eilersen, 1995, p. 54).

After a period in hospital, Head returned to Cape Town and the *Golden City Post* (Eilersen, 1995, p. 56) but soon resigned due to depression and remained unemployed for a time (Eilersen, 1995, p. 57). During her recovery, she became friends with Randolph Vigne (Eilersen, 1995, p. 58) and wrote her own 'newspaper' (*The Citizen*), a strongly pro-Africanist publication which highlighted the "absurdities of the apartheid system" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 58).

Marriage and motherhood

In 1961, Head met and married Harold Head, living in slum conditions in District Six. Harold's sister found Head "a difficult person to live with", although Harold was calm (Eilersen, 1995, p. 60). While Head was pregnant, she worked for *New African*. Howard was born on 15 May 1962 and Head's first and only published poem appeared in the *New African* in July. Head wrote *The Cardinals* (called *Where the Wind Don't Blow*) at this time, which was published

after her death (Eilersen, 1995, p. 62). In September 1962, the Heads moved to Port Elizabeth and rekindled their friendship with Dennis Brutus, a 'banned' person (i.e. confined to his home, able to receive only one visitor at a time). In 1963, Harold was offered an editorship and they returned to Cape Town (Eilersen, 1995, p. 68). By November 1963, she was "feeling that her whole life was a failure" and she moved in with her mother-in-law (Eilersen, 1995, p. 69). This relationship soon broke down and Head was "desperately unhappy" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 70), looking to leave South Africa for a free African country. Her application for a passport was denied but she nonetheless applied for and got a job in Botswana. She was granted a one-way exit permit and left South Africa (Eilersen, 1995, p. 71) with by then nearly two-year-old Howard.

Botswana – Serowe

In 1964, Bechuanaland was on a countdown to independence, and in Serowe tribal authority coexisted with British colonialism (Eilersen, 1995, p. 77). Serowe was "astir with an awakening political consciousness" not least due to Seretse Khama, "a man of international repute … loved and respected by the local people" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 81). Although Head's school was considered one of the better ones, the poverty of the children, the lack resources, and Head's intense fear of the darkness mitigated her success as a teacher (Eilersen, 1995, p. 82). Nevertheless, Head felt the "shattered little bits" of her life begin to come together (Eilersen, 1995, p. 83).

Serowe, a centre for local politics, became a "meeting place for the steadily increasing stream of South African political refugees" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 84) including Head's husband. Patrick van Rensburg was in voluntary exile and dedicated to improving educational facilities and providing critical vocational education (Eilersen, 1995, p. 84). Head felt distinctly unsuited to refugee circles which ignited a "nightmarish terror" in her (Eilersen, 1995, p. 86), choosing freedom over politics, which made her lonely but also allowed her to go in any direction she chose (Eilersen, 1995, p. 86). Although eager to fit in, Head's ways were so different to those of other women that she soon antagonised both the "influential men in the village" and, "[w]orse than that, she antagonised their wives" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 87).

In October 1965, tensions exploded when the school principal propositioned Head and manhandled her in front of the children. Having bitten him to free herself, she ran from the school screaming, apparently the second such event. The School Committee required a medical

examination which, terrified, she refused. She was blacklisted, unable to teach (Eilersen, 1995, p. 91), and anxious to earn money. With help from van Rensburg and Vigne she published a piece on Serowe in *Transition* in 1964 (Eilersen, 1995, p. 92) soon followed by several others. She joined the Radisele Bamangwato Development Association Farm "doing whatever menial work was needed in return for somewhere to live and some time to write" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 96) in February 1966. This period saw a resurgence in her religious fervour which may have been symptomatic of psychological disturbances, a fact that did not escape her (Eilersen, 1995, p. 99). Head writes at this time "I've suddenly got the firm conviction that something like the equivalent of God is around in Southern Africa" and "I'm not the kind of person that's just born for being born (sic) sake" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 99).

Five months after arriving at Radisele she left by bus for Palapye where she was taken in by a sympathetic woman. She began work as a typist but was dismissed after two months (Eilersen, 1995, p. 101). She had no choice but to register as a refugee and move to the settlement in Francistown. Over two years, the UN High commission for Refugees approached 12 countries for Head's settlement, without success. As a stateless person, she reported to the police station every Monday and could not be formally employed, and she often went without food so that Howard could eat (Eilersen, 1995, p. 107). Events took a more positive turn when Simon and Schuster's editor Jean Highland asked for articles. Head then received a significant advance and began work on *When Rain Clouds Gather* (Eilersen, 1995, p. 109), which she completed by November 1967 (Eilersen, 1995, p. 110). The publication of *When Rain Clouds Gather* changed Head's attitude to Botswana and she decided to 'adopt' it as her own (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 120–121). Thoughts of herself as African and whether she was 'black enough' lead to her decision that she had a different destiny which required her to "opt for 'mankind as a whole'" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 121) . She believed wholeheartedly in her special role in Africa's future and did not view her visions as anything other than true.

Howard's schooling experiences were distressing as children told him he was not Motswana. The distress Head felt at this contributed to her increasing feelings of victimisation. She removed him from the school and decided to school him herself (Eilersen, 1995, p. 124) but by the end of January 1969 returned to Serowe where van Rensburg agreed that Howard could attend Swaneng Primary School (Eilersen, 1995, p. 125). She felt increasingly that "everyone was watching her and talking about her behind her back" (MacKenzie, 1997, p. 128) and, once again, she expressed loathing for Botswana.

When Head was evicted from the temporary home she had 'borrowed', Lenyeletse Seretse arranged for her to rent a hut near *kgotla* (Eilersen, 1995, p. 129). Despite her friends' best efforts, she was in a confused and nervous state. Unable to act rationally, her self-hatred and disturbing inner turmoil erupted at a shop and, screaming and swearing, she was taken to hospital (Eilersen, 1995, p. 129) where she was sedated and able to sleep. When she awoke, she saw the events of the day before as cathartic and a release as people 'knew' now that she was 'crazy' and not a 'loose woman' of which she had been accused. Later, she said that she and Howard were victim to the racial prejudice of Africans who despised "mixed breed" people (Eilersen, 1995, p. 130).

On 11 March 1969, the hard copy of *When Rain Clouds Gather* was published. The book sold well, leading to a second edition. Reviews were "encouraging" and "opened up new horizons" including friendships with Giles Gordon (Head's editor at Gollancz), Tom Carvlin (news editor at the *Chicago Tribune*), and Paddy Kitchen (freelance journalist and writer) (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 131–132). All three assisted Head with money and books and during this buoyant period she was free from "destructive obsessions" and was "bursting with creativity" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 132). She begins to write *Maru* under great pressure and in difficult circumstances (her hut was one small, dusty circular room filled with insect droppings from the thatch) (Eilersen, 1995, p. 133). The novel was completed in the same year and Gollancz accepted it (Eilersen, 1995, p. 134). On receiving the request that she change some of the 'confusing names', Head responded, "I do not write only for white people!!" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 139).

In November 1970, Head moved into a small, two-bedroomed house named 'Rain Clouds' with money from *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The house had running water and gas but, without electricity, Head still worked by candlelight. She also joined van Rensburg's project, Boiteko (self-help) as an instructor, imparting valuable gardening knowledge (Eilersen, 1995, p. 143) where she made a friend, Bosele Sinana, her "only true companionship among the local villagers" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 144). Sinana was a quiet person with little English and Head spoke no Setswana. Nonetheless, "she was to become one of Bessie's most loyal and long-suffering friends" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 144). The garden was a success and Head received seeds from around the world which flourished under her care.

Mental health concerns

By early 1970, Head's mental health was deteriorating although with Sinana's support the symptoms were more manageable, and neither the garden nor her mental health prevented her from writing (Eilersen, 1995, p. 148). It is then that she wrote 'Bothwell', revealing her obsessional thinking. She believed she had been Mary Queen of Scots in a former life, and thought that in Botswana the drama between her (Mary), Elizabeth I and Bothwell was playing itself out (Eilersen, 1995, p. 153). Head saw herself as part of the "eternal conflict between good and evil" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 152) and was equally convinced she was the reincarnated King David. Although Head had initially been able to distinguish between spiritual phenomena and the physical, this was no longer the case as the "visions became terrifying and perverted" causing headaches and necessitating tranquilisers (Eilersen, 1995, p. 155). By the end of 1970 she was getting nearer and nearer to mental collapse (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 156–157).

By Christmas, she was convinced that Vice President Quett Masire had been assassinated by the Peace Corps and believed that Seretse Khama was leading a cover-up of his death (Eilersen, 1995, p. 158). In Eilersen's view, Head was by this time quite "deranged", convinced that Khama was also spinning a "web of intrigue" in her life (Eilersen, 1995, p. 159). She was confined to bed and her friends were deeply concerned (Eilersen, 1995, p. 160). Encountering Joan Blackmore, an elderly neighbour, outside her home, Head struck the old woman and fled screaming and cursing to lock herself in her house. Although she calmed enough to put Howard to bed, the next morning she went to the shopping district and displayed a homemade notice which accused Khama of incest with his daughter and of conspiring in the death of Quett Masire. Head was arrested although her declarations about Masire and Khama were met with confusion by the magistrate, who ordered her admission to hospital. This made her nightmares worse (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 160–161) and, realising that sleep would not work this time, she was transferred to a mental hospital. The conditions were harsh, and Head was a difficult patient. Doing everything that she could to be discharged, she returned to Serowe in early June but was not well and suffered dreadfully as a result of the early discharge (Eilersen, 1995, p. 163). Van Rensburg spoke to Khama whose measured approach to Head made people "more tolerant" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 162) of her. She apologised to Blackmore, seeing in the elderly woman "the normal, the friendly, with a soft kind glow about the eyes" and was deeply embarrassed by her attack on the woman (Eilersen, 1995, p. 164).

Head slowly recuperated and by early August 1970 was working on a third book. By March 1972 she had chosen the title, *A Question of Power*, and completed it by April. She apprehensively submitted it to her agent and publishers and prepared herself for rejection (Eilersen, 1995, p. 169). Eilersen makes an interesting comment on the text and its link to Head's own life:

> To the degree that the writing process can be regarded as a form of therapy it would appear to have been successful … Unfortunately, as time was to show, the autobiographical element does not apply in this vital area. Bessie could not eradicate her paranoiac concern with evil by writing about it (Eilersen, 1995, p. 178).

The publishers' initial reception of *A Question of Power* upset Head: Gordon called the book a "draft of a novel" and Rubinstein found it "dense and intractable" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 178). Head "rose up in noble indignation" at the criticism (Eilersen, 1995, p. 178) and a troubled period followed as she tried to get the novel accepted. She finally moved to a new agency, and Heinemann agreed to print the book. In 1972 a hardback publisher was found and Head received an excellent advance (Eilersen, 1995, p. 181).

A growing awareness

With the passing of what Head called the 'thunderstorm' of her life, she became aware of the impact of her letters to others, and of the strain and stresses on her friendships. Writing to Gordon she said, "I can't carry on with any friendship just now and I am grateful to the people who no longer write to me" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 182). She asked Tom Carvlin and Paddy Kitchen to destroy the letters she had sent them. Carvlin did so and correspondence with him became sporadic, while it tapered off with Kitchen and Highland. In August 1972 Head was broke, and van Rensburg assisted her as she had not taken earnings from the garden (Eilersen, 1995, p. 186). In October 1973, the editor of *Drum* asked her to research his great-grandfather, missionary John Mackenzie who had lived with Khama III, and in this way "'Khama the Great' entered her life" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 187). Giles Gordon suggested a book about Serowe similar

to Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield, Portrait of an English Village*[7] and Head began work on the book by interviewing residents with Sinana's help (Eilersen, 1995, p. 187).

In 1974, Head received an offer to settle in Norway, initiated by Marit Kromberg. Initially she accepted (Eilersen, 1995, p. 190) but changed her mind three months later, citing her imminent death and the fact that no one cared about her as the reasons (Eilersen, 1995, p. 191). Eilersen notes:

> It is deeply tragic that Bessie so often felt that no-one cared about her. Many people had disproved this but she sometimes had difficulty in recognising and accepting offers of help in the same simple spirit that they were given (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 191–192).

She was by this time arranging the materials for the Serowe book, focused on "three central personalities" – Khama III, Tshekedi Khama, and Patrick van Rensburg (Eilersen, 1995, p. 192) – and ultimately cited the book as the reason for remaining. The publisher's response to *Serowe* was positive, despite knowing it would not sell easily. By July the contract was signed (Eilersen, 1995, p. 194) and Head began on the next text - *Botswana Village Tales*, a collection of 13 stories in a particular order. She submitted this to Gordon (Eilersen, 1995, p. 202) and it was published as *The Collector of Treasures*. *Serowe*'s editor required extensive changes against which Head bridled so much so that in February 1975 she terminated the arrangement (Eilersen, 1995, p. 204). Head suggested that Davis-Poynter Ltd partner with Bateleur Press (Eilersen, 1995, p. 203) which resulted in a complicated arrangement to release both *Serowe* and *Botswana Village Tales* in South African and international markets. To everyone's surprise she then wrote to Davis-Poynter accusing Cullinan of stealing her money despite his efforts to increase her earnings (Eilersen, 1995, p. 206). Cullinan travelled to Botswana, telling Head that he thought she was in the throes of another breakdown (Eilersen, 1995, p. 207). She ignored this, and her behaviour escalated, with long and irrelevant letters which made repeated reference to Satan and the Botswana tax authorities being sent to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and to President Seretse Khama (Eilersen, 1995, p. 208).

[7] Robert Blythe's *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* was published in 1969 and is a fictionalised account of life in a Suffolk village (covering the period 1880 to 1966). The text is based on interviews with three generations of Blythe's neighbours. Unlike Serowe, there is no village named Akenfield.

In February 1976, Davis-Poynter informed Head that it would publish *Village Tales*. Head initially signed the agreement but then changed her mind at the end of May. Davis-Poynter was angered by Head's accusations about his alleged collusion in her tax issues and withdrew support for both books. She was now without an agent in London and New York. As a result, only in 1977 were the books finally published by David Phillip and Ad Donker in Cape Town. *The Collector of Treasures* and a paperback version by Heinemann were published at the same time.

Head's sarcastic correspondence with Nikki Giovanni had become difficult for Giovanni and Head terminated the correspondence in a letter replete with swear words and insults. Her irrational and violent behaviour was, of course, symptomatic of her fragile mental state, which her tax issues exacerbated and "[s]he paid a heavy price financially for her decisions. By late 1975 she was so heavily in debt that one local shopkeeper refused to greet her any more" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 211). Betty Fradkin bailed her out with a monthly 'loan' as well as enough to pay off her debt (Eilersen, 1995, p. 212). In January 1976, van Rensburg asked Head to return to the Boiteko garden project, although this too did not last. Head allowed her group a weekend off which angered van Rensburg and another project leader (Eilersen, 1995, p. 213) and resulted in her resigning (Eilersen, 1995, p. 214).

In April 1976, Head met Mary Benson, author of the Tshekedi Khama biography, and presented her first paper at the Writers' Workshop at the University of Botswana. Benson sought Head out, gifting her a yellow cloak (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 215–216). She also received a copy of Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* and made contact for the first time in years with black South Africans. The events of 1976 in South Africa during which police shot protesting high school students, as well as the Zulu attacks on Soweto residents shocked Head deeply and she wrote to her sister-in-law of the persistence of the "horror" of South Africa (Eilersen, 1995, p. 218). Accepting that Botswana was now her home, and gaining perspective on her previous naïve views, Head wrote to Betty Fradkin in 1975 that she had defined her race for herself in her novels: "I am a New African. I like being a pioneer, creating light and space" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 220).

The final decade

Although the tenth anniversary of Botswana's independence was celebrated in 1976, the region remained troubled. The Unilateral Declaration of Independence by then-Rhodesia and the situation in Angola, Mozambique and Namibia impacted on Botswana which was by then

experiencing sanctions as a result of taking in Rhodesian and South African refugees (Eilersen, 1995, p. 229). Against this backdrop, Head commenced the final decade of her life. In July 1977 she was approved for an all-expenses paid trip to the International Writing Programme at Iowa University. Iowa's rural setting delighted Head as she compared it to Serowe (Eilersen, 1995, p. 244). She settled into writing punctuated by twice-weekly discussions and a visit to Canada with Cecil Abrahams in November (Eilersen, 1995, p. 246). She travelled to Jackson, Mississippi to see Margaret Walker in December (Eilersen, 1995, p. 247), and loved Jackson University, amazed by the fact that it was almost all black. This was a settled period. Her finances were in order, her research was progressing, and she was not "constantly creating her own crises" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 248). Into this calm came the Botswana government's letter denying her citizenship, ironic as she was the Botswanan representative in the United States. Reviews of *The Collector of Treasures* published as part of the African Writers' Series were generally positive. Head remained in the United States until the end of December (Eilersen, 1995, p. 249).

On her return to Botswana "the partly healed sore of Bessie's old disillusionment with Botswana had started to fester again" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 250) as she arrived home to a house and garden damaged by an intense hailstorm. She was depressed again, and news of Robert Sobukwe's death in February 1978 coupled with the refusal of citizenship, shocked her deeply (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 254–255). Desperately lonely since her return from America, the unexpected suicide of a doctor who had treated Howard unnerved her and the insomnia returned. She began to take brandy and water instead of food (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 256–257).

In July, a discussion with Jane Clegg on *A Question of Power* challenged Head's view of the book as her lived experience (Eilersen, 1995, p. 258) and drew her into a consideration of evil. Head was angered by Clegg's view that evil in the text was white South African and angrily asserted that the novel was set in Botswana and not South Africa (Eilersen, 1995, p. 259). The book, Head said, was about *all* evil and she took exception to the view that black people could not be seen as toweringly evil, "so hugely demonish" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 259).

In 1979, Head was offered a university bursary by the German Ambassador and unsuccessfully applied for development studies at Michigan State. Around the same time, she rejected an invitation from a German group saying she was a "near-broken corpse" who should be left to die but not in an African state "where corpses are registered as being dead from an identifiable

disease … I am almost out of my mind with terror. So? Who cares?" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 262). Her mental state was variable, with logical and coherent letters going to some, and chaotic ones such as this going to others.

Heinemann Educational Books accepted *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* for publication. Head was deeply relieved and excited as there were to be no alterations and no illustrations as had been requested previously (Eilersen, 1995, p. 263). Unexpectedly in February 1979 she received a letter from the Botswana government that her application for Botswana citizenship had been approved. As she had had no reply after her first, rejected application she was puzzled (Eilersen, 1995, p. 263) but the outcome was thanks to van Rensburg who had appealed directly to Khama (Eilersen, 1995, p. 264). Just prior, Head had mentioned to Jane Clegg that she was suffering from a mental breakdown and reliving memories from earlier times, obsessively moving between holy people and devils. Three days after receiving her citizenship, she accepted the previously rejected Berlin invitation (Eilersen, 1995, p. 265). Head was among "the cream of black writers: Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Mongo Beti, Camara Lye and Wole Soyinka ... Ama Ata Aidoo and Bessie Head were the only women" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 266). There she met up with Lewis Nkosi, James Currey, and Dennis Brutus, noting that she and Brutus were no longer "on the same wavelength" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 268). The festival ended on a sour note as Head confronted an organiser for speaking of a fellow writer as 'that coloured' (Eilersen, 1995, p. 269).

By the end of that year, Head returned to researching the Khama novel. With Howard finishing school, they left Serowe for Gaborone for a year, living off a grant and in the apartment of some friends. Head seemed now to be "on an even keel mentally" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 271). Seretse Khama died on 13 July 1980. With his death, Dr Quett Masire became president and Head's friend Lenyeletse Khama vice-president (Eilersen, 1995, p. 275). Head's letters make brief reference to these events, noting that things were peaceful despite the change (Eilersen, 1995, p. 276). In South Africa things were changing too. John Vorster had been forced to resign and P W Botha spoke of the need to 'adapt or die', with several constitutional 'reforms' resulting, although none would undermine white minority rule (Eilersen, 1995, p. 276). Head's work however was not proceeding well as she was struggling to "assemble research data into novel form", noting that parts of the six chapters she had written were "very dry and didactic" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 277). Around this time, she and Howard received an invitation to Denmark to attend the launch of an anthology for which one of her pieces had been selected and she and

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o delivered addresses. From Denmark they flew to London where Jane Grant "became aware of Bessie's precarious nervous balance and the complex mother-son relationship" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 281).

Ending at A Bewitched Crossroad

Head's return to Botswana was marred by the news of the sudden death of her friend, Mona Pehle. Head was quiet about his loss, and that of several others who left her life, among these Randolph Vigne and Betty Fradkin (Eilersen, 1995, p. 285). Activity on the new book continued, with publications of short pieces in *Drum* and in a University of Natal collection, and she wrote a foreword to Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* (Eilersen, 1995, p. 287). Overall, this was a peaceful time, despite arguments with publishers about free copies of *Serowe* for the contributors (in which Head prevailed) and the book appeared officially on 29 June 1981. Head had been having difficulties with Howard and when Harold Head made contact after 17 years, Howard left Botswana for Canada on 26 May 1982.

Head was kept busy by the numerous invitations and was especially a sought-after speaker for volunteers. She chose from among her invitations based on logical reasons (such as she could not incur expenses), and some less so (such as that other speakers were people she did not like or other vague "personal reasons") (Eilersen, 1995, p. 293). Several last-minute cancellations occurred with, for example, Head (falsely) claiming that she was dying of lung cancer, causing much consternation (Eilersen, 1995, p. 305).

Nonetheless, in early 1982 Head travelled to Nigeria but was upset by the students' reactions to her texts and by the "extreme forms of good and evil" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 295). She returned via Zimbabwe, where students found her texts 'western' and 'not African' enough. In early 1983, Lenyeletse Khama died and again, Head kept her feelings to herself. A visit from Susan Gardner and her students followed, which allowed Head to discuss her life and works. In South Africa, Gardner contacted the National English Literary Museum to make Head's material accessible to scholars (Head had donated materials). Several students sent Head their research although she was "uneasy about seeing some of her more outspoken comments in print" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 299). Although Gardener's activities were standard academic practice, Head was concerned: she could see how students and Gardner benefitted but saw no benefit to herself. She wrote an explosive letter to Gardner about her exploitation by university people who "despise me, the self-made writer" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 300). Eilersen is critical of

Gardner's dismissal of Head's actions as a brain disease, noting that Head was out of touch with "academic efficiency" and was "distressed and indignant, not deranged" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 301). Head felt "discriminated against economically, and no doubt all the old feelings of racial discrimination welled up", and she stopped accepting requests for interviews (Eilersen, 1995, p. 301). One positive outcome of Gardner's visit was a letter from Tim Couzens and a copy of his book, *The Return of the Amasi Bird*. She praised the collection and Couzens's rediscovery of Plaatje (Eilersen, 1995, p. 302).

In early 1983, Michael Chapman, from a Johannesburg-based publishing company, requested materials for a series of books by women in southern Africa. Head replied that her book would be ready in two months. Amongst this flurry of work, she received a letter from Veronica Billings, Nellie Heathcote's granddaughter (Eilersen, 1995, p. 303). They would correspond regularly, triggering memories of her childhood in South Africa. Finally *A Bewitched Crossroad* was submitted to agents and the publisher – it had taken ten years (Eilersen, 1995, p. 306). One month later, Ad Donker sent word that it would be published, and a positive trip to Australia followed, despite many not knowing about her or her books (Eilersen, 1995, p. 319). Head returned to Botswana to a visit from Donker and his wife and by the middle of June her first cheque arrived.

A visit from Jean Marquard and her students ended poorly when Head grew suspicious of Marquard's motives and angry at being exploited. She wrote to the University of the Witwatersrand complaining about the lecturers and students and the lack of payment (Eilersen, 1995, p. 322). Her "obsessively suspicious attitude towards researchers and media people was becoming a permanent state. Her accusations this time were ridiculous, though this did not stop her from relating the story afterwards, with embellishments" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 322).

Head was depressed and worried again, about Howard and her finances although it was unclear why she was in debt given her simple lifestyle (Eilersen, 1995, p. 324). Eilersen believes it may be because she gave Howard everything he wanted, and her alcohol habits were expensive. Head was approached in 1984 to write her autobiography and asked for a year and a space in which to write (Eilersen, 1995, p. 327). *A Bewitched Crossroad* was published on 31 October 1984 to relatively quiet reception (Eilersen, 1995, p. 329) and the disadvantages of publishing in South Africa became evident. Heinemann Educational Books turned down the British rights

and although American Paragon House published the title it did not sell, in part due to sanctions against South Africa (Eilersen, 1995, p. 330).

Howard returned from Canada in October 1984, and Head took up gardening as a small business. She published several pieces in van Rensburg's paper *Mmegi Wa Dikgang* and in the French newspaper *Liberation* (Eilersen, 1995, p. 332), and wrote to the welfare society for information about her past but they made no reply. On 6 July 1985, Head turned 48 and was visited by Harold Head, seeking a divorce. She said nothing to anyone, "becoming more reserved" and increasingly lonely (Eilersen, 1995, p. 338), "more and more afraid of facing people," and suffering from chronic insomnia (Eilersen, 1995, p. 339).

Head negotiated a good payment for her autobiography, bought her first fridge, and paid off her debts. She seemed calmer although money was disappearing again (Eilersen, 1995, p. 339). In December she received a back payment in royalties from the Dutch publishing house, Novib, and a parcel of gifts (Eilersen, 1995, p. 340). Alice Walker nominated Head for the Mother Jones Diploma which she was awarded. Soon after, her divorce was finalised and she wept for ages, overwhelmed also by writing the book she had promised (Eilersen, 1995, p. 342). Increasingly stressed, she moved from beer to brandy and gin, and by March 1986 was drinking a bottle a day. She had lost a lot of weight and by February 1986 people realised how ill she was and persuaded her to see a doctor. Refusing hospital admission despite being diagnosed with hepatitis, she was permitted to go home (Eilersen, 1995, p. 342). After a week, she still could not get up. A visitor found her weak and losing consciousness and she was admitted to the hospital. Bosele attempted to visit Head, was unable to do so, and decided to return the next day. By that time, however, Head was in a coma and in the late afternoon, one each of her hands in the hands of a friend, she died. It was 17 April 1986. She was buried, as at her request, by a Catholic priest, in the Botolaote cemetery.

2.2. Head's works

The texts published in Head's lifetime are, in 1968, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, followed by *Maru* in 1971. In 1974, *A Question of Power* was published, followed by *The Collector of Treasures* in 1977. The year 1981 saw the publication of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, and in 1984, *A Bewitched Crossroad*. Subsequent to her death is *Tales of Tenderness and Power*, a collection of Head's shorter works published in 1989, and *The Cardinals* in 1993. Head published seven texts in a short period spanning 1968 to 1984. What is particularly

fascinating is how Head creates a fictional reality that both accords with and contradicts her view of Botswana, as Eilersen (1995) has so ably demonstrated. Head's 'escape' into fictional pasts, presents and futures is convoluted and intricate. In writing the Botswana or Africa of her "own making" (Head, 1990, p. 62), Head argues that she has "forcefully created, under extremely hostile conditions, [her] ideal life" (Head, 1990, p. 28). As she says, it

> was always tentative because it was always so completely new: it created new worlds out of nothing; … it brought all kinds of people, both literate and semi-literate together, and it did not really qualify who was who – everyone had a place in my world (Head, 1990, p. 28).

2.3. Critical reception

This survey of the literature demonstrates the depth and richness of research of Head's work and this thesis joins this diverse community of scholars. In many instances, the scholarship focuses on Head's texts as individual projects rather than seeing the linkages and connections between the texts themselves. Head's works are not straightforwardly subsumed into one category or another and, as a result, there are overlaps and duplications in some of the areas of discussion. Although some of the critics have drawn on several texts, as the discussion below demonstrates, in this thesis I argue that taken as a whole, Head's works deal with the fundamental question of the constitution of personhood in Africa. By surveying each of the broad focus areas in the literary critiques of Head's works, I set the groundwork in place for the longer view I argue for in this thesis.

Although the scholarship below has been clustered thematically in a particular way, there are obvious intersections and overlaps, and some critiques may have relevance across the different clusters. I have focused in each, however, on those I consider to be the most salient examples of the approaches I wish to highlight. The clusters are as follows: biographical and autobiographical approaches; questions of identity, whether of race, gender or class; history, tradition and orality; gardening, rurality and development; and the new worlds Head proposes.

2.3.1. A story to tell: biography and autobiography

It is predictable perhaps, given the tragic aspects of Head's life story and the realities of her mental health, that these have dominated critical responses to her novels. This is particularly

true when one considers the central position accorded to *A Question of Power* in evaluations of her works, as the 2014 special edition of *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* shows (Beard, 2014; Gray, 2014). From the biography presented earlier in this chapter, it is apparent that Head was a complex, often difficult person to associate with, and had troubled relationships with many, including some who had helped her enormously (Eilersen, 1995). As a result, several critics have focused either on the stories she told about herself, or conversely on the story they wish to tell about her. A few of the critical responses have constituted bewilderingly personal attacks on Head, often as vindications of the critics themselves.[8] Researchers and critics alike can be grateful for Eilersen's objective accounts of Head's behaviour and for the balanced and reasoned way she locates these in Head's increasing paranoia and in the psychological disturbances at various intervals in her life (Eilersen, 1995, pp. 178, 159 and pp. 305–306).

Closely linked to analyses of the auto/biographical elements is an intense focus on madness, which is notable as madness, and is central only to *A Question of Power* and tangential to *Maru*. The former, however, remains one of the most "widely discussed, highly rated, and yet most puzzling novels in the entire corpus of African fiction" (MacKenzie, 2014, p. 148) and continued attraction to critics of her works.[9] The critics have, variously, linked madness to an African context, seeing it as linked to witchcraft (Talbert, 1982, p. 31), to African and diasporic worldviews (Nweze, 2015), and to the status of women in society (Nweze, 2015, p. 308). Yet others use the texts to diagnose either Head and or Elizabeth or Margaret, the protagonists in the novels (on this, see Lilford, 2014, p. 171). Madness in Head's text is seen as standing in for a variety of pressures whether in Head's life or in the context in which she lives: it is representative of the ambiguities in Botswana (Olaogun, 1994, p. 73), or is a "mental and spiritual decolonizing processes" (Cappelli, 2017, p. 164) able to "transverse and recollect the historical memories and personal stories of apartheid South Africa" (Cappelli, 2017, p. 167). Head's treatment of madness demonstrates the weaknesses of social and medical models of madness (Kruger, 2019, p. 133), recognising the role of power and persecution which creates "dehumanized victims" (Lewis, 2007, p. 198). In the same cluster are those critics who have focused to one degree or another on connecting events in Head's life to the lives of her

[8] See, for example, Susan Gardner's obituary which crudely references Head's drinking and eating habits (1986, p. 111) and Stephen Gray's comment that Head is "cigarette-chugging" and money grasping (2014, p. 196).
[9] See, for example, Craig MacKenzie (2014), Linda Lee Talbert (1982), Modupe Olaogun (1994), Susannah Zinato and Annalisa Pes (2013), Jacqueline Rose (1994), Patrick Hogan (1994), Rajeev Patke (2005) and Silue Lèfara (2017, pp. 221 & 231).

characters, with some discordant critical conclusions reached as a result. For example, some have questioned the veracity of Head's life story as told by her, while others conflate characters with author (Evasdaughter, 1989; Gardner, 1986; MacKenzie, 1989a, 1989b; Wilhelm, 1983). These analyses have admittedly diminished significantly following the publication of Eilersen's extensive biography (1995). Nonetheless, the need to differentiate between Head's life and her writing has been pointed out by Mary Lederer (2014, p. 163) and Grant Lilford (2014). Happily, more recent autobiographical analyses have focused on the complex question of how autobiography is constituted, examining the letters and other writings as sources, rather than the fictional.[10] Although considerations of madness are central to debates about personhood and individual autonomy, it is possible in this approach to neglect other aspects of Head's conceptions of personhood. Critical extensions of madness are, of course, in evidence in other critical works which, for instance, use madness as the basis for an analysis of Head's views on good and evil (Wilhelm, 1983, p. 6), and to determine the links between good, evil and the workings of power (Beard, 1991, p. 579). Linda Susan Beard acknowledges Head's rejection of "totalities and absolutes" (Beard, 1991, p. 581) arguing the polyphony in the texts makes clear that "apartheid manifestation of absolutism will not outlast a more ancient story" (Beard, 1991, p. 586), a view supported by Adetokunbo Pearse (1983).[11]

Head's personal status as refugee and voluntary exile too dominates the critical works which examine her works (or her) from this perspective. Some focus on her lack of belonging and identity, while others focus on the ways in which the texts reveal her growing sense of acceptance of or belonging to Botswana. Daniel Moshenberg (2016, p. 112) draws from her texts lessons about the constitution of female communities in exile and drawing significant parallels between contemporary Zimbabwean women awaiting repatriation in South Africa with the communities of women Head depicts across the stories in *The Collector of Treasures*. The woman seeking asylum as a refugee is, Moshenberg argues, "the absolute test of national democracy" and is challenging the system as a woman, as a citizen failed by her state of origin, and thus as a stateless person. *The Collector of Treasures* reveals the "simultaneously precarious and powerful positions women occupy" (Moshenberg, 2016, p. 116). Margaret

[10] See, for example, Gagiano (2020), Manus (2001), and Nuttall (1996). Wilhelm (1983, p. 2) examines the tension between autobiography and fiction, Evasdaughter (1989, p. 130) focuses on the autobiographical as a device used by women. Daymond (2014) and Lewis (2007) offers analyses of Head's letters for perceptions of the self.

[11] Head roundly rejected the critics' insistence on apartheid as the source of insanity in her stories (see Pearse, 1983, p. 82), Kandemiri and Mlambo (2022), Shannon Young (2010), Abdul Wahab (2017) and Saara Jäntti (2012).

Daymond (2013) uses Head's correspondence to illustrate how her letters speak to different instances of losing or of being denied a home. She shows how women's letters create "fresh points of connection" in their focus on women's and other concerns and bridge "cultural, economic and generational gaps" (Daymond, 2013, p. 127). Eleni Coundouriotis argues that in exile Head dignifies "African people by rendering them visible in their daily lives to an international readership" (Coundouriotis, 2011, pp. 23–24), using the village to indicate her connectedness to decolonisation (Coundouriotis, 2011, p. 28). Yielding some useful insights into Head's perception of herself as stateless person (which from her biography we know she found distressing), using the facts of Head's exile as a source of analysis requires the continuous awareness of the differences between her state and that of her contemporaries, whose exiles were most often directly politically motivated. These differences are evident in the texts as Rob Nixon (1993, pp. 115–116) points out:

> The work of most of the literary exiles—Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, Es'kia Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Dennis Brutus et al.—reveals few attachments to the alien present, ... Almost all of these exiles wrote at a great physical distance from South Africa, having put oceans and continents between themselves and apartheid. Head's circumstances and approach proved wholly different.

For Nixon, it is for this reason that, out of necessity, Head's attention turns to ordinariness, an element which she could not take as a given due to her life story and which she saw "as an exhausting, improbable attainment" as a result of the "tremendous violence of South Africa" (Nixon, 1993, p. 122). Nixon sees Head's exile writing as a rejection of the protest tradition, a "literary tradition of the Titanic clash, often staged between characters who are little more than ciphers" (Nixon, 1993, p. 122). As critics look to Head's experiences of exile for information on her choice of genre and style, others link to her gender, her race and her sense of (un)belonging. None of these directly links these to the fundamental question of what makes a human a person, and to broader definitions of personhood in the contexts of which Head writes. The question is not, therefore, whether and how women can belong to a man's world, or Masarwa can belong to a Batswana world, but how Head writes personhood in an African context.

Head's notions of personhood are tied up with her express rejection of the common binaries associated with identity in the southern African context: black or white, man or woman, modern

or traditional, African or western, Christian or traditional, and so on. There are consequently many significant critical works which focus on these themes, as well as on the ways in which Head resorts to binaries even as she rejects them. Part of the consideration of Head's treatment of binaries is tied up with the ways in which some claim Head as spokesperson for one group or another, with all the associated privileges. While I will not assess all of the critical works which adopt this view, it is important to appreciate the difficulties of claiming this role on her behalf, especially given the project she undertakes across her oeuvre.

She speaks, it is claimed, variously for or against women, for or against the traditional, for or against 'coloured' people, for or against tradition, for or against Christianity, and so on. Briefly, for example, Kwadwo Osei-Nyame (2002) asserts that while Head's texts echo South African concerns, she "spoke for, and on behalf of *Africans generally*" (Osei-Nyame, 2002, p. 2, emphasis added). Diana Mafe (2008) argues Head is the 'self-made' woman in a racist, male world forging "alternative identities" for women (Mafe, 2008, p. 69), a view similar to those expressed by Lewis (2007), Koul (2017), Sharma (2017) and Somveer (2017). El-Malik (2014) says Head's politics are insurrectional, refusing "discursive closure" (El-Malik, 2014, p. 493) and in her consistent "think[ing] against the grain of binary oppression and resistance" (El-Malik, 2014, p. 502), she cannot be seen as a 'woman alone'. She is, rather, not a postcolonial feminist but an anticolonial writer who rejects racism and its "dehumanising practices" (El-Malik, 2014, p. 494).

Part of the problem with such views is that in seeing Head as representative of one group or another, the complexity of Head's thinking and the resulting fictional works may be 'flattened'. Nwabisi Bangeni (2014) identifies this, and writing in response to El-Malik she argues that while Head's works extend the "boundaries of imagination to the unthinkable", Head pays scant regard to the "contradictions of the worlds she creates" (Bangeni, 2014, p. 506). It is possible to see in these contradictions, however, Head's budding attempts to marry binaries, to recreate new approaches, and to develop an alternative paradigm with which she attempts to replace the inherited race, gender, and social binaries.

The thing is that Head identifies for herself a voice which is far wider in scope than any of these particular interest groups, a factor perhaps which results in the contradictions as she grapples with binaries. As early as 1963 she writes that she had found "the opposite of isolation[,] and a sense of belonging, if not to the country, at least to the human race" (Head,

1990, p. 10, emphasis added). Head does not think of herself as a black woman, she says, but as a woman of southern Africa, "an ordinary and wryly humble woman" (Head, 1990, p. 31) who finds in Botswana an "intense human awareness" (Head, 1990, p. 40). Her irreverence for racial and national classifications in her writing is clear, and her "writing is not on anybody's bandwagon. It is on the sidelines where I can more or less think things out with a clear head" (Head, 1990, p. 61).

2.3.2. Race, class and gender

At least some of the thinking inherent in binaries is evident in the either/or thinking of the critics. Garrett notes that the emphasis on the personal aspects of Head's texts risks neglecting the social, political and historical issues (Garrett, 1999, p. 123). Given that the personal is political, he comments, Head's "turning inward" is not a "turning away from that which is outside" (Garrett, 1999, p. 123). As the realistic gives way to the romantic, this becomes the means through which Head mediates "different social and political structures where traces of prior structures *infuse and conflict* with those of the present" (Garrett, 1999, p. 124). He sees in the realism "the pull of tradition".[12] The problem with such a view, however, is where analysis resorts to an either/or expressly rejected in the text (see, for example, the discussion of *Maru* later in this thesis). In an assessment of Head offered by Pucherova, she highlights the weakness of using anti-apartheid discourse to analyse Head's works (Pucherova, 2011, p. 105). Using *The Cardinals*, she argues that Head dismantles the "racist/masculinist elements of the available anti-apartheid discourse of her time" creating an "alternative narrative" that encompasses her "dissident identity as an anti-apartheid writer and activist—but not male; and not black and not white" (Pucherova, 2011, p. 108). To appreciate more fully why Head expends so much effort to undoing binaries despite the contradictions and flaws that result, the critic could pay close attention to not applying these themselves. The many contradictions in Head's texts are perhaps better understood as linked to the difficulties of building an alternative paradigm. In drawing on ways of being in the past to depict a present and anticipate a future, Head's ability to suggest a new approach to ways of being African may have been neglected.

[12] Rizzuto takes the Utopian argument a step further making what she calls a "surprising claim": Head's novels are written in the genre of magical realism (Rizzuto, 2020, p. 375) and, given their cosmopolitan character, traverse the world, different literary marketplaces, and anthologies and syllabi becoming "synonymous with postcolonial fiction" (Rizzuto, 2020, p. 375).

Outside of the most commonly used categories of race and gender, a few critics use class as the unit of analysis, commonly premised on Head's assessment of poverty and the place of women in society. Some of these approaches intersect with the focus on Head's biography and particularly on her racial identity in the southern and South African contexts. Mohamed Khalaf (2016) sees class at the base of the "neglect and deprivation" that characterises Head's own life (Khalaf, 2016, p. 23) while Koul (2017) concludes that Head's race and gender are arbitrary and contestable (see also Dobrota Pucherova, 2011, p. 107 in this regard). Critiques which focus on Head's place at the intersections of race, power and gender demonstrate a clear appreciation of how Head has worked to address some of the questions relating to identity generally. Stretching this point, Boolane argues that *Maru* forces Botswanan society to confront its lack of self-reflection (Lederer and Tumedi, 2020, p. 54), and Ikenna Dieke (2007) observes Head's efforts to diagnose the causes of racism rather than its symptoms (Dieke, 2007, p. 6). Likewise, Clayton's comment that Head "bypasses the details of apartheid to attack its base" (Clayton, 1988, p. 65) and Wicomb's (1992, p. 17) analysis of how the texts contain "not the white-black opposition" but the "inherent reproductive nature of race as a sign of difference" (Wicomb, 1992, p. 17).

It is my contention that while Head extrapolates to all human experience it is not immediately evident that this approach is based on "her own wretched condition" (Manus, 2001, p. 25). In examining the ills before her she establishes already in the early texts a set of underpinning criteria for African personhood in which race, class and gender become less and less important, and whether or not one is a 'true' African becomes her focus. Head's exposé of the "fault lines of colonial and decolonizing politics of race and gender" (Counihan, 2011, p. 68) goes further than many critics have recognised. Her texts recognise the "coercive demands of linear and coherent narratives of racial and national identity" (Counihan, 2011, p. 69) and the failures of nationalism to resolve "quandaries of identity" (Counihan, 2011, p. 70).

Alma Billingslea-Brown picks up on the aspect of personhood, commenting that Head's texts depict the "struggle for human agency, independence, and dignity" (Billingslea-Brown, 2010, p. 85). She links this struggle, however, to "Head's understanding of the divine, sacred and natural [as the] source of human rights" (Billingslea-Brown, 2010, pp. 90; 92), a strange marriage indeed. In a similar vein, Megan Paustian says Head's works expose the "euphemism for Western control and African subordination" offering a "[literary] fiction of international community" in which universalism is reimagined as the basis "from which to confront global

inequity" (Paustian, 2018, p. 344). *A Question of Power* provides a "decentered, desecularized humanism" which contrasts with the "grand narratives of African salvation by humanitarian means" (Paustian, 2018, p. 357). Using *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Billingslea-Brown says that when Makhaya asks Mma Millipede whom he should see as his brother, and she replies that it is every person on earth, Head is articulating the "foundational moral principle of human rights" (Billingslea-Brown, 2010, p. 90). My response to these critical approaches is that I do not see in Head's works an overt concern with human/rights-based humanisms although she certainly (as the critics have shown) responds to the humanitarian model which equates 'Africa' and 'Africans' to victimhood and victims. Head's fictional and non-fictional works cohere in their presentation of a distinct paradigm which articulates how love, expressed as acts of ubuntu, enables the human to come to personhood, as distinct from the ostensible universalism accorded to the rights of dignity and autonomy. As I argue later in this thesis, Head's texts make clear that the mere possession of rights does not guarantee personhood, an altogether different experiential state.

Many have focused on Head's depictions of women and on whether she is a feminist or not. There is little question that some of Head's views on women and men are discomfiting. The responses of the critics reflect the contrariness of these views. On one hand, she is a "voice for sanity and sensitivity in the discourse on human sexuality and relations between women and men" (Ingersoll, 1996, p. 458), and on the other hand, she resorts to "patriarchal stereotypes" (Lederer and Tumedi, 2020, p. 73) in her depictions of men and women. Her works, it is argued, show that romantic love is "not indigenous to traditional African society" (Kemp, 1988, p. 2) but also capitulates to "popular romance" (Kemp, 1988, p. 9). Head analyses the oppression of women "within the social mores and the patriarchal power structures" (Bazin, 1986, p. 34), (see also Harrow, 1993, p. 169; Lionnet, 1993, p. 133; Mukherjee, 2013, p. 49). Linking race and gender "reflects the approach of contemporary French feminist thought" as Head recognises the African patriarchal oppression of women as an adverse result of colonisation (Zeleza, 1997, p. 597). Head is simultaneously a "voice for sanity and sensitivity in the discourse on human sexuality and relations between women and men" (Ingersoll, 1996, p. 458), and an anti-feminist who uses the 'male voice' in her novels (Lederer and Tumedi, 2020, p. 75). As with men, women are either villains, or paragons of virtue (Lederer and Tumedi, 2020, p. 73). The novel *Maru* "capitulates" to the "popular romance", confirming with the overall romantic vision of the text in the context of "Tswana myth and oral tradition" (Kemp, 1988, p. 9). Ng'umbi identifies a "trend of eliminating male characters" (Ng'umbi, 2017, p. 94).

Head's dramatisations of misogyny in society (Lionnet, 1993, p. 133) are the result of colonialism and post-independence corruption, but also embedded "ancient customs and traditions" (Lionnet, 1993, p. 134).

In the final analysis, it is not clear whether Head is or is not a feminist, a misogynist, or a misanthrope. Of course, part of the difficulty with determining the answer to this derives from focusing on her depictions of men and women and on the love stories in the early novels as the stories of *individual* men and women (*The Cardinals*, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and *Maru*). Even where these are seen as allegorical, representative or metaphorical for other forms of being, the problem is that the love story proves a clumsy vehicle for effecting lasting meaningful social change. Head grapples with the fictional possibilities of the reach of the individual and the lens she adopts increases in scope from the individual (as in *The Cardinals*) to entire races (as in *Maru*). That said, there is no question that Head focuses in detail on the lives of women and in particular on the value of women's work. In interviews, she expressed the view that women are "suffering" from oppression (MacKenzie and Clayton, 1989, pp. 15–16), facing daily "calamities" in their lives (Marquard, 1978, p. 50). I am of the view that Head is not a traditional feminist. But I am equally of the view that this in itself is not instructive. Head's women are fictional creations who, in the events and stories she writes for them, serve her specific narrative purpose. The use of the love story as a vehicle requires in her conventional view of the world a man and a woman. What kind of man or woman in the feminist range of possibilities does not matter, and her consistent inconsistency leads to contradictions and ambiguities which reach into the characters as she uses them and their love relationships to drive the deeper narrative in her novels. In this view, it seems almost impossible to explode binaries. I argue that as Head realises this failure, her works move from lovers and the love story to history as the vehicle for the future. Perhaps we ought to accede to Head's characterisation of herself:

> 'I am not a feminist,' she kept repeating as the question was asked again and again, 'in the sense that I do not view women in isolation from men' (Eilersen, 1995, p. 279).

What then do we make of another related theme common to critiques of Head's works and which can roughly be termed 'personal development'? Most overtly linked to *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power*, the 'development' of the individual (as in Makhaya's

acceptance of his new context, or Elizabeth's coming to sanity) is an implied ontological goal evident in some of the critical approaches. Such goal orientation is, after all, what we as readers have come to expect from the novel form which presents the "normative story of how the natural and the individual might become civil and social … without recourse to social coercion" (Slaughter, 2009, p. 26). Ward (2013) examines this theme in his reading of Head's stories of individual as allegorical of communities. He argues that Head distinguishes between "a belief in a set of ideas" and actually "living these ideas" (Ward, 2013, p. 11). In the state of belief there are "shifts, changes, distortions, and reversals", but living the ideas is "an unquestioned orientation which directs the entirety of one's perceptions" (Ward, 2013, p. 11). What is missing from this and other analyses is the mechanism: how exactly does Head see the move from the individual reality of a marriage to the achievement of its allegorical function? In my view, an allegorical reading avoids the question of the workings of the link between the 'idea' or 'belief' (as, for example, informing Maru's forced marriage to Margaret), and the reality of it achieving the liberation of the Masarwa. The link is tenuous and Head's works seek to reconceive of using the individual as the prime mover of social change in the way depicted in the earlier novels.

2.3.3. History, tradition, and orality

Taking their cue from Head, a number of authors focus on her use of history and the inclusion of this and tradition, which is seen as linked, in her texts. It must be noted, however, that there are far fewer critical works on history in Head's oeuvre than on those already canvassed. In line with New Historicism and its overt concern with power, Niyi Akingbe argues that Head depicts history as neither homogenous nor stable but as dynamic and unstable, an "interplay among discourses" (Akingbe, 2014, p. 78). *Tales of Tenderness and Power* presents this interplay as a "negotiation of meanings" (Akingbe, 2014, p. 78), in line with Head's recognition that "history is the history of the present, always in the making" to be "read just like any other text" (Akingbe, 2014, p. 78). Envisioning a new world inescapably entails history, Nixon argues, and Head's later texts suggest that she saw "historical narration as symptoms and agents of colonial violence" which she redresses in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (Nixon, 1993, p. 118).

Positioning Head's historical approach a little differently, Lewis sees *A Bewitched Crossroad* as comparable to *Maru* in that "southern Africa becomes a series of fictions that textualize the subjective and cultural needs of interpreters" (Lewis, 2007, p. 264). In a similar observation,

Joyce Johnson notes that Head tries to "relate the local experiences of the characters depicted to mankind's social evolution", exploiting analogies between the conflict of forces within individuals and community and humans and cosmic forces (Johnson, 1986, p. 56). These are valuable observations on the ways in which Head's texts work and require that we re-read and re-conceive of the binaries typically associated with the colonial history of the region. That said, however, it is essential not to lose sight of the constructed nature of Head's histories, especially those perceived of as necessarily 'oral', discussed below.

Literacies, learning and orality are common themes in the analyses of Head's later texts (*The Collector of Treasures, Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, and *A Bewitched Crossroad*). *Bewitched,* Cherry Clayton (1988) says, shifts in emphasis and form in line with Head's assertion that the history of Serowe is "precariously oral" (Head, 1981, p. x) implying that she acts as scribe to those among whom she is a refugee. The text is replete with "images of a continuity deeper than historical change: birdsong and the dreaming horizons" (Clayton, 1988, p. 58) and the narrative rests "on a tension between oral memory … and documentation, or textuality" (Clayton, 1988, p. 63). *A Bewitched Crossroad* blends "modern idiom and African proverb" (Clayton, 1988, p. 62) as Head uses the oral history "to detect, in the smallest shards of village life, the impress of history" (Nixon, 1993, p. 122). Lewis sees in Head's use of orality a simultaneously subjective and universal vision (Lewis, 2007, p. 259). Head demonstrates her "kinship with the village storyteller of the oral tradition" (Thorpe, 1983, p. 414) which rehabilitates the "precolonial" and questions "society's shortcomings, seeing them as not merely the consequence of colonial victimization, but part of the universal enigma of human folly" (Thorpe, 1983, p. 414). *The Collector of Treasures* which follows from the research undertaken for *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* uses the oral histories gathered and testifies to her ability to transform the oral "into written narrative form rather than to attempt the doomed task of replicating oral features in writing" (Nixon, 1993, p. 124).

Finally, it is not possible to talk about orality and Head without making reference to Craig MacKenzie who argues that the use of the oral in written form is not as simple as it initially appears (MacKenzie, 2002, p. 347) as the shift from oral to written narrative moves from one "ontological mode to another" (MacKenzie, 2002, p. 347). Comparing Head with A C Jordan,

Mtutuzeli Matshoba, and Njabulo Ndebele, MacKenzie finds Head's use of the oral the most successful.[13] Head's short stories are arranged to:

> re-enact … the historical process from ancient, mythical times, through the subsequent arrival of a new culture and the conflict with tradition, and on to contemporary times, in which the breakdown of the family and all the other problems experienced by a society in upheaval are dealt with (MacKenzie, 2002, p. 356).

She captures the oral tradition in written form "'stylising' oral modes" in which the narrators adopt an "authorial voice", making use of a mixture of traditional sayings, history, and the storyteller's voice (MacKenzie, 2002, p. 357). While it is the case that with her friend Bosele Sinana's assistance, Head interviews the residents of Serowe, it is also true that she makes extensive use of written sources weave in and out of each other, as Head's depictions of village life are written with a particular narrative purpose in mind. Insights from the critical works surveyed above are useful and enriching.

Lederer argues that *A Question of Power* explores the concept of time as constructed by Mbiti (Lederer and Tumedi, 2020, p. 87). For Mbiti, African traditional time is two-dimensional, "with a long past, a present and virtually no future" and stands in contrast to linear western constructs of time, which have an "indefinite past, present and future" (Babalola and Alokan, 2013, p. 144). Head's texts force us to "question conventional notions of the inviolability of the past" (Lederer and Tumedi, 2020, p. 87).

Of particular interest are the more recent evaluations of the complex interplay between colonial and postcolonial spaces, and how this links Head's use of oral and written histories. However, a survey of the available critical work reveals that there is relatively little written on the later texts, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, and *A Bewitched Crossroad*. Charles Lock comments that *Serowe* is "absent from the postcolonial" (Lock, 2016, p. 9) as it is "an exceptional work of *colonial* space and life writing" (Lock, 2016, p. 9). Head's texts are a clear instance of

[13] MacKenzie examines the increased use of the short story in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, an increase coincident with the rise of Black Consciousness, the "rejection of Western literary" modes with the aim of developing "aesthetic independence" by revitalising traditional modes (MacKenzie, 2002, p. 348). Despite this intent, however, many of these authors did not, like Head, adopt an oral style as narrative mode but thematised the oral (MacKenzie, 2002, p. 348).

"complicity of the centre with the periphery" (Lock, 2016, p. 3). In this critical view, a dualism between the colonial and the post-colonial is assumed. Not only does such an approach stand in contrast to Head's own vigorous rejection of "a duplication of colonial modes of power and self-definition in African nationalism" (Lewis, 2007, p. 74), it is also difficult to define in the context of the history of Serowe. As Lewis (2007, p. 285) points out, "what is often seen simply as 'colonial penetration' is separated into two trajectories", as Head grounds her "vision of liberation in reciprocity, rather than in retreat". Thus, the two modalities are in constant interplay, and it is not easy to separate the colonial from the post-colonial in a way that permits for a simple categorisation of the fictional elements as fitting into either one 'class' or another. Head's view of the colonial/postcolonial interrelationship is not dualistic, and it is likely that she would reject the idea of 'complicity' with the 'colonial', as an analysis of *Serowe* and *A Bewitched Crossroad* in Chapter 6 of this thesis will show.

Similar to the discussion of the dualities in Head's depictions of women, Ketu Katrak (1995, p. 64) examines the double-edged sword of the colonial socialisation of women, and of whether and which aspects are 'colonial' or 'post-colonial'. Paul Zeleza (1997, p. 592) sees the "effects of cultural colonization as a form of mental disease". Sebina argues that "colonial trauma" results in neurosis and "psychic disintegration" (Lederer and Tumedi, 2020, p. 106). Kruger contemplates the implications of the postcolonial for mental illness, a disability (Kruger, 2019, p. 133). Sue Kim argues that madness is postcolonial (Kim, 2008, p. 40) in that it subverts linear development at the heart of the *Bildungsroman*. Paul Lorenz sees Head's recognition of Buddha and Hinduism as decolonisation (Lorenz, 1991, p. 603) and Sayyed Moosavinia and Sayyede Hosseini (2018, p. 334) focus on Head's 'hybridity' as the liminal space between the colonialist self and other (Moosavinia and Hosseini, 2018, p. 334). Her journey takes her across nations, cultures and ethnicities and she is caught in the postcolonial 'third space', and her schizophrenia provides her with a "chance for revolution, violation, and resistance" (Moosavinia and Hosseini, 2018, p. 336).

I propose that rather than deciding whether Head's works are 'colonial' or 'postcolonial' and which texts or aspects of the texts support or undermine each of these claims, we examine in detail her unambiguous efforts to achieve a new Africanism.

2.3.4. Gardening, rurality, and ecopolitics

Noting that Head is the only South African author to have moved from an urban childhood to a rural adulthood and to rural fiction, Nixon comments that this appears to have caused her to be seen as a

> literary misfit rather than as a writer who anticipated the need to counterbalance the literature's fixation with male, urban experience and with realms of spectacular conflict rather than quotidian survival (Nixon, 1993, pp. 122–123).

I agree that Head's focus on the lives of rural women conveys the "cadences" of rural life and poses a forceful challenge to "many of the conventional silences in South African literature" (Nixon, 1993, p. 123). It makes a lot of sense then, that the importance of women to gardening and farming, and of development and ecopolitics are at the base of another set of critical evaluations of her works. Prefiguring ecopoetry and eco-criticism, Sonali Perera's (2015) insights into Head's works are valuable. She argues that Head provides a literary space for what she terms the "ideological blind spot" in much Marxist, postcolonial and globalisation studies: the rural (Perera, 2015, p. 30). In their distinctive rural location – both literal and metaphorical – Head "reverses and displaces" the archetypal move from rural to urban (Perera, 2015, p. 3) making a significant contribution to the "collective subject of socialized labour" (Perera, 2015, p. 4), producing "universality out of disparate heterogeneity" (Perera, 2015, pp. 6-7).

Early critical works noted the importance of the garden, with Wilhelm (1983, p. 17) commenting on similarities between Head's stories and Olive Schreiner's use of the farm, with Maxine Sample focusing on the depiction of the rural and traditional (Sample, 1991, p. 312), and on the healing power of rain and water (Sample, 1991, p. 316), showing how the river embodies "group unity" (Sample, 1991, p. 313). Elspeth Tulloch (2012) argues that despite the critical tendency to view agriculture metaphorically in Head's works there is a deep practical concern with "how to live well with the land" (Tulloch, 2012, p. 137). In a more recent piece, Zaid Ismael and Sabah Khalifa (2020, p. 2) note that feminist writers often find an affinity between women's suffering and that of the natural world, both of which are viewed by men as property to be exploited. This view is not dissimilar to Head's, expressed in *When Rain Clouds Gather*:

> … one of the major stumbling blocks to progress in the country [is that] [t]he women were the traditional tillers of the earth, not the men. The women were the backbone of agriculture while the men on the whole were cattle drovers. But when it came to improved techniques in agriculture, soil conservation, the use of pesticides and fertilizers, and the production of cash crops, the lecture rooms were open to men only (Head, 2010, p. 33).

Head's assertion that it is the women who do the work who need to be trained links also to more contemporary critical discourses of the Anthropocene which involves learning from indigenous or rural communities. It is these kinds of questions that the ecopolitical analyses of Head's works turn. Anissa Talahite (2005, p. 141) notes that Head uses the western traditional image of the garden to "reinterpret the relationship between nature and culture in the context of social change" while redefining the "relationship between the social world and the individual self" in the postcolonial context. Head uses metaphors of transplantation and hybrid growth to counter hegemonic discourses and re-evaluate the "colonial myth of the land in the South African literary tradition" (Talahite, 2005, p. 142). Writing about the land provides distance from "the trauma of apartheid" and creates a "site of collective belonging" (Talahite, 2005, p. 142).

Building on some of Talahite's argument, Darlington proposes that Head's comments on the environment were not appreciated in her time, and it is "time to re-engage ecocritics and ecoliterature writers to keep the earth's precarious sustainability as their primary focus of conversation with an inclusive global community" (Darlington, 2007, pp. 97–98). In the same vein, Coundouriotis' focus on the trope of the village links Head to a global community (Coundouriotis, 2011, p. 21) in which the "cultural discourse" is the "internationalism of the planted earth" (Coundouriotis, 2011, p. 23). More traditionally, Tulloch reads Head as part of the georgic tradition arguing that although Head's works encompass typical European themes they are also "non-European (sic) with a western education" inviting us to ask how they "engage with and rehabilitate the form" (Tulloch, 2012, p. 138). The novel reworks the georgic convention to create a new African georgic tradition (Tulloch, 2012, pp. 145–146).

Discussing the role of postcolonial authors in development programmes, Lauren Horst (2021) notes that *When Rain Clouds Gather* is still set as reading for volunteers to the Peace Corps

(Horst, 2021, p. 168). She argues that while both *A Question of Power* and *When Rain Clouds Gather* "engage and challenge dominant modes of development planning", the preference for the latter is understandable given its focus on science, technology and progress (Horst, 2021, p. 169) aligning to the vie of those bestowing aid on Africa. In Head's later fiction, she resists the "objectifying, abstracting logic of the planning imagination" and in *A Question of Power* moves to an "ethics of mutual caring" in which the virtues of community-based work are paramount (Horst, 2021, p. 176). Head cautions against the "paternalistic benevolence" of aid worker embodied by the character Camilla (Horst, 2021, p. 178). The sanctuary offered by the garden (Counihan, 2011, p. 77) shows how perfection resides in the ordinary and the new world emerges slowly and carefully in its "fragile space" (Counihan, 2011, p. 78). The garden is hallowed ground and is the only place where the chaotic and fragmented narratives remain intelligible and coherent. Kenosi's notes – a combination of English and Setswana – "preserve … [the garden's] narrative capacity" (Counihan, 2011, p. 78). Cappelli (2021, p. 389) concludes that *When Rain Clouds Gather* is Head's most ethico-political narrative in that it "examine[s] the introduction of modern capitalism and patriarchal science against the haunting spectral of traditional tribal systems in pre-Independence Botswana". Unlike those who read agricultural collaboration between traditional and modern agriculture as a token of healing, Cappelli sees it rather as a "parable of how imperial do-good projects and Western ideology trammeled Botswana's ecosystems" (Cappelli, 2021, p. 390), arguing for an ecofeminist approach in which gender relations in indigenous systems and the interconnectedness of colonialism, development and capitalism are studied (Cappelli, 2021). Similarly, Dokubo Goodhead (2017, pp. 31–32) argues *When Rains Clouds Gather* examines how poor rural people try to "gain a foothold in modernity and self-sufficiency" using basic science. Examining Head's representations of land more broadly, Annie Gagiano (2014, p. 114) sees Head's focus on horizons as having two functions – to represent the imagined, and indicate the "geographical contiguity" of South Africa and Botswana. For Karen Barad (2010, p. 244), Head's texts represent a posthumanist 'journey' in which "there is a ghostly sense of dis/continuity, a quantum dis/continuity, which is neither fully discontinuous with continuity or even fully continuous with discontinuity".

Focusing on water, Marike Beyers (2020, p. 119) examines the land before and after the rains, a change "mirrored in [the] community and the self" – the rains are "a healing force of life". Gerd Bayer's (2019) insights into water in the texts too are germane. Taken from an ecocritical perspective, he argues, *When Rain Clouds Gather* anticipates "twenty-first-century

environmental thinking in the postcolonial sphere" (Bayer, 2019, p. 448). The marginalised characters in the text get together and "violate against existing hegemonic structures … with an agricultural revolution" which empowers the subaltern (Bayer, 2019, p. 448). Recognising Head's practical nature, Bayer argues that Head does not "subsume the physical environment under its mythological heritage," unlike Achebe and Okri who use the natural world to "educate readers about the cultural" (Bayer, 2019, p. 450). Bayer argues that Head anticipates poststructuralist theories, demonstrating the "substantial elusiveness at the centre of many ideological discourses", deflating the "stability of semantic concepts (like the tribe)" and moving towards a "non-cultural and therefore more flexible materiality of the earth" (Bayer, 2019, p. 454).

I agree with Robolin's (2015) identification of Head's engagements with gardening as creating a "world of circulating people" (Robolin, 2015, p. 111) and an "envisioned community" (Robolin, 2015, p. 114). I think, however, that the agency or energising force for change resides less in the gardening or women's work itself than in how Head's characters "work out their social relations by way of working the land" (Robolin, 2015, p. 125). I am of the view that gardening or farming is shown to succeed as and when it is the *result* of new relationships between people, forged on the basis of ubuntu which lead to the development of innovative rural communities providing the basis of a new kind of African person and society.

2.3.5. New worlds, new people

Critics have identified a variety of ways in which Head conceives of and depicts new worlds in her texts. As early as 1988, Clayton wrote that Head's project in *A Bewitched Crossroad*, as writer, novelist and historian, interwove literacy and orality in what Head saw as pioneering an African critique of South African history and society (Clayton, 1988, p. 55). The resulting 'shadow history' reveals the qualities necessary to heal the damaged past (Clayton, 1988, p. 57) and as witness to the "oral memory of the tribe", Head is at the junction of the crossroads where historian and novelist intersect (Clayton, 1988, p. 59). Lewis's contribution, that Head sees herself as a romantic with special insights (Lewis, 2007, p. 7), reflects Head's preoccupation with her vision. As a romantic, it is through her ideas about personal torment and artistic creation that Head searches for "psychological and social freedom" (Lewis, 2007, p. 129). Clare Counihan sees *A Question of Power* as fundamentally interrogating realist representations in the postcolonial (Counihan, 2011, pp. 70–71), repudiating the borders

between reality and fantasy (Counihan, 2011, p. 71). Her observation – that the antinarrative in the novel "undermines the subject defined by nation or race as the primary and privileged subject of the postcolonial narrative" (Counihan, 2011, p. 74) – is valuable.

Rizzuto argues that although Head uses aspects of magical realism in *Maru*, it dominates *A Question of Power*. In *Maru*, the isolated Margaret collapses the boundaries between "wakefulness and sleep, dreams and reality" (Rizzuto, 2020, p. 388). In *A Question of Power* there are more consistent aspects of magical realism which serve "to deconstruct an opposition between reality and madness" providing a "meta-critical commentary on the persecution of peoples throughout history in Africa and beyond" (Rizzuto, 2020, p. 390). Head's oeuvre constitutes "another mode of writing" – new naturalism – focused on the quotidian and avoiding the historic "discourse of the proletariat that appear in forms of socialist realisms" (Rizzuto, 2020, p. 393).

Building on Rizzuto's observations, and regardless of whether the novels confirm to this genre or not, there is extensive evidence of Head's deliberate and conscious efforts to reconfigure the ways in which we understand both the present, and the 'realities' that we have come to accept about the past. "I believe" Head writes, "that all the nations of the earth are drawing closer to each other" (Head, 1990, p. 99). Although she asserts that all writers "are mirrors of the times in which they live" she is in the same breath convinced that "time and history will coin a special name for those who were the pioneers of African literature" (Eilersen, 2001, p. 33). In her role as creator of a new kind of Africa, she says that her

> dream world is crowded with thousands and thousands of people. It is not fancy or pretty-pretty but a practical, busy world where people are planning for the future and make known to me their preferences. My books are rooted in this source and all commentary and communication from this source have been carefully recorded in all my books. Together with people I have built up a kind of people religion that is rooted in the African soil. … In my world people plan for themselves and dictate their requirements to me. It is a world full of love, tenderness, happiness and laughter. From it I have developed a love and reverence for people.

2.4. Concluding remarks

In summing up, I turn again to Head's own comments about her writing for insight. She says that her work

> was always tentative because it was always so completely new: it created new worlds out of nothing; … it brought all kinds of people, both literate and semi-literate together, and it did not really qualify who was who – everyone had a place in my world (Head, 1990, p. 28).

Gayatri Spivak questioned whether we are able to think about any philosophy outside of the monotheist Judeo-Christian tradition when we all, regardless of where we are, 'precomprehend' the subject "within various kinds of imperialist or anti-imperialist traditions" (Danius, et al., 1993). Head's response to this question is, for her, a resounding no. In her works she not only re-envisions for herself the history of Serowe, but also the history of colonialism and Christianity more broadly. In Valentin-Yves Mudimbe's phrasing (1988, p. 185), African writers who have received a predominantly western education in which the "concepts and categories underpinning this ethnocentrism are inventions of the West" (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 185) will need forcefully to think outside of these paradigms. If, as he asserts, African thinking has become a "mirror and a consequence of the experience of European hegemony" (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 185), how are we to evaluate Head's oeuvre? As the critics have demonstrated, Head draws on a wide range of sources, making use of a variety of narrative forms. The histories she presents in *Serowe* and *A Bewitched Crossroad* use the conventions of a 'history from below', oral testimonies, archival sources, published histories, interviews, and local storytelling, or even gossip. I argue that Head seeks not to replace but to remake and reorient how we perceive the history of Africa by providing a reworked version of the history of Serowe which supports her construction of personhood.

In the analyses of the texts in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, Head's reconstruction of African personhood is examined and the extent to which it falls outside of the western model, premised as it is so often on a human/rights, personal development model. Usefully, Billingslea-Brown (2010) has shown the ways in which Head's references to Buddhism and Hinduism establish a distinctive narrative form and understanding of what is right or just (as distinct from who has and does not have rights) and is the means through which she expresses her approach to and constructions

of what it means to be and become a person. James Ogude (2018, p. 1) writes, "the African idea of self or the person […] stands in sharp contrast to the view of the individual found in European thought" contributing, in turn, to the development of a world view that is communalist rather than individualistic (Ogude, 2018, p. 2). In a more communalist view, we transform from 'humans' to 'persons' through "interactive engagement" with one another, rather than through one individual's interactions with society (Ogude, 2018, p. 2). Neither thought nor experience are linear, with the result that rather than imposing linearity in narrative on the stories she crafts, Head's texts have been found by some to be politically contradictory and incoherent. As Perera (2015, p. 5) notes, Head contrasts "surreal scenarios of the mind and the prosaic realities of international civil society planning" (Perera, 2015, p. 8), a juxtaposition which undoubtedly leads to some of the inconsistencies identified in her texts.

Although Head unambiguously denounces politics, she is not ignorant of how power impacts society. She says of her position that

> our only education in South Africa, as black people, is a political one. We learn bitterly, every day, the details of oppression and exploitation so that a writer automatically feels pressured into taking a political stand of some kind or identifying with a camp. It was important for my work to choose a broader platform for my work, so *I avoided political camps and ideologies because I feel they falsify truth*. It was necessary for me to concentrate directly on people because I believe it is only people who make people suffer and not some hidden, unknown God or devil (Head, 1990, p. 63).

From the critical works surveyed, it is clear that Head's writing has been assessed from a multitude of perspectives. Importantly, and although her death occurred in the late 1980s, she exploits numerous and diverse paradigms, anticipating and reflecting on many of the debates current then and those taking place now. She openly rejected labelling, and especially rejected the nomenclature of 'Marxist writer' derived from her gardening and farm work (Eilersen, 1995, p. 266) and of 'feminist' (despite her focus on women) (Eilersen, 1995, p. 279). There can be no question that Head's death at age 49 is sad, and that it would have been interesting to see where the trajectories of her writing would have taken her and how her corpus might have developed.

Chapter 3: Bessie Head in context
South African literature, protest and human rights

> *I believe that people cannot protest against evil social systems. The people who create it merely laugh in your face, and keep guns at hand to annihilate you … If you protest and make one gain against apartheid, the South African government, possibly, in terror, has to pass two more repressive laws to liquidate your gain and you end up by increasing the suffering of the people in the country . . . It involves a broader question than mere protest - it is a question of evil as a whole.* (Head, 1990, p. 61).

Insights into Head's positioning of herself as a writer in and from South Africa can be gleaned from elements of her biography as set out in the preceding chapter, as many critics have done. In this chapter, the political context in South Africa at the time Head was writing and an account of her engagements with these are set out. In responding to the question of her political views, Head says that the answer to the question of who and what she is "lies in Africa; in part it lies within the whole timeless, limitless, eternal universe" (Head, 1993, p. 149). It is impossible, she continues, to "discover the meaning and purpose" of her country if she does not first discover the meaning and purpose of her own life (Head, 1993, p. 149). Head consciously and deliberately writes to discover the answers to these questions and not to protest against apartheid or to elucidate the disenfranchisement of black South Africans, a situation which pertained until after her death.

This assertion is not made, as has been suggested by some, to indicate that she is disconnected from concerns about race or power. Indeed, she is very much part of a history of "African literary contestations" which, as Phaswane Mpe neatly points out, arose from a context in which

> [a]ny demonstration by Africans of their ability to write in European languages, then, had major implications … it would challenge the hierarchy of human beings that was already established by 1750, in which "the human scale rose from the 'the lowest Hottentot' [black South Africa] to 'glorious Milton and Newton'" (Mpe, 1999, p. 107).

Significantly, African writers "almost always position themselves with regard to colonialism, political independence and politics of orality and the written word" (Mpe, 1999, p. 108). In South Africa, the publication of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (in Sesotho, published in 1925), A C Jordan's *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (in isiXhosa, published in 1940) and Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (one of the first African novels published in English, in 1930) are testament to this history. That Head positions herself in respect of these concerns is clear. However she does so in a way that fundamentally challenges aspects of the "sociocultural, formal, historical, and ideological conjunctions between human rights and the novel, particularly the coming of age genre" (Slaughter, 2009, p. 3). The African novel and the language of human rights have much in common, sharing a

> conceptual vocabulary, deep narrative grammar, and humanist social vision … in their cooperative efforts to imagine, normalize, and realize what the Universal Declaration and early theorists call the 'full and free development of the human personality' (Slaughter, 2009, p. 3).

Human rights debates in South Africa have a long history, and before moving to an analysis of Head's texts, the first section of this chapter sets some of this out, as relevant. A survey of critical receptions of her works follows this, and the chapter concludes with some thoughts on Head's political views and the influence these have had on her thinking, providing the basis for the textual analysis which is to follow.

3.1. Human rights in South Africa

The lack of universal suffrage and the unequal distribution of rights has dominated much of South Africa's history. The language of the 1981 *African Charter* references Africa's "ongoing struggle against colonialism and its legacy" and "foregrounds the struggle to achieve dignity rather than declaring the dignity of African people as inherent" (Coundouriotis, 2021, p. 20). In dignifying this struggle, the *African Charter* highlights the "agency of African people" (Coundouriotis, 2021, p. 20). On the fiftieth anniversary of the UDHR in 1998, Nelson Mandela addressed the UN General Assembly as follows:

> For those who had to fight for their emancipation, such as ourselves who, with your help, had to free ourselves from the criminal apartheid system, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* served as the vindication of the justice of our cause.[14]

Mandela's speech linking the UDHR to the end of apartheid alludes to a series of historical events taking place long before the 1994 transition to democracy. In the early part of the 1900s, a delegation from the South African Native National Congress (later the African National Congress) went to London to petition support from the British government. After World War I, a second deputation attempted unsuccessfully to obtain British support for black South Africans. Similarly, after World War II in 1946 a multiracial group of South Africans (led by Dr A B Xuma, ANC President-General) travelled to New York to discuss discrimination and human rights violations by the South African government with United Nations delegates. Bolstered by India which had placed the question of the treatment of its citizens in the Union of South Africa on the agenda of the General Assembly, a presentation was made by the South African delegation with rebuttals from Jan Smuts. Events culminated with the unanimous adoption of the proposal by the Egyptian delegates of Resolution 103(1) which stated that racial discrimination be ended, after which the General Assembly "censured South Africa for the treatment of the South African Indians" (Haines, 2001, p. 187). Concerns pertaining to Indians had been shared by Africans at the fifth Pan-African Congress in October 1945. Representing the ANC, Marko Hlubi and Peter Abrahams submitted their grievances and a "strongly worded resolution against racial discrimination was subsequently passed by the Congress" which saw the conduct of the South African state as violating Clause 3 of the *Atlantic Charter* and Article 1 of the *UN Charter* (Haines, 2001, p. 189). In 1945, South Africa had been a signatory to the *Charter* of the United Nations, article 55 prohibits unfair discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, language, or religion. Regardless, in 1948, when South Africa was called on to sign the UDHR, it abstained, along with states such as the USSR, Ukraine, Saudi Arabia and Poland (Marcus, 1984, p. 38).

These international activities were coupled with events in South Africa, including the 26 June 1955 'Congress of the People'. At this Congress, numerous organisations acting in concert against the racist policies of the country adopted a political document, the *Freedom Charter* ('the *Charter*'), which was to become a significant part of South Africa's rights legacy. Writing

[14] Nelson Mandela's Universal Declaration of Human Rights | The Nation

60 years after the adoption of the *Freedom Charter*, Raymond Suttner captures its character thus (Suttner, 2015, p. 2):

> The Charter is both a universal document by virtue of some of the rights it demands, claimed in many parts of the word, as well as being very specifically contextual, deriving from the process though which it was created ...

The *Charter* opens with the following declaration:

> **We, the People of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know:**
> that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people;
> that our people have been robbed of their birth right to land, liberty and peace by a form of government founded on injustice and inequality;
> that our country will never be prosperous or free until all our people live in brotherhood, enjoying equal rights and opportunities;
> that only a democratic state, based on the will of all the people, can secure to all their birth right without distinction of colour, race, sex or belief;
> And therefore, we, the people of South Africa, black and white together equals, countrymen and brothers adopt this Freedom Charter;
> And we pledge ourselves to strive together, sparing neither strength nor courage, until the democratic changes here set out have been won.

Demanding universal suffrage, the *Charter* states further that:

> Every man and woman shall have the right to vote for and to stand as a candidate for all bodies which make laws;
> All people shall be entitled to take part in the administration of the country;
> The rights of the people shall be the same, regardless of race, colour or sex.

Other provisions include that "All National Groups Shall have Equal Rights" with respect to courts, schools, languages**,** race and national pride, asserting that "All apartheid laws and practices shall be set aside". The *Charter* demands that all share in the country's wealth, and

that restrictions on land ownership on a racial basis end. Equality before the law, the equal enjoyment of human rights, the freedom to work (the abolition of the 'pass system'), access to "Learning and Culture"; houses, security and comfort are also included. The *Charter* ends with the exhortation: "There Shall be Peace and Friendship!"

Captured in detail in Tom Lodge's seminal book, the history of the *Charter* is a central element of South Africa's anti-apartheid lore (Lodge, 1983, p. 69). In 1950 when the apartheid government initiated a "major offensive" against organised African opposition, disagreements among the leadership of the ANC were rife (Lodge, 1983, p. 33) but 1953, the ANC was showing "new sensitivity to the preoccupations of the poor and insecure", in a move from its middle class occupations. In August 1953, Z K Matthews suggested a national convention at which a freedom charter for South Africa could be drawn up (Lodge, 1983, p. 69). In 1954 representatives from the ANC, the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), the South African Congress of Democrats (SACOD) and the newly formed South African Coloured People's Organisation (later the Coloured People's Congress) met to discuss this congress (Lodge, 1983, p. 69), and the National Action Council for the Congress of the People was formed.

Planning for the *Freedom Charter* involved the establishment of provincial committees, the recruitment of 'Freedom Volunteers' who promoted the Congress and gathered demands, and the election of provincial delegates to draft the *Charter*. The submissions were often "thousands of little bits of paper, many of them with specific demands" (Lodge, 1983, p. 70). By April 1955 they were sorted into categories and a small committee produced a draft *Charter*, with a "rather distinctive poetic style" which was handed to the ANC's national executive on the eve of the Congress of the People, to be held on 25-26 June, 1955 (Lodge, 1983, p. 71). The following description is worth citing in full:

> The Congress itself was a dramatic affair. It lasted two days and was held in an open space near Kliptown, a coloured township near Johannesburg. It was attended by 3 000 delegates from all over the country, including 320 Indians, 230 coloureds and 112 whites. The various clauses of the Charter were introduced, there was an opportunity for impromptu speeches from delegates present, and the clauses were then read out and acclaimed by a show of hands. The proceedings were brought to an exciting close by the arrival of large detachment of policemen bearing Sten guns in the afternoon of the second day. They took over the speakers' platform,

> confiscated all the documents they could find, announced that they had reason to believe that treason was being contemplated, and took the names and addresses of all the delegates before sending them home. Clearly the state was now confident that with the holding of the Congress the ANC and its allies had been given enough rope to hang themselves: hence the degree of toleration with which it had been treated up to that point (Lodge, 1983, p. 71)

Critics of the *Charter* saw it as resulting from "manipulation and conspiracy" (Lodge, 1983, p. 72). Liberals were put out by the dominance of the Congress of Democrats which they saw as a "front for the communists" (Lodge, 1983, p. 72). Africanists were concerned by "sections concerning rights and guarantees for all national groups", seeing it "as a vehicle through which the ANC could be influenced and even controlled by non-Africans" (Lodge, 1983, p. 72). The *Charter* has always been contested (Suttner, 2015, p. 3), with the South African state claiming during Nelson Mandela's trial that it was a Marxist or socialist document.

Despite dissent about its provenance, the *Charter* was adopted by the ANC and other organisations in August 1955 (Lodge, 1983, p. 73). However by 1955, 42 senior ANC leaders had been banned and in 1956, many prominent members of the Congress were implicated in the Treason Trial which "removed from active political life some of the ablest and most experienced men and women in the Congress movement" (Lodge, 1983, p. 76). In the absence of a long-term ANC strategy in the 1950s, and given the increasing crackdown on ANC leadership in the 1960s, the *Freedom Charter* consolidated the "ANC's influence on popular political perceptions" and was "taken up and adopted by several organisations" (Lodge, 1983, p. 341).

The significance of the *Freedom Charter* lies in the fact that it led the development of a "human rights coalition [which] created a new dynamic and political reality wherein the whole was greater than the sum of its parts" and "broadened the coalition's popular appeal and increased the possibility of building mass support for its political opposition to the racial imperialistic policies fostered and implemented by the South African government" (Haines, 2001, p. 186). The *Charter* formed a significant part of what Cathy Albertyn has termed the "varied and contested archive of ideas" as "South Africa entered the transition in the early 1990s" and it is the ideas of the *Charter*, "with all its nationalist, social democratic and socialist tensions, forms of liberal egalitarian equality and women's struggles for gender equality … [that] came to

define an idea of substantive equality" in South Africa's constitutions (Albertyn, 2018, p. 451). Strongly liberal and egalitarian at its core, the *Charter* nonetheless speaks to socialist ideals of equality and redistribution, in which "(liberal) equality" is at the core, as a "rights-based legal concept … consistent with mainstream world opinion, reflected in international rights documents, such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights" (Albertyn, 2018, p. 445). Significantly, however, Albertyn points out that even as the *Charter* "cohered with global ideas, it was also an indigenous response to apartheid in its particular emphasis on race and apartheid exclusion, including land, education and the economy" and the "call for non-racialism was a direct response to racial domination" (Albertyn, 2018, p. 445).

Not long after the *Freedom Charter* had been adopted as policy by the African National Congress, a split in the party occurred between those in support of the *Charter* and cooperation with white, 'coloured' and Indian groupings, and Africanists who rejected the *Charter* as diluting African nationalism (Marcus, 1984, p. 17). The split resulted in the 1959 establishment of the Pan African Congress (PAC) under the leadership of Robert Sobukwe whose writing and person Bessie Head greatly admired (Vigne, 1991, p. 1) and Potlako Leballo (Marcus, 1984, p 18).

The term 'apartheid', which came into use directly after the adoption of the *Freedom Charter* and increased activism among black, Indian and 'coloured' South Africans, "was the electoral slogan which brought radical Afrikaner nationalism to power in South Africa in May 1948" (Dubow, 2014, p. 1). Of course, racial discrimination and legislation had long and deep shadows in South Africa, under the government of Jan Smuts. In the build up to the election, the National Party exploited "[f]ear of the *swart gevaar* (black peril) and of *oorstrooming* (swamping) [which] were well-rehearsed tropes, especially for those whites living a precarious existence in towns and cities" (Dubow, 2014, p. 5). Apartheid refined much of the preceding legislation which had already ensured that the black South African was, in Sol Plaatje's words, "not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth" (Plaatje, 1998). The centrality of 'apartheid' in the minds of artists is stark as can be seen from Njabulo Ndebele's keynote address at a conference on *New Writing in Africa: Continuity and Change,* in 1984:

> … It could be said, therefore, that the most outstanding feature of South African oppression is its brazen, exhibitionist openness. It is no wonder then, that the Black writer, sometimes a direct victim, sometimes a spectator, should have his

> imagination almost totally engaged by the spectacle before him …(Ndebele, 1986, p. 143).

It was difficult to escape apartheid, whether in reality or in one's creative output. Although not the focus, apartheid and the South Africa system do appear in Head's first three novels: *The Cardinals*, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and *A Question of Power*. Head, however, does not make the same fictional use of apartheid as her contemporaries, as the brief discussion below outlines.

3.2. The Freedom Charter, the UDHR, and South African literature

The *Freedom Charter* came to take on a particular significance in South Africa's political landscape, and its similarities and differences to the UDHR are useful. In the latter, 30 articles relate to the *individual's* rights and are similar to those in the *Freedom Charter* (Suttner, 2006, p. 5) in which these serve primarily to assert the right of Africans to full citizenship of South Africa. This concern is reflected in the current South African Constitution's[15] Bill of Rights which was heavily influenced by "two vital documents in the history of fight for human justice: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the South African Freedom Charter".[16] However, unlike the UDHR, the *Charter* uses communal language - 'we' and 'all groups' and rights belonging to 'all' is how expression is given to "the demand for those *basic human rights* which had systematically been denied to the majority of South Africans" (Marcus, 1984, pp. 18, emphasis added).

The *Charter's* use of 'we' contrasts with the third person references to the individual in the UDHR, for example. The privacy provisions reveal further differences. Article 12 of the UDHR provides

> No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

[15] *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Act 108 of 1996.
[16] South African Constitution: The Bill of Rights | South African History Online (sahistory.org.za)

The *Freedom Charter* asserts a more limited conception of privacy: "The privacy *of the house* from police raids shall be protected by law" (emphasis added), speaking as it does more to the sanctity of the home (regularly violated by state security) than to an individual's articulated right to privacy. In the UDHR privacy attaches to the human subject; in the *Charter* to the person/s in a home.

The differences in the language of the two documents are relevant, as the impact of apartheid and the desire for the freedoms expressed in the *Charter* came to dominate South African poetry, drama and prose and the critiques thereof, for decades.[17] Muxe Nkondo (2015, p. 57) asserts that "[s]ince the adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955, the novel has become … a recognised art form which has absorbed all of the techniques of narrative, whether oral or literary, that preceded it". Writers such as Alex la Guma, Nadine Gordimer, Es'kia Mphahlele and Zakes Mda wrote novels "tied up with the idea of nationhood. What are we? Who are we? What has the experience of particular groups been? How did it become this way? What is it that stopped us from attaining the true meaning of liberation?" (Nkondo, 2015, p. 57). In addition to the novel, the South African literary canon includes short stories, protest poetry, protest songs, music and dance, all equally affected by apartheid. Capturing the role of literature in the struggle ten years after South Africa's first democratic election, South African academic and activist, Saleem Badat, delivered a keynote address to the Imbizo[18] on *Grassroots Community Newspaper*. This newspaper was founded in 1980 by over 60 democratic organisations including trade unions, civics associations, and the United Democratic Front (UDF). Referencing *Staffrider*[19] as a starting point, Badat notes that the function of much South African literature was to:

[17] See, for example, Narismulu, P., 1998. 'Here be dragons': Challenging 'liberal' constructions of protest poetry. *Alternation* 5(1), pp. 191-214; Watts, J., 1989. *Black writers from South Africa: Towards a discourse of liberation*. Springer; Attridge, D. and Jolly, R. eds., 1998. *Writing South Africa: Literature, apartheid, and democracy, 1970-1995*. Cambridge University Press; Steadman, I., 1990. *Towards popular theatre in South Africa.* History Workshop Paper 397. University of the Witwatersrand; Vaughn, M., 1982. A report on the conference on literature and society in Southern Africa. York University, September 1981. *English in Africa* 9.2; Emmett, T., 1979. "Oral, political and communal aspects of township poetry in the mid-seventies." *English in Africa*, pp. 72-81; Orkin, M., 1991. *Drama and the South African state*. Manchester University Press.

[18] Imbizo is the isiZulu word for a meeting at which issues of significance or of policy are discussed.

[19] Staffrider magazine (1978-1993) | South African History Online (sahistory.org.za): *Staffrider*, a literary and arts magazine, was published by Ravan Press in Johannesburg from 1978 to 1993. 'Staffrider' is a slang word for a young black person who travelled on a train – either on the roof or by hanging on outside.

> popularize the ideas of freedom, justice and democracy; the ideas of non-racialism, non-sexism; popularize the Freedom Charter and the United Democratic (UDF) Declaration (Badat, 2004, p. 3).

For Leon de Kock, what binds all South African literature (a "fantastically diverse body of writing") is the political "in the deep sense as a contest over terms of identity and forms of belonging" and the "impulse in the writing [was] to engage with the seams of breaking and mending, of denial and counter-affirmation, of overwriting and rewriting, of splitting and splicing" which "derived from a battle over people's very hearts and souls, their deepest notions of themselves" (De Kock, 2005, p. 71). Arguing that it is in protest that South African literature "found its urgency" (De Kock, 2005, p. 71), it was either pro- or anti-apartheid, a dichotomy that meant that "[w]riters were caught in either-or positions: dissident or conformist, exiled or working within the system, black or white, pro- or anti- the cultural boycott." (De Kock, 2005, p. 75). Contemporary writers express similar views, using African literature as a lens through which to teach about constitutional values. For example, Thabisani Ndlovu argues that African literature continues to play a vital role in the conscientisation of South Africans (Ndlovu, 2019, p. 109).

Nonetheless, it is certainly true to say that the view that literature 'speaks truth to power' took on a particular dimension of protest in South African writing, as expressed by Gareth Cornwell (1980, p. 52):

> The black writer confounds the system through the *universality* of his enterprise. Such is the 'social mobility' of the written word that it makes a mockery of the compartmentalizations of apartheid which would otherwise deny the writer a complete and meaningful sense of self. Writing and the right to freedom of expression and a sense of self are inextricably linked, such that "for the black South African, serious creative writing is inescapably a form of political and social action".

Briefly in the period leading up and into the 1960s, South Africa was dominated by 'bannings'[20] and the imprisonment and exile of South African community, civic and other leaders opposed to apartheid. In the context, creative production took on some of the political functions of conscientisation and mobilisation ordinarily associated with political movements. From the 1940s and 1950s many of South Africa's most well-known authors and poets had gone into exile to avoid persecution by the apartheid government, including Dennis Brutus, Mazizi Raymond Kunene, Nat Nakasa, Arthur Nortje, Lewis Nkosi, Wally Serote, Mandla Langa, Can Themba, Lindiwe Mabuza, Heinz Klug, Breyten Breytenbach, Es'kia Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Patrick Fitzgerald, Alex la Guma and Peter Abrahams, among others. Head's exile was different in form to that of these authors. As Rob Nixon (1993, pp. 115–116) notes:

> The work of most of the literary exiles—Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, Es'kia Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Dennis Brutus et al.—reveals few attachments to the alien present, ... Almost all of these exiles wrote at a great physical distance from South Africa, having put oceans and continents between themselves and apartheid. Head's circumstances and approach proved wholly different.

The difference, of course, may also be attributable to the different reasons the writers had for their exile.

State responses to literature (which included the banning of texts and authors (Van der Vlies, 2007), dramatically enhanced the writers' sense of writing as protest. Censors reviewed every creative output referred to them, and thick black lines were placed across the published works of , for example, Lewis Nkosi and Dennis Brutus (for examples see Cornwell, 1980, pp. 52, 53, 57). Surveying protest writing, Cornwell concludes that James Matthews writes "to motivate his readers to social and political action"; Nadine Gordimer sees protest as a logical result of writing honestly, and Ezekiel (Es'kia) Mphahlele writes to catalyse action. The result, Cornwell argues, is that it was difficult for South African authors "to be received as anything but protest writers" (Cornwell, 1980, p. 55) and literature and resistance politics became

[20] A person could be banned through the application of law, including the *Suppression of Communism Act* (1950), and the *Riotous Assembly Act* (1927). These Acts dealt with apartheid resistance by banning a person – which meant that s/he was restricted to home and could not be in the presence of more than one person at a time. A banned person could not be quoted, speak publicly, or write for an audience. In 1966, a total of 936 people were 'banned'. From 1950 to 1990 over 2000 people were banned in South Africa. Summary available here: Number of banned persons in South Africa totals 936 | South African History Online (sahistory.org.za).

intrinsically entwined (Cornwell, 1980, p. 60). Only when apartheid was no longer the state's official policy subsequent to 1994 did artists and critics question the future of South African creativity in the absence of protest.[21] Increased state repression in the 1980s meant that all aspects of culture whether theatre, poetry, short stories, or novels had become overt 'weapons' in the struggle against apartheid. Drawing on the *Freedom Charter's* demand that "The doors of culture shall be opened!", "cultural activists began to develop what was termed 'people's culture' as a tool for mass mobilisation against apartheid", a concept that was publicly adopted at a conference in 1982 in Gaborone.[22]

Some examples of protest literature and the forms it took follow and are distinct from Head's production. Black women workers produced spoken and performed poetry situated in a political context and demonstrating a commitment to an African destiny and to "cultural pride and affirmation" … "alongside non-racial principles and collaboration based on the Freedom Charter and the spirit of the ANC" (Clayton, 1990, p. 26). Women 'cultural workers' drew on a variety of genres to depict the "abuses of power in the polity or the workplace", favouring the oral delivery of poetry (Clayton, 1990, p. 26). Two such flexible protest forms are captured by Priya Narismulu (1988, p. 274): "a train play", *Workers Lament*, and another performed by women passengers called *Women stand up for your rights*, both performed in moving trains to audiences of fellow workers. English short stories too were very popular, perhaps because they were easier to produce and had international appeal, coming to dominate writing in "protest against the state's policy of enforced tribalism" (Trump, 1988, p. 36).

In a detailed analysis of South African protest songs as literature, Jeremy Cronin (1988, p. 22) shows how these changed to keep pace with current events. Whether the toyi-toyi[23] is a song, a chant, a war cry, or a poem is "a scholastic point", and they serve the same purpose as the performance poetry of the period: to "mobilize and unite large groups of people … capable of facing down a viciously oppressive and well-equipped police and army" (Cronin, 1988, p. 22).

[21] The trajectory from protest nature to other forms of literature in South Africa is the focus, for example, of the following pieces: Van Graan, M., 2006. From protest theatre to the theatre of conformity? *South African Theatre Journal*, *20*(1), pp. 276-288; and Blumberg, M., 2009. South African theatre beyond 2000: Theatricalising the unspeakable, *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, *21*(1-2), pp. 238-260. Similar pieces occur in relation to poetry, for example, Boehmer, E., 2018. The transformative force of the postcolonial line: Protest poetry and the global short story. *Postcolonial Poetics*, pp. 173-192. Cham.: Palgrave Macmillan; Jenkins, E., 2019. Folksong and ballad as social comment in some South African railway poems and songs. *English in Africa*, *46*(2), pp. 103-121.

[22] See SAHA - South African History Archive - Culture: The doors of culture shall be opened! for examples.

[23] An example of which may be viewed here: Toyi-toyi - Bing video.

Protest novels such as Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood* were largely urban, and outlined "the process that begins in June 1976 of conscientization and violent resistance to the apartheid system" (Sole, 1988, p. 68). And in the poetry, Mbulelo Mzamane (1988, p. 4) finds a common "language of assertion, defiance, and subversion" among poets who "are student leaders, political activists, persecuted militants, and their sympathizers" often resulting in poetry that reads like pamphleteering (Mzamane, 1988, p. 10).

In summary, the production of written works in South Africa was "inescapably a form of political and social action" and "a form of social action" as a result of which many writers experienced dire consequences including banning and exile (Cornwell, 1980, p. 52). Examining novels written after 1976, Kelwyn Sole argues that they naturalised and mobilised "a political community of black people" as a "radical urban intelligentsia denied access to political rights and seeking to identify with and conscientize other blacks in a struggle for freedom" structured a new social and political identity and morality (Sole, 1988, p. 80).

Of course, not all responded favourably to the protest elements of literary and creative works. Ndebele's sharp critique that protest writing is replete with what he calls the 'spectacular', sees it as:

> a society of posturing and sloganeering; one that frowns upon subtlety of thought and feeling, and never permits the sobering power of contemplation, of close analysis, and the mature acceptance of failure, weakness, and limitations (Ndebele, 1986, p. 150).

Protest literature moves away from "the entertaining stories of Drum", to the "spectacular ugliness of the South African situation in all its forms" (Ndebele, 1986, p. 145). He requests of writers that they 'rediscover the ordinary', and write differently "to create a new society, … to build a new civilization" (Ndebele, 1986, p. 157), a challenge that Head, however unwittingly, responds to. In Head's use of the village, there is an evocation of "consolation in retreat to a life of the ordinary" (Coundouriotis, 2021, p. 22).

Similarly in 1989 in a hotly debated address to the ANC in exile Albie Sachs, well-known anti-apartheid activist and prominent advocate, asked the ANC to abolish the phrase 'culture is a weapon of the struggle' (Gilbert, 2007, p. 421). Arguing that it was banal and devoid of content,

Sachs concluded that it had resulted in art confined to narrowly defined, politically acceptable themes, portraying the struggle against apartheid in oversimplistic terms of good and evil. Art, he argued, should be nuanced and represent not only the struggle "but also the richness and diversity of the newly emergent South African nation" (Gilbert, 2007, p. 422).

3.3. Head and politics

In a 1975 response to the *Index on Censorship*, Head writes, "[w]e may be at a turning point and need new names for human dignity, new codes of honour all nations can abide by" (Head, 1990, p. 61). In the 1978 piece, "Social and political pressures that shape writing in Southern Africa" (Head, 1990, pp. 65–72), Head enumerates the "Southern African preoccupations" (Head, 1990, p. 67) that inform her writing as refugeeism, racialism, patterns of evil, and the ancient southern African historical dialogue. She says of her position that

> our only education in South Africa, as black people, is a political one. We learn bitterly, every day, the details of oppression and exploitation so that a writer automatically feels pressured into taking a political stand of some kind or identifying with a camp. It was important to my development to choose a broader platform for my work, so I have avoided political camps and ideologies because I feel that they falsify truth. It was necessary for me to concentrate directly on people because I believe it is only people who make people suffer and not some hidden, unknown God or devil (Head, 1990, p. 63).

A year later she comments that "Literature is very functional in Southern Africa and bound inextricably to human suffering; the death of South African literature is that it is almost blinded by pain; people hardly exist beside the pain (Head, 1990, p. 67). Each of these statements indicates Head's awareness of the nature of South African politics, of the literary responses thereto, and of her unambiguous responses to these.

She was 11 years old when the National Party in South Africa came to power (1948) implementing its policy of 'apartheid' in full force. The racism inherent in the South African system had of course already had a profound impact on the events of Head's life and would continue to do so. In 1956, when Head was discharged from state care (Eilersen, 1995, p. 34), the 'coloured' community was engaged in an intense struggle about the vote (Eilersen 1995,

p. 34). Surrounded by politically active people, Head echoes Sobukwe, saying "[t]he masses do not hate an abstraction like 'oppression' or 'capitalism' … They make these things concrete and hate the oppressor – in South Africa the White man" (Head, 1990, p. 83). In 1948, the year Mahatma was assassinated (Eilersen, 2001, pp. 35-36), the UDHR was adopted. Head was aware of these developments, as set out in her biography in Chapter 1, and although not directly involved in politics her written works as cited above indicate her familiarity with the issues of her time.

Head makes a choice about where and how she positioned herself politically, and her articulation of equality and freedom and of how these are constituted and who is to be equal or free is complicated. No reading of her texts should assume a ready and unambiguous correspondence between the views she expresses in letters and other documents, and her fiction. In an early piece, "A Personal View of the Survival of the Unfittest", Head (1993, p. 146) writes:

> Though my whole life and thoughts are bent towards my country, Africa, I live a precarious existence, never knowing from one day to the next whether I shall be forced into an unwelcome and painful exile, never knowing whom it is I offend, who it is who demands absolute loyalty from me; to all, I can give nothing; to all, especially politicians and those still fighting for liberation, I ask an excuse for taking, prematurely, in advance of the chaos, dislocation and confusion around me, the privilege of a steady, normal unfoldment of my own individuality. I ask it. I have taken an advance on what I have not earned in any battlefield - human dignity.

In an analysis of this piece, Coundouriotis points out that Head's position on dignity "depends on an idea of self-realization" and "is the concept that frames her resistant subject position" (Coundouriotis, 2021, p. 20). Furthermore, she adds, "[d]ignity is not something Head wants to wait for as a reward for a just fight; nor does she believe she needs to earn it" (Coundouriotis, 2021, p. 21). In fact, if anything, Head "explicitly rejects the notion that dignity can be bestowed on the individual as a result of collective, political struggle" , rather, her conception of dignity "complicates the relation between the individual and the community" (Coundouriotis, 2021, p. 22).

Rejecting political activism, even in her writing, Head uses her fiction and other writing as a means to achieve personal, philosophical and political release. She characterised herself as unfit for political subterfuge saying of herself: “I have such a delicate nervous balance that when faced with danger or secret activity, I tremble violently. The spies of the Boers would have long found me out and sent me the parcel bomb” (Eilersen, 2001, p. 58). Although in 1960 she had collected money for the women and children negatively affected by the arrest of breadwinners during the pass raids, [24] and was charged with furthering the aims of a banned organisation, this was to be the extent of her ‘activism’. Nonetheless, power and the politics of power were central to her creative toolkit. And, while many of Head’s contemporaries had gone into political exile to escape being detained or imprisoned, such a direct political threat or cause was not the reason for Head’s wanting to leave. As a result, however, she and her works were identified as ‘not political’. Critic and fellow author, Lewis Nkosi comments that Head seems “politically ignorant” with the “moral fluency of an intelligent, intensely lonely individual” whose concern is “problems of belonging, of close interpersonal relationships, of love, value, and humanity” (cited in Garrett, 1999, p. 122). Nkosi adds, Head is "not a political novelist” and is, in fact, “generally hostile to politics” (Garrett, 1999, p. 122). Taoua sees Nkosi’s response to Head as discomfort with her rejection of the “toxic consequences” of the masculinist politics of liberation (2018, p. 119).

Eilersen’s remarks in this respect are germane. Calling Lewis’s words ‘hard’, she thinks he may have amended his view in light of Head’s three later works (Eilersen, 1991). That Head did not regard herself as political is a given, however, although she would certainly not have seen herself as “politically ignorant” (Eilersen, 1991, p. 44). Head “dissociated herself from political activity, not because she was apathetic but because her sensitive nature had been maimed in childhood” and met with “increased criticism from often-hostile audiences, who could not accept her refusal to involve herself politically in Africa’s many problems” (Eilersen, 1991, p. 44). Eilersen is firm, however, that Head’s three final works would have required Nkosi to reconsider his view.

[24] The apartheid government enacted laws to control the ‘influx’ of Africans to the urban centres. Each African person was required to have a ‘pass’ in order to work in a particular location. A failure to produce such a pass would lead to arrest. Raids of public and private spaces to check ‘passes’ were common, and the pass system became the object of activism and resistance. See: Pass laws in South Africa 1800-1994 | South African History Online (sahistory.org.za).

The significance of Head's last three works (*Serowe*; *Collector;* and *Bewitched*) should be seen in the context of Couzens's argument that any appreciation of South African literature needs to recognise the magnitude of the reach of oral tradition of literature in Africa, which is a "continuous tradition of literature, oral and vernacular, adapting partly to written and European forms when history and inclination dictated" (Heywood, 2004, p. 159). It is also significant that the South African canon was a predominantly male tradition with the result that, for example, at *Drum's* height, "[o]nly two black South African women published books written in English in the 1960s - Noni Jabavu and Bessie Head - and both did so from outside the country" (Driver, 1996, p. 227). As Driver comments, "Head survived as a writer in spite of *Drum*" (Driver, 1996, p. 227).

Taken among her peers, Head's works do not adopt the same style and stance as 'protest' writing, but do problematise how we view the person, both as individual and as community member. Head's contemporaries and literary forebearers had produced plays (*Woza Albert*, *Asinamali* and *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*), protest poetry (Wally Mongane Serote, Sipho Sepamla and Oswald Mtshali), novels and autobiographies (Es'kia Mphahlele, Njabulo Ndebele), and scathing journalistic and fictional pieces (Can Themba, Richard Rive, Lewis Nkosi, and Nadine Gordimer). And one could add to this brief list the musical contributions of Todd Matshikiza, and performance poetry as discussed in 2.3.1. above.

As an exile, Head too was different. Her exile was not political: "she was determined to leave, both because she was not happy in her marriage and because she hoped that in a free African country she would find new inspiration for her writing" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 71). Her application for a passport was not successful, however, "perhaps because of her brief membership of the PAC" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 71). With the help of Patrick Cullinan and his wife Wendy, Head was able to obtain an exit permit and arrived in Serowe in 1964. The reasons for her exile were not the same as others', an aspect that reveals itself in her writing. Nixon notes that:

> [the work of] most of the literary exiles—Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, Es'kia Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Dennis Brutus et al.— reveals few attachments to the alien present, ... Almost all of these exiles wrote at a great physical distance from South Africa, having put oceans and continents between themselves and apartheid. Head's circumstances and approach proved wholly different.

While Head did not expressly write 'against apartheid' she was deeply motivated by the issues of her time. In 1985 she asserted that she "carefully avoided politics" (Head, 1990, p. 97) but also expressed a love for Pan African Congress leader, Robert Sobukwe. She had met Sobukwe at a gathering and had a conversation with him about land reform in China, he "made an indelible impression on her" (Eilersen, 1995, p. 51). When he was arrested a few weeks later, Head was there to see it. As a result, at one stage Head saw herself (and was seen as) a "fire-eating African nationalist and a supporter of the Pan-Africanist Congress [(PAC)]" (Vigne, 1991, p. 1). Head supported the ideals of Pan-Africanism specifically in respect of the "principled PAC leaders, pre-eminently Sobukwe" (Johnson, 2019, p. 155) who had accepted 'coloureds' as African (Eilersen, 1995, p. 48) and was for a brief time a member of the party. As early as 1969 she expressed discomfort with "the black power people" who she said had "no heart" and an "inferiority complex which wants to impress perhaps 'whitey' that the black man has got brains. It is all sham and pose and ego and something I can't stomach" (Vigne, 1991, pp. 92–93). In a letter to Sobukwe in 1972 she mentioned the betrayal of the PAC's ideals by its members (Johnson, 2019, p. 155), admitting that she "was not, in the final analysis attracted to the P.A.C. as much as I was attracted to your personality. I met too many types of voracious people in that political party and disliked them" (cited in Johnson, 2019, p. 156).

In 1985 and notwithstanding her jaded views on the PAC, Head's early loyalty to Sobukwe remained, and she credits him with enabling her as a person with a "very broken sense of history" to attain "a sense of balance" and "a comfortable black skin in which to live and work" (Head, 1990, p. 97). Sobukwe "forced one to make an identification with Africa and [have] a sense of belonging to Africa" (Head, 1990, p. 97), and there can be no question that it this commitment that she expresses across all her fiction, even when her letters express an often distinctly different stance. There are echoes of Sobukwe's phraseology in her view that "Africa is going to rise to a great height of civilization and this is going to be done, in the last resort, with African brains …" (Head, 1990, p. 46). Her sorrow at Sobukwe's death was heartfelt, and his writings, she says, demonstrate that "he was a rich and creative man" but also "so idealistic". She wrote in a letter that: "The light went out for me with his death. For days and days I cried simply because he was the only man I ever loved and trusted" (Vigne, 1991, pp. 219–220).

Head's politics were certainly eclectic, perhaps even confused. In addition to Sobukwe's influence, she was inspired by the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), of which her husband was a member and the South African Liberal Party (SALP). The former resisted state

bodies constituted to govern the activities of 'coloured' people (Nasson, 1990, p. 192) and was firmly committed to non-racialism (expressed as the view that race did not exist) and to non-collaboration with the apartheid state (Nasson 1990, p. 192). Its membership was drawn largely from teachers, and it was headed by a "radical middle-class intelligentsia" (Nasson, 1990, p. 192). As a young woman in Cape Town in the first half of the 1960s, Head was acquainted with Dennis Brutus (a 'coloured' South African writer, and active member of the NEUM at the time) and Lewis Nkosi (the author and critic who did not find her works weighty enough for their lack of political value) (Head, 1990, p. 13), but also with Randolph Vigne and Patrick Duncan (both active SALP members). Head's political 'sources' (for want of a better term) encompassed the widely differing perspectives of the PAC, NEUM and SALP.

Unlike members of her circle, whether in Johannesburg or Cape Town, Head did not remain a member of, nor declare an ongoing allegiance to, any political movement, nor in her writing did she act as a spokesperson for any particular view: "I have avoided political camps and ideologies because I feel they falsify truth" (Head, 1990, p. 63). She expresses surprise that "creative writing is often regarded … as a nationalistic activity" (Head, 1990, p. 101) and in 1962, Head says that in her writing she would:

> just like to say people is people and no damn white, damn black. Perhaps if I was a good enough writer I could still write damn white, damn black and still make people live. Make you love them, not because of the colour of their skin but because they are important as human beings (Head, 1990, p. 6).

Head's avoidance of parties was set out in a 1967 letter to Randolph Vigne and she says is due to her feeling that

> There are really wicked people on this earth. BUT THEY ARE NOT IN CAMPS. … you can't say all white men are evil. The most good people found there side by side with terrible brutes. You can't say African people, because they walk around in rags and tatters, are good (Vigne, 1991, p. 54, emphasis in original).

Head did have a deep interest in history and unlike politics, history is at the forefront of many of her texts, especially so in the last three (*Collector of Treasures, Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, and *A Bewitched Crossroad*). Head bypasses the typical questions and concerns of protest

literature, choosing to interrogate what she presents as the more pressing problems of the prevalence of such problems across time. For example, while South African protest writers tended to record the move from the rural to the urban contexts, associated with a coming to know politics and apartheid, Head's use of the rural context is different as she recalibrates the nationalism at the heart of, for example, Sol Plaatje's works. Using the rural context in which she finds herself, she focuses on conceptions of tradition and orality, and on the present and the past to which she is there exposed. At 27 years old, a refugee from South Africa in Botswana, she finds herself in the:

> most unique and distinguished country in the whole of Africa. It has a past history that is unequalled anywhere in Africa. It is a land that was never conquered or dominated by foreign powers and so a bit of ancient Africa, in all its quiet and unassertive grandeur, has remained intact there (Head, 1990, p. 66).

She uses Serowe in her stories because "[l]ife in Botswana cannot be compared in any way to life in South Africa because people here live very secure lives, in a kind of *social order shaped from centuries past by the ancestors of the tribe*" (Head, 1990, p. 62, emphasis added) and because the "immense suffering black people experience in South Africa had created in me a reverence for ordinary people" (Head, 1990, p. 63). Head does write 'against' apartheid but does so only inasmuch as apartheid is an instance of a long, universal history of discrimination and inequity. Her discourse is in this sense not political 'anti-apartheid' or 'protest' and does not take the form of assertions against the national and systematised racism of the time, informed by the lack of civil and human rights of black South Africans. Rather, and in her own words, Head 'protests' from the perspective of needing to find "an eternal and continuous world" from which her writing could be "illuminating the future for younger generations" (Head, 1990, p. 86). She says that she has never been able to "represent South African society but the situation of black people in South Africa, their anguish and their struggles, made its deep impress" on her (Head, 1990, p. 86).

She actively embarks on a "search as an African for a sense of historical continuity, a sense of roots" (Head, 1990, p. 86), a search led by a history which is unfamiliar and unknown to South Africa but is present in Botswana. There, Head has a sense of Africa as "ancient and existing since time immemorial" and the "presence of the timeless and immemorial is everywhere" (Head, 1990, p. 86).

In her novels there is evidence of many strands of thinking, exactly as she has said, and these strands, for example of religion, or mythology, or of the political allow for her to respond to the "possibility that Africa can produce a lot of idealist young men, the need for the people to solve centuries of exploitation and poverty" (Head, 1990, p. 73). Arguing that, through reading, she was able to participate in the "thought of the whole world" (Head, 1990, p. 56), she places herself outside of political ideologies choosing to select from Christianity what she likes. It is, she says, "a doctrine above all traditions and mores; a moral choice freely available to both men and women" (Head, 1990, p. 56). As a result, and just as she does with politics, she takes from certain Christian actors what she sees as social reform, often collapsing these with African tradition, arguing that the former permitted Africans to be free to choose to be a moral person.

As a result, Head sought out and depicted men with an "extreme willingness to abdicate from positions of power and absorb themselves in activities which would be of immense benefit to people", saying she

> built an horizon in which black men of talent were portrayed in activities which were 'a new beginning'. I wanted to widen the image on the horizon and to give young black men alternative choices. It was like a suggestion I hoped would move into the future while not too much could be done about the chaos of the present (Head, 1990, p. 73).

She was, she wrote, "fascinated by history, by the migrations of people, by the meeting of many strange cultures and by trade and the exchange of goods" (Head, 1990, p. 83).

Significant developments in southern African history from the 1960s and 1970s are evident in Head's works although both the classically nationalist version of history (as the narrative of an unfolding nation) and a more populist approach to history (as the 'history from below') operate side-by-side in her texts. The former dominated her school education; the latter focused in South Africa on the struggles of 'the people'. Given Head's Anglican schooling, she would not have received tuition in the nationalist historiography taking place in response to colonial views of Africa and in which the focus was on leaders and rulers able to lead nations to independence. Nonetheless, it is clear that she had a developed and equal interest in the 'big men' of history, such as the Khama III ('the Great' or 'the Good', ruler of the Bamangwato tribe when nineteenth

century Bechuanaland was a British protectorate), Tshekedi Kama (son of Khama III), and Seretse Khama (first President of independent Botswana), as well as in the ordinary village people among whom she lived. Alongside the focus on the 'big man' history of Serowe is that of a historiography more typical of the 1970s in which she writes 'from below' about the minutiae of village life, on women's work, on migration, on development, and on marriage and death. Head's texts draw heavily from interviews she undertook with her friend as interpreter. Interviews, a fundamental tool of the radical historiography of the time (Bozzoli and Delius, 1990, p. 17), "disputed colonial denial of a meaningful precolonial African history and stressed the centrality of African initiative in shaping the past and present of the African continent".

Also significant for Head's works is the point made by Bozzoli and Delius (1990, p. 16) that given the constraints and limitations apartheid laws imposed on access to higher education and thus on the development of African historians, the genres of journalism and fiction allowed for the black intelligentsia to find its voice. They locate the roots of radical history in the "pioneering work done by black writers from the last decades of the nineteenth century", who "explored precolonial and African history and sought to recover the oral traditions of their communities", and include in this scope authors such as Sol Plaatje and S Modiri Molema (Bozzoli and Delius, 1990, p. 14). Plaatje's classical work – *Native Life in South Africa* – focussed on the consequences of the *1913 Natives Land Act* which dispossessed black South Africans of their land. The publication of this text was followed from the 1920s by "a proliferation of local histories written in African languages which have only in recent years started to receive the attention they merit" (Bozzoli and Delius, 1990, p. 14). Many of the more radical and polemical pieces of historical work were written "outside of university history departments" and "grappled with the experiences of African dispossession and resistance, and questions of race and nationalism and their variable and complex relationships to those of class and capitalism" (Bozzoli and Delius, 1990, p. 14).

That Head read and appreciated Plaatje is obvious, and she authored a foreword to *Native Life in South Africa*. She comments as follows:

> *Native Life* is wide and deep in its historical reach. A full portrait of the times emerges and we are presented with a view of history reaching back nearly five hundred years and up to a period of transition as it has affected the lives of black people … [Plaatje's] main

> aim is to present the black personality as deserving justice, humanity and dignity (Head 1990, p. 81).

Interestingly, her remark about justice, humanity and dignity is one of the few times that she chooses to use a vocabulary most associated with rights.

Head worked early in her career as a journalist, and the desire to record what she sees is evident in her work. Her need to re-tell history feeds the desire to write a future "of dignity and compassion" (Head, 1990, p. 64). Head says of Serowe "there isn't anything in this village that an historian might care to write about. Dr Livingstone passed this way, they might say. Historians do not write about people and how strange and beautiful they are – just living" (Head, 1990, p. 30), and so she tells of the "everyday life of the people" (Bozzoli and Delius, 1990, p. 15). The distinction between fiction and history begins to blur in Head's texts. Head's works evince overt and conscious efforts to engage with the history of the region, to find ways to capture it in written form, to do the people with whom she lives justice, to understand the loss of personhood, 'rights' and their 'regaining', to address racism, discrimination, poverty, and misogyny, and other social and economic ills. Drawing on African histories and oral accounts is indicative of Head's search for Africa's 'deep history' (Reid, 2011, p. 141).

3.4. Conclusion

One of the challenges facing African writers in dealing with history lies in the conflicts between contemporary views on, for example human rights or gender equality, and traditional practices and values. In a fascinating article on decolonising curricula in contemporary South Africa, Lesley le Grange terms what needs to happen as "complicated conversation[s]" which "do not conform to predetermined outcomes, but, as in the case of improvisational jazz, produce something new and transform those engaged in the conversation" (Le Grange, 2018, pp. 5, 6). Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin write in 2002 that the decolonisation project is "frequently accompanied by the demand for an entirely new or wholly recovered pre-colonial 'reality'" and that while understandable it simply "cannot be achieved" (Ashcroft, et al., 2002, p. 220). "Postcolonial culture" they continue, is "inevitably a hybridized phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the 'grafted' European cultural systems and an indigenous ontology, with its impulse to create or recreate an independent local identity"

(Ashcroft, et al., 2002, p. 220). Although Head's works are not overtly political in the manner of contemporaries, they nonetheless address these tensions.

Head grapples with freedom as set against a 'traditional' African existence. She characterizes tradition simultaneously as a "deep river … unruffled by conflict or a movement forward, [in which] the people lived without faces, except for their chief whose face was the face of all the people" and a source of "evil" (Head, 1977, p. 1), producing men:

> who lived by the tradition and taboos outlined for all the people by the forefathers of the tribe … [which] demanded that he comply and obey the rules, without thought. … The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life (Head, 1977, p. 92).

In her texts, Head is "wrestling with alienation and the search for personhood" that are part of "attempts at disrupting and displacing colonial discourses that rationalize the denigration, oppression, and exploitation" of African people (Peterson, 2019, pp. 57–58). Her views on the different kinds of freedom shuffle between personal/individual freedom, and the freedoms offered by communitarianism. Her works provide multidimensional additions to the southern African literary canon and challenges to the binaries of tradition and modernity, orality and literacy, urban and rural. As Phyllis Taoua (2018, p. 115) puts it, Head's recreation of the African pastoral experience appears largely "uninterrupted by imperial domination" Ajayi's view, that colonialism is an "episode" and not the whole of Africa's history finds fictional form in her texts. As Ajayi notes, the tendency to see "the activities of Europeans" as the "central events in African history from which all others derived" is an exaggeration (Falola, 2000, p. 168), and Africa was never static, its 'precolonial' past extends before the European invasions, before the Islamic, Dutch and Portuguese periods. Importantly, Ajayi observes that despite the nature of the political, social and supernatural disturbances occasioned by the colonial authorities, "their impact on Africa was very uneven" (Falola, 2000, p. 170) and despite the power differences between the colonised and coloniser, Africans retained their initiative, restricting the Europeans' ability to make entirely new departures (Falola, 2000, p. 171). Head's search for an African frame of reference infuses her works, encouraging us to read these as part of another genre of African fictional historical writing.

Chapter 4: The 'rag-bag' novel - Head's protest begins
The Cardinals and *When Rain Clouds Gather*

> *The thing about Botswana is that it is a vast, semi-desert, and drought-stricken land, and all through its history it attracted few white settlers. A bit of ancient Africa was left almost intact to dream along its own way. In South Africa the white man took even that air away from us – it was his air and his birds and his land. In Botswana, I have a little bird outside my window every day* (Head, 1990, p. 27).

4.1. Introduction

Isabel Hofmeyr says Head's work "stood athwart many of the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid orthodoxies of the day" (Hofmeyr, 2021). In this chapter I argue that Head adopts a post-oppositional approach from which to establish love as the basis for a revised Africanist perspective which references both western and African approaches to the self, as she deems fruitful. This chapter focuses on her use of love and ubuntu as an alternative to the typical tropes of protest literature and the teachings of African nationalism and builds on some of the critical approaches to Head's use of love.

Avoiding the figures of speech of African nationalism, Head characterises its adherents in *When Rain Clouds Gather* as "blindly gesticulating and shouting that they were 'in the grip of the force and direction of *the law of change*'" (Head, 2010, p. 67, emphasis added). She is unambiguous on her view that although the legal status of an independent Botswana and of its citizens may have changed, the circumstances of the majority living there have not. Head's work operates outside of the paradigm of rights, and focuses on the social and communal work and the strength and power of women in the face of intense poverty and anonymity (Head, 1989, p. 42). It is in this work that dignity resides. In "Village People", she writes:

> Poverty has a home in Africa – like a quiet second skin. It may be the only place on earth where it is worn with an unconscious dignity. … there must be some other, unfathomable reason for the immense humanity and the extreme gentleness of the people of my village (Head, 1989, p. 40).

Aspects of the role and value of love in Head's texts have already been acknowledged in the critical responses to her works. For example, Driver argues that *Maru* destabilises the "symbolic order which determines the positions of self and other", which leads to a world "in which the self is defined not in opposition to its other but in terms of a process where human beings are *at once autonomous*, variable and mutually constitutive" (Driver, 2001, p. 74, emphasis added). In this view, the mutually constitutive aspects of Head's vision work alongside the traditional western notion of autonomy. Driver comments that Head seeks her symbols not from her current environment but from indigenous or a potentially 'pre-colonial world' in which contemporary dichotomies did not pertain (Driver, 2001, pp. 74–75). I find this assertion difficult, however. Such dichotomies clearly did exist as Head's use of the Masarwa-slave/Batswana-slave owner relationship demonstrates. Driver concludes that the resolution to the novel inheres in the restoration of the humanity of the indigenous people (Driver, 2005, p. 75).

There is a discernible alignment between these two novels and post-oppositional thinking which asks broadly that we move "to spaces of imagination and possibility without the need to place this [new] work in opposition to that which came before" (Bhattacharya, 2016, p. 198). Head's novels propose that love, expressed as love relationships between two people in some instances and as acts of ubuntu in others, is the primary mechanism through which a post-oppositional, 'new African' state may be achieved. If we contrast the two novels, in *The Cardinals* the situation in South African where black and white are completely unequal has dire consequences for black Africans. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, where black people have the right to equality in an independent Botswana, there is still inequality. The mere fact of having the right to equality does not make 'humans' into 'persons'. Personhood is in Head's construction a status that is earned, not awarded, and that does not attach to the simple fact of having rights. The first two novels set out the groundwork for love and ubuntu as the primary mechanism through which humans come to personhood.

Head's novels clarify her view that the binaries underpinning discrimination are universal. In her post-oppositional approach, Head references the tensions between all repression and oppressive practices (whether tribal, colonial or apartheid) and instances of goodness, love or ubuntu. Individual self-expression and communal values are tied up in a complex interaction which results in positive social change. Leonard Praeg argues that for ubuntu to be useful it will have to

> play the role of positing past realities as future possibilities through a perpetual deconstruction of two essential building blocks of Western modernity: a linear conception of time and the binary separation of self and other, being and belonging (Praeg, 2014, p. 248).

It is my contention that Head's works address this requirement. In her use of ubuntu, there is evidence of Ogude's pragmatic approach to African personhood – a "process of deliberate and careful negotiation between those values rooted in communal ethos and those that seek to reach out for individuality and associated elements of freedom to choose and act as free agents of change" (Ogude, 2018, p. 260). Peterson notes that the question of "what it means to be human and the attendant quests for personhood – as themes and tropes on lived experiences – are shot through much of the creative and discursive interventions undertaken by black artists and intellectuals in South Africa" (Peterson, 2019, pp. 55–56). Head's vision of personhood is more in keeping with what Ramose calls human*ness* which "suggests both a condition of being and the state of becoming, of openness or ceaseless unfolding. It is thus opposed to any -ism, including humanism, [which suggests] a condition of finality, a closedness or a kind of absolute (Ramose, 2015, p. 69).

In post-oppositional thinking, love is an epistemology (Boveda and Bhattacharya, 2019; Jaggar, 1989; Vandenberghe, 2008), a "grounding force" which permits for the critical and deep reflection on the meaning of aspects of life, such as freedom and resistance, without (ideally, clearly) "being in subjugation to any master narrative" (Boveda and Bhattacharya, 2019, n.p.) especially those which dominate representations of history and culture. In line with this, Head says of herself that she has observed as a "*discipline* ... an attitude of love and reverence to people" (Head, 1990, p. 99, emphasis added), asking "what happens to the dreamer and storyteller when he is born into a dead world of such extreme cruelties that no comment of statement of love can alter them? … Who can write about that?" (Head, 1990, p. 101). Head's choice of words is not accidental. 'Discipline' implies the conscious and deliberate adoption of an approach which required her to move outside of linear and binary thinking, which may not have come naturally to her. Her search in the myths and religions of the world to make sense of this has been explored in detail (see, for example, Cary, 1995). In part, she resorts "in a practical way" to using the word 'God' to reflect all "that is most holy" which is not, she continues, "an Unseen Being in the sky" (Head, 1990, p. 99). In fact, 'god' is present "[w]hen

people are holy to each other, war will end, human suffering will end" (Head, 1990, p. 99). The vehicle through which a new state can be achieved, her texts propose, is an African 'way' characterised by nexus between love and ubuntu.

Whereas in the later texts, Head foregrounds her view of Africa, drawing on the methods of a 'history from below' and the oral and storytelling tradition, in these early texts she tentatively explores an alternative to the political standpoint dominant in her time. Love and ubuntu take a progressively firmer shape as she moves from a more traditional use of the novel genre into explorations of narratives which exploit oral testimony and history. Although Head never uses the term ubuntu, she nonetheless applies its philosophical precepts to her characters and their actions, as well as to the definition of personhood she is developing, as the discussion below demonstrates.

Head establishes in these two texts a complexly intertwined relationship between love and change in which positive personal transformation is achieved with and through engagements with others. In the first text, *The Cardinals*, change is predominantly individual, whereas in *When Rain Clouds Gather* the reader is asked to move with the characters beyond the binaries of traditional versus new; stranger versus family; black versus white as personal and communal change blur.

The Cardinals with Meditations and Short Stories (1993) is the only text Head set in South Africa. Although it is located here as her first text, it was published posthumously, having been discovered among Patrick Cullinan's papers after his passing. Head's first published novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* features a refugee from South Africa but the story is set almost entirely in Botswana in the fictional village of Golema Mmidi. Head's choice of the novel as her early fictional vehicle is conscious and deliberate: "I found eventually," she says, "that I could do anything with the novel form" (MacKenzie and Clayton, 1989, p. 9). In 1978, she writes that the novel is

> like a large rag-bag into which one can stuff anything – all one's philosophical, social and romantic speculations. I have always reserved a special category for myself, as a writer – that of a pioneer blazing a new trail into the future (Head, 1990, p. 64).

In her use of the novel she gives expression to her many strands of thinking including religion, mythology, and politics, all of which she says allow her to respond to the "possibility that Africa can produce a lot of idealist young men … [able] to solve centuries of exploitation and poverty" (Head, 1990, p. 73). In creating fictional young men who demonstrate "extreme willingness to abdicate from positions of power and absorb themselves in activities which would be of immense benefit to people" she "built an horizon in which black men of talent were portrayed in activities which were 'a new beginning'" (Head, 1990, p. 73). In her novels, she says, she was able to:

> widen the image on the horizon and … give young black men alternative choices. It was like a suggestion I hoped would move into the future while not too much could be done about the chaos of the present (Head, 1990, p. 73).

The discussion below brings to the fore the powerful subliminal narratives of love, community and ubuntu, and shows how Head's view that personhood is not assumed but achieved, whether through communication and interactions between people, or with their environments in their totality (Ogude, 2018, p. 3) is indicated.

4.2. The Cardinals

The plot of *The Cardinals* is simple. A young woman has a baby, Miriam, which she cannot keep as she is to marry a man who is not the father of the child. Sarah and her partner agree to take the child and the mother drops her off. The young girl, Miriam, learns to read and write from an old man in the informal settlement, delighting in these new skills. When Miriam is ten, Sarah's partner tries to sexually assault the child and beats Sarah for intervening. Miriam runs away and wanders the streets of Cape Town. She is found by a man and taken to hospital where she is re-christened Charlotte Smith and placed with a foster family in the slums of Cape Town. Life is harsh, and moving from foster home to foster home affects her negatively, so that she becomes "more and more silent … almost to a point where no living being could reach her" (Head, 1993, p. 11). Only the final home in which she was placed is a safe place and the man and woman with whom she lived created a home that was "wonderfully peaceful and filled with a quality she had never experienced before: love and cooperation between a man and his wife" (Head, 1993, p. 11). The foster father encourages Charlotte to read: protest literature, about communism and Darwin's evolutionary theory featured. At sixteen, however, social support ends and she obtains work in a hair salon. As the result of an indignant letter to a

newspaper, she is offered a job with *African Beat* where she meets three men: Johnny, PK, and James. James is sly and taunts her; PK is condescending and paternalistic, and Johnny tries by all means to get her attention and nicknames her 'Mouse'. She and Johnny begin a love affair against the backdrop of events typical of apartheid South Africa and indicative of discrimination and repression. Much of the novella revolves around conversations and interactions between the characters, with a concentration on the relationship between Mouse and Johnny. As the reader learns more about the two and sees more of their affair, the stories of the two coincide and it becomes clear that the relationship is unwittingly incestuous. The ending is abrupt with neither of the characters realising the real nature of their relationship.

There is relatively little critical work which focuses on *The Cardinals*. There are references to the novella in general terms or to the additional pieces published with it in numerous articles, but mostly it is referenced as an aside to discussions of other texts (Agbo, 2021; for example, Coundouriotis, 2011; for example, Osei-Nyame Jnr, 2002; Villares, 2011; Zinato and Pes, 2013). Of particular interest, therefore, are the Daymond, Lewis and Gagiano pieces on the novella (Daymond, 2013; Gagiano, 1996; Lewis, 1996, 2007). However, these critics focus on the concurrences between the novella and Head's own life story. It is a difficult book to read, and as simple as it is, does not read only as the story of an incestuous love affair. It has a "scattered, far-flung, erratic writing style" (Gagiano, 1996, p. 47), with much of the content comprising conversations that do not always have a natural rhythm to them. Nonetheless, Gagiano feels that the text illustrates the "case for story-tellers and dreamers to be considered freedom fighters rather than romantic escapists" (Gagiano, 1996, p. 48). Lewis sees in the novella "allegories of the self" linking these to the fictional life story/ies Head had created for herself and seeing these as expressive of Head's and others' "particular fantasies of pasts and origins" (Lewis, 2007, p. 97). Unlike those who "have lambasted Head for her 'dishonesty'", Lewis sees in Head's inconsistent stories, in her fictions of self and mother, of madness and autobiography, the use of fiction to "convey epistemological truths" (Lewis, 2007, p. 100). Head's origin stories try "provocatively" to "unsettle many of the conventional South African codes through which political and artistic meanings are reproduced" (Lewis, 2007, p. 106). "*The Cardinals*," with which Head opens the text are in the "astrological sense" the "foundation for change" (1993) encapsulating "a cosmic energy that somehow exceeds political protest" (Lewis, 2007, p. 107).

For Gagiano, the "roughness" of the style of *The Cardinals* is its strength revealing that the text is "appropriate to the notion of aspiration (as a lifestyle)" which is its "hidden theme" (Gagiano,

1996, pp. 47–48). Johnny and Mouse engage continuously with each other and critically also with "the place and circumstances in, by and out of which they live" (Gagiano, 1996, p. 48). Gagiano argues that loving "involves politics down to the furthest recesses of the psyche" rendering the public/private distinction "the mark of the hypocrite" (Gagiano, 1996, p. 48). The text is an autobiographical response to Head's "severance from and ignorance of the identity and personality of her own father" and the incest in the novella "becomes in Head's hands a metaphor for recovery, in the full range of its meaning" (Gagiano, 1996, p. 55). It is not clear to me why this is the case, however, as we do not in the novella see any of the 'recovery' to which this critic refers.

Daymond proposes that the novella transmutes Head's "personal pain and fear into larger, impersonal forms of expression" (Head, 1993, p. x). The "annihilating rejection of a whole people" by the *Immorality Act* and the fact that Head herself was one of these children provides the rationale for the application of the incest taboo although in the novel she sees Head as making a case for the protagonists having "the right to love each other" (Head, 1993, p. xiii) as linking into the process of writing. The link between barriers to being a writer and an incestuous love affair is not an obvious one. The transition of the character from Miriam to Charlotte to Mouse – who speaks the words "How can you force me into something like this?" to Johnny – do not seem like those of a changed character facing a new beginning (Head, 1993, p. 137), but rather as someone aware that she is being coerced. The above analyses are useful and inform my reading.

Johnny claims he is training Mouse to be a writer. But he is an aggressive man with a constant undercurrent of violence in his interactions with her. His statement to Mouse: "You are part of me," is reminiscent of Catherine's cry about Heathcliff to Nellie in *Wuthering Heights*. As in Heathcliff's depiction, Johnny says of himself that he is a "disgusting, primitive man" (Head, 1993, p. 133), a "rapist, an alcoholic, … a crazy irrationalist" (Head, 1993, p. 131), and a "blasted donkey" (Head, 1993, p. 132). Heathcliff, has long been regarded critically as "bestial", is "redeemed through a reading that has him merely as 'an animal amongst other animals'" … [so that] Catherine's "famous cry 'I am Heathcliff' becomes a statement beyond binaries of transcorporeality" (Woodward, 2021, p. 299). In common, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Cardinals* depict love as a violence of sorts. The lovers in the *Wuthering Heights* face a violent and harsh natural context, and a cold and unloving home. The lovers in *The Cardinals* are surrounded by "a riot of violence and drunkenness" (Head, 1993, p. 4)), Johnny berates,

chokes, shouts at and slaps Mouse (Head, 1993, p. 132) and she bites him on the neck (Head, 1993, p. 133). In other instances, the violence is threatened: "You'd better hurry up or else I'll come in there and rip them [Mouse's clothes] all off" (Head, 1993, p. 136). Caroline Koegler (2021, p. 271) points to the "excessive levels of violence" in *Wuthering Heights*, whether verbal or physical or emotional, arguing that hatred becomes the "affective link" between the feminist concerns in the text, and the "colonial other inflicting anticolonial revenge and oppression on the British domestic scene: Heathcliff" (Koegler, 2021, p. 272). But it is not clear what the role of violence in the novella is, especially dressed as it is in the cloak of 'love'. Daymond argues that Head's application of the *Immorality Act* in the story shows that she takes "the risk of writing her profoundest angers in non-protest form" (Head, 1977, p. xiii).

It is this last statement on which I would like to expand. Accepting that Head is not a typical anti-apartheid or protest writer, a view she expresses in a letter to Patrick and Wendy Cullinan (28 September 1964):

> It's no longer S. Africa and protest writing. It's myself and myself alone that I have to present. A protest is an excuse, a cover up. I no longer have that and besides it's the lowest form of writing. Anyone can be justifiably indignant! How well I know that! But who am I? What the damned hell am I doing on this planet? Why? (Cullinan, 2005, p. 23).

It is not clear to me that the use of violence is linked to the workings of the *Immorality Act* and to the presumed 'violence' of being coloured in South Africa. She could, however, be commenting on the extremity of Johnny's views and on the intensity of the interactions presented in the text.

In addition to the overt comments on poverty and on the relegation of poor (black) people to the slums of Cape Town (Head, 1993, p. 10), there are the wider-ranging roots of a nascent alternative to 'protest' as rooted in a post-oppositional expression of love and in acts of ubuntu. *The Cardinals* opens with a clear allusion to the communal values of ubuntu. The old man who builds himself a shack in the settlement where the young Miriam lives has a habit of getting drunk. When drunk he would sing for long periods of time in an annoying, high-pitched voice. Despite their irritation with this, he was treated kindly by people:

> Usually such a display of individualism would have been violently repressed but the valuable service he performed for the community set him apart and protected him. The way his hands and body continuously trembled from age and dissipated living also warmed and softened their blind, brutal hearts and made them want to protect him (Head, 1993, p. 4).

The comment significantly introduces us to an underexplored tension in the text: that between the individual and the community. The old man provides a service to the community by writing letters on behalf of those who cannot; letters about birth, death and marriage (Head, 1993, p. 5). These are the very things that bind individuals and on which communities are based. They are the written forms of ubuntu's assertion that 'I am because you are'. In linking the old man with a community, and of the old man to the young girl to whom he is completely unrelated, there is a subtle hint at how 'community' will later be constructed in *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

Although the relationship between the old man and the young girl is only briefly described it is deeply significant. They are connected by the old man's ability to see the young girl's potential, a claim that Johnny too makes. When the old man passes *The Art of Letter Writing* to Mouse, there is a kinship between them, a lineage of those able to read and write, and to know and see what others cannot. The relationship is reminiscent of that between Sebina and Mazebe in *A Bewitched Crossroad* (Head, 1984, pp. 79, 80). Miriam, the young Mouse, is "hungry for words" and displays both "seriousness and purpose" (1993, pp. 8, 6), so too is the little boy with Sebina, a "wizard of learning" with a "precise and astonishing memory for all that had been taught to him" (Head, 1984, p. 80). The links between the old and the young and the passing along of wisdom and learning – whether of writing or otherwise – will become a core focus in the later texts. It is, the text suggests, a fundamental form of kinship but also, unlike Johnny's insistent invasion of Mouse's person, takes place from the basis of ubuntu, of love.

The 'threat' of individualism alluded to above is present also for Mouse. Since childhood she has been distinct from those around her. She stands out in her ability to read and write, and in the quiet stillness to which she retreats from the slums with the same "pattern of life … the weekends of drunkenness and violence and the crude, animal purposeless, crushing world of poverty" (Head, 1977, p. 10). She moves from one foster placement to another, ending with a family headed by a committed communist. Communism has "no meaning for her [but] … she

read avidly because of the excitement words and books had always stimulated in her" (Head, 1993, p. 11). What does have value for her are the visible connections between the man and his wife, and between them and the children they care for, including her. For a brief time, she is part of a warm and affectionate family, a community defined, if you will, by the works of two authors: Marx and Darwin. Mouse encounters the theory of evolution, enjoying the "precise and logical arguments and the quiet, ecstatic beauty of the language" (Head, 1993, p. 11). The family's connectedness, the language and the logic are the opposite of the chaos and disorder of violence and of the unnatural consequences of the harshness of poverty which "does not allow for respect between mother and child," as Mouse writes in her short story (Head, 1993, p. 38). Reading and writing given to Mouse by the old man are the means through which she is able to create order out of chaos.

What is also present in the novella is nature and the links between it and the characters which peek occasionally through the narrative. When Miriam learns to read it is not the slum context that is the backdrop, but nature: she "went behind the tree to puzzle over it and absorb it" (Head, 1993, p. 7). Later, when she has moved in with Johnny, she "happened to look up at the window and a few birds flew by with the sunset on their wings" which moves her to tears (Head, 1993, p. 73). The old man's death leads Miriam to realize "how little she could achieve on her own and how dependent she had been on the encouragement and guidance of the old man" (Head, 1993, p. 8). Thus, although underexplored in the novella and the critical responses thereto, the old man's impact on Mouse must not be underplayed. When Johnny says to Mouse, "How long do you think you can go on raking around in the muck without becoming muck yourself?" the young woman had not become part of the 'muck'. She had defined for herself from a young age a set of meaningful skills. For example, she was able to read and write, she got a job and lived (again, with elderly people) in a space conducive to reading and writing, spending all her earnings on books and on educating herself (Head, 1993, p. 12). When Johnny says to her, "A new way of life is emerging in Africa and you and I, and many others, fit in somewhere. Africa may not need us but we need a country like Africa" (Head, 1993, p. 71), it is the combined Miriam/Charlotte/Mouse, the little girl "possessed of an insatiable desire to learn to read and write" (Head, 1993, p. 8), who receives this comment and who uses the knowledge acquired initially from the old man in the slum, and from her readings of communism and Darwinism to express herself in text in ways that she cannot in speech.

It is precisely her self-sufficiency that allows her to survive, and it is despite the younger men in her life that she succeeds. Her stepfather is a would-be child rapist. Johnny is nerve-wracking and destructive. James taunts her and is sly and crude. PK is a bumbling, patronising and paternal man. Mouse is silent and impassive in the face of these characters in ways that she was not with the old man, to whom she expressed her glee and needs.

Against the dehumanising backdrop of apartheid, 'community' is inscribed in political action: "When something like this happens we all participate. Even the reluctant ones and the old men and women and children must participate" (Head, 1993, p. 81). Ubuntu is at play in Mouse's meeting with the man who helps with her unsuccessful search for a wheelchair for a story. He is a good man and despite Johnny's and James's suspicion has no ulterior motives. His attempt to get his grandmother's wheelchair fails because of his family. He says to Mouse that he is "the walking symbol of what they fear. Responsibility. Most people fear it" which prevents the world from progressing (Head, 1993, p. 36). Responsibility binds him to Mouse, but it also moves him away from his family. In this, a distinction between 'real' family and a constructed one (he and Mouse are alike) is hinted at. When Johnny says to Mouse, "Why don't you ask for help? You can't live it out on your own. It was not meant to be that way" (Head, 1993, p. 88), it is possible that this comment is about her relationship with him. As her interactions with the old man, and then later with the man in the car show, she does ask for or elicit help from others that she trusts. Even if the idea of a relationship between a man and woman is at the heart of the change envisaged for the cardinals in the novella, it is as the basis for integration into a community that is developed further in *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*.

The novella is 'bookended', first by Head's own prefacing statement that the cardinals establish the foundation for change. Second by its abrupt ending which reads as incomplete. Despite the opening assertion, *The Cardinals* does not deliver on the promise made either to the characters or its readers. It is not clear to us how or why change will result from their relationship, even if we accept that Mouse has changed. Mouse and Johnny do not know the nature of their relationship, only the readers are aware of that, and the text closes with Johnny's instructions to Mouse to remove her clothes, get into bed, and wait for him (Head, 1993, p. 136). The incestuous relationship is about to be consummated and, as a metaphor for Mouse having found her creative voice, it is an awkward one to say the least. *The Cardinals* does not succeed in the task it has set for itself. Head (1993, p. xvii) called it a 'funny book' and it is a 'rag-bag' in its parsing of issues of social injustice, its depictions of poverty, and the violence it induces. Although discussions of

the politics of the time are replete, the novel is not well crafted enough to expose any of the "disparities and paradoxes" inherent in " the idealist vision of human personality development" (Slaughter, 2009, p. 28).

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head's use of the novel becomes firmer and more articulate.

4.3. Setting a course: *When Rain Clouds Gather*

The plot of *When Rain Clouds Gather* is relatively straightforward and Head has resolved some of the weaknesses in plot and structure evident in *The Cardinals*. At one level, the novel revolves around the relationship between a man and a woman, and at another level it is the story of a community, and perhaps even a country. Makhaya, a black South African man, has fled the country as a result of his political involvement. He crosses the border to Botswana, where he meets an old man, Dinorego, whose presence and kindness lead to Makhaya's decision to stay in the village of Golema Mmidi. There he is introduced by Dinorego to an Englishman, Gilbert, whose expertise in agriculture has brought him to the village. Dinorego refers to Gilbert as his son, telling Makhaya that Gilbert's aim is to help everyone, and to improve everyone's lives. Gilbert has been in Botswana for three years as part of a cattle cooperative. He has an enemy in the village, Chief Matenge, who is an authoritarian troublemaker. Matenge has been placed in Golema Mmidi by his brother Chief Sekoto to keep him away from his affairs. Matenge and Gilbert disagree on the cooperative, and Matenge actively interferes in its workings so that the project is negatively impacted.

Dinorego introduces Makhaya to Gilbert in the hope that he will assist the Englishman. A conversation about the restrictiveness of tribalism between Gilbert and Makhaya persuades Gilbert to include Makhaya in the project. Makhaya uses his ability to speak Setswana to communicate the Englishman's knowledge of agriculture to the village's women. A disagreement over fencing livestock to prevent desertification leads Matenge to tell the villagers that Gilbert wants to make them slaves using these fences. Despite this, Gilbert persuades the elders that fencing is beneficial as is seen in his land. Their support angers Matenge who tries then to stir up trouble for Gilbert with Sekoto over the fact that Makhaya – a refugee – is working on his farm. Sekoto refers Matenge to the police, avoiding the issue. Makhaya is popular with the villagers, including with the policeman, George Appleby-Smith.

Mma Millipede, an older woman, takes a liking to the manner in which Makhaya engages with women.

Paulina Sebeso, a single mother in the village, is equally attracted to Makhaya. He is ignorant of this, and as a result unintentionally rejects her advances. Gilbert then asks Makhaya to instruct the village women on a millet project, which is when Makhaya notices Paulina. Paulina's eight-year-old son is based at the cattle post and in this way, Paulina is able to support herself and her daughter. The drought and resulting famine cause many cattle to die and many men return to the village. When Paulina checks on her son with Rankoane, a rancher, she discovers that her son was sent home two weeks previously, as he had been unwell. Paulina is distraught and sets out to find her son. She and Makhaya find her son's remains in an empty hut, and the entire village attends the boy's funeral. A week later, Paulina is summonsed to Matenge for the offence of failing to report her son's death.

A group of her friends that had gathered at her house to work decides to accompany her to Matenge's house. On the way others join the group, including Dinorego, Gilbert and Makhaya. As the crowd waits, Appleby-Smith arrives. Tired of waiting, Makhaya enters the house to find Matenge hanging from a rope. The policeman decides that Matenge committed suicide out of fear of the crowd and informs Sekoto of his brother's death. Makhaya is troubled by the death of Paulina's son, worrying about a world in which children die in this way. He decides that a new beginning with Paulina is apposite, and he proposes marriage to her, to which she readily agrees.

When Rains Clouds Gather begins the process of addressing personhood in Africa, proposing an alternative to the blindly bifurcated view as expressed in apartheid, but also for example, by aid workers (such as is explored in *A Question of Power* through the character of Camilla [Horst, 2021, p. 178]). The weaknesses of an oversimplified dualism of good/evil; back/white introduced in *The Cardinals* is expanded on in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The latter focuses on how western ideas (represented by the farming and other methods Gilbert brings to Africa) can be incorporated into or used by Africans such that they do not eclipse these.

There is a more substantial body of critical work on Head's first published novel. MacKenzie (1989a) argues that *When Rain Clouds Gather* demonstrates Head's desire to spotlight the ways in which tradition and tribalism are inhibiting, negative aspects of African life. MacKenzie sees

the text as a realist, pastoral novel (MacKenzie, 1989a, p. 13) which examines the "conflict between modernity and tradition". Expanding on the pastoral, Wilhelm (1983, p. 2) argues that the novel is a quest novel in which Makhaya seeks to 'belong' through a search for self and for a home. He steers a course "between unacceptable political ideologies" as the "quest moves beyond race, oppression, and anger encountered in its new inter-tribal forms" as he seeks to strike a balance "between man and woman, between aloneness and community" (Wilhelm, 1983, p. 2). The farm provides the metaphor for Makhaya's integration (Wilhelm, 1983, p. 5) in an "idealized semi-documentary form of the quest-pattern" (Wilhelm, 1983, p. 7).

Lewis points out that despite the image of Botswana as a homeland, Head was deeply critical of Botswana (Lewis, 2007, p. 128). As a result, it is necessary to appreciate Head's adoption of Botswana in the novel "stemmed not so much from her sense of literal security there as from a perception of its potential to offer rejuvenating symbolic and psychological meanings" (Lewis, 2007, p. 128). Botswana offered Head "images of alternative notions of liberation" which cannot be considered as simply pastoral (Lewis, 2007, p. 129). The novel allegorises Head's need to find a "liberating creativity and psychological and social freedom" (Lewis, 2007, p. 129) using concepts of "freedom that refuse loyalties of tribe, nationality and race" (Lewis, 1996, p. 130). The two relationships in the novel are "mutually sustaining human relationships" which defy "class, national and racial boundaries" (Lewis, 2007, p. 136), which suggest a "political rather than a romantic consummation for their union" (Lewis, 2007, p. 137). Dinorego and Mma-Millipede are "[a]rchetypal pastoral figures … who illustrate a fundamental supportiveness and tenderness that become central principles for humane relationships" (Lewis, 2007, p. 138). By drawing on specific notions of relationship Head implies that "efforts at social transformation without a holistic scrutiny of human attitudes and relationships cannot be substantively liberating" (Lewis, 2007, p. 139).

Billingslea-Brown (2010, p. 85) sees freedom in the text as rooted in "individual and communal empowerment". David Johnson argues that Head "combines a critique of Pan-Africanist apparatchiks with an optimistic image of Pan-Africanist ideals enacted in postcolonial Africa" (Johnson, 2019, p. 156). Head rejects the "trans-continental rhetoric of Pan-Africanism" in favour of "the village-based appeal of communitarianism" (Johnson, 2019, p. 156). Lauren Smith (1999, p. 63) sees Head's belief in the "divinity of the ordinary person most eloquently illustrated" in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Smith argues that the novel "turns most noticeably from the historical" not paying heed to South Africa "or to the Western colonial/neo-colonial

presence in any of its manifestations" (Smith, 1999, p. 63). Head, Smith argues, demonstrates a "faith in the supposedly objective vision of Gilbert's science and the universality of Mma-Millipede's religion - both, presumably, arising out of Western, colonizing discourses" (Smith, 1999, p. 67).

Given the presence of Jesus in Head's writing, Smith characterises these depictions as a "weapon in the fight against imperialism" which demonstrates the "creative power of African Christian converts" (Smith, 1999, p. 77). Similarly, Nicole Rizzuto (2020, p. 377) sees interpretations of the novel as realist as articulating a "(neo)colonial narrative of progress as a process of scientific instrumentalization and rationalization of African earth" (Rizzuto, 2020, p. 377). The novel "re-deploys Christian discourse … to cast doubt on its premises as well as the neocolonial development narrative" (Rizzuto, 2020, p. 381). Rather, she argues, Head's novels are in the genre of magical realism with *Maru* connecting the first (*When Rain Clouds Gather*) and third (*A Question of Power*) novels. Rizzuto sees in Head's novels evidence of Garuba's "re-enchantment of the world throughout contemporary African culture, politics, and economics" which incorporate science and technology into a magical worldview (Rizzuto, 2020, p. 380).[25]

Keeping in mind the above, there is an immediate difference between the opening scenes of *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *The Cardinals* as the (post 1995) reader moves from the urban slum that typifies South Africa to the rural village that will come in Head's texts to typify Botswana/Africa. From Head's perspective, Botswana is the

> most unique and distinguished country in the whole of Africa. It has a past history that is unequalled anywhere in Africa. It is a land that was never conquered or dominated by foreign powers and so a bit of ancient Africa, in all its quiet and unassertive grandeur, has remained intact there (Head, 1990, p. 66).

She uses Serowe in her stories because "Life in Botswana cannot be compared in any way to life in South Africa because people here live very secure lives, in a kind of social order shaped from centuries past by the ancestors of the tribe" (Head, 1990, p. 62) and because the "immense

[25] Cappelli (2021, p. 389) characterises the novel as Head's "most ethico-political" narrative which examines "the introduction of modern capitalism and patriarchal science against the haunting spectral of traditional tribal systems in pre-Independence Botswana". Cappelli opposes critics who argue for the collaboration of traditional and modern agriculture as a "healing gesture" or "humanitarian progress" (Cappelli, 2021, p. 2).

suffering black people experience in South Africa had created in me a reverence for ordinary people" (Head, 1990, p. 63). One constant between the urban and rural setting is extreme poverty, and in particular the villagers' responses to this.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the rural village is immediately visually different from the setting of *The Cardinals*, comprising circular huts on the border between South Africa and Botswana, an image that has come to be iconic of an 'African' setting. On one side of the border is South Africa with its speeding border police patrol vehicles and barbed wire fences and on the other side, Botswana and the "illusion of freedom" (Head, 2010, p. 1). Botswana is also, however, "the worst tribal country in the world" (Head, 2010, p. 5), a hyperbolic challenge to Makhaya that sets the tone for the novel. The rural setting is deliberate and connects Head directly to the creation of a re-conception of 'Africa' more than would the slums of the city, or the racial confines of South African cities, striated and controlled as they are by legislation permitting and denying access to people based on the colour of their skin. By Chapter Two of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the reader has been introduced to a range of people with different ethnic backgrounds, countries of origins, and skin colours.

Despite the shift from an urban to a rural setting, poverty is common to both. Poverty and ubuntu are linked as, as Peterson points out, a:

> refrain that underpins both the defenders and dismissers of ubuntu are the challenges presented by poverty, urbanity and individualism. Yet since the idea of ubuntu is premised on ethical conduct and moral equality that is not contingent on context and circumstance, some of its most profound progressive effects have been found among the poor and marginalized (Peterson, 2019, pp. 77–78).

Right at the outset, however, Head creates different kinds of 'Africa' or the 'African village'. Thus, once Makhaya crosses into Botswana, he encounters an old woman and her young granddaughter. He seeks shelter with them for the night, a request which is begrudgingly agreed to at a price. Once in the hut to which the old woman has assigned him, the young girl comes into the room and offers herself to him for money. The young girl is about ten, the same age as Mouse was in *The Cardinals* when her stepfather attempted to sexually molest her. Both Makhaya and the stepfather are South African. Makhaya, however, responds "fiercely" and sends the young girl away with the money that she expected to have made from the encounter.

He considers what could make the old woman act in such a way and thinks that it is a form of evil "created by poverty and oppression" but also, confusingly, blended with a "clinging, ancestral, tribal belief that a man was nothing more than a grovelling sex organ" (Head, 2010, p. 11). *The Cardinals* expresses a similar view, that poverty results in a crude, animal and purposeless world (Head, 1977, p. 10).

Complicating this, however, is that poverty is both a dehumanising force (as above) but also a didactic and instructive pressure which forces the characters into acts of ubuntu and to develop and respond in different ways. Head makes no link between poverty and morality as can be seen in the different responses of Makhaya and Mouse's stepfather. Poverty provides the catalyst through which Head explores people's characters, and different moral and ethical standpoints. The binary established by Head in the opening of the *WRCG* is soon collapsed: all the characters introduced are poor but there are key differences in the *community* contexts in which they are located. Thus the old woman and her granddaughter, unlike the old man in South Africa who is surrounded by the barking dog, the chatter of women, music and singing, and the crying of a child (Head, 2010, p. 2), are not part of a village. The old woman and the young girl are isolated, separated from community and it is perhaps this combined with their poverty which makes them grasping and corrupted.

Once over the border, Makhaya meets Dinorego, another poor person, who is an integral part of Golema Mmidi's community and life and who will become a central character in Makhaya's story. Dinorego recognises Makhaya as "a sociable man" (Head, 2010, p. 16). On learning that Makhaya comes from South Africa, Dinorego comments that it is a "terrible place" and that the "good God" does not like it. He contrasts it to Botswana which he terms "God's country" (Head, 2010, p. 17). What is significant about this exchange is that despite Dinorego's poverty and although Makhaya tells him he has no money, he extends an invitation to Makhaya to come and stay with him. In Dinorego's view, even a poor person such as he can be hospitable. As Peterson points out, a lack of hospitality is seen as a loss of ubuntu (Peterson, 2019, pp. 64–65), and the old man's insistence is expressive of ubuntu providing a framing reference for life in Golema Mmidi. Makhaya's 'place' in the village is determined by his connection to Dinorego and not by his embeddedness in the "intricate configuration of a patrilineal and segmentary lineage system that established relationships between immediate relatives and the extended family" (Peterson, 2019, pp. 64–65). Conversely, however, Makhaya's experience of South Africa is as described by Peterson – arranged by "homestead, age set, clan, and nation"

(Peterson, 2019, pp. 64–65) which Makhaya links to the worst aspects of tribalism. The counter- and under-currents present come to fuller expression later in the novel.

Makhaya's "strange new ideas" (Head, 2010, p. 11) are, it is proposed, the result of the perspective he obtained from living where "black men were called 'boy' and 'dog'" and other racial slurs (Head, 2010, p. 11). Through him, Head depicts South Africa as "mentally and spiritually dead through the constant perpetuation of false beliefs" (Head, 2010, p. 12). As Makhaya falls asleep he is aware that he may like it in Botswana, thinking to himself that "somehow he had come to the end of a journey" (Head, 2010, p. 13). In his meeting with Dinorego, Makhaya comes 'home' to a place where ubuntu of the sort offered by the old man and subsequently by others in the village speaks profoundly to the

> deep challenges that past injustices and brutalities (all a denial of the humanity of others) posed to the present and whether, as part of transitioning to a better future, other forms of healing, accountability, and redress could be achieved without further retribution (more violence and inhumanity) (Peterson, 2019, pp. 55–56).

In what ways does the text make this possible? Firstly, and as indicated above, the old man's Golema Mmidi is not one in which kinship or tribal ties predominate to determine membership or belonging. In this sense the village can be contrasted to the ways in which kinship in Makhaya's experience has served to separate him, the oldest son, from his sisters through a traditional insistence on "exaggerated respect" (Head, 2010, p. 11). In Golema Mmidi, kinship and tribal groupings have not been eradicated, but they have certainly been superimposed with other connections, notably those between "individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life" (Head, 2010, p. 18). How these connections are worked and reworked by Head to trigger change is what is especially interesting. A key element of this is in Head's application of kinship.

Two approaches to kinship and its links to tradition in the village are represented also by the two chiefs – paramount Chief Sekoto and his brother Matenge. Sekoto makes Matenge a chief in another village only to separate himself from Matenge and his negative machinations. Matenge however "really believed he was 'royalty'" (Head, 2010, p. 66), acquiring what he sees as the necessary objects to display this (a deep purple dressing gown and a "kingly chair") (Head, 2010, p. 66). Chiefly, conduct relates to the items rather than to the provision of

leadership. Matenge is overwhelmingly avaricious and unpleasant, a troublemaker, constantly attempting to expropriate the villagers' property, or banish those who disagreed with him (Head, 2010, p. 19). Chief Sekoto spends a great deal of time hearing appeals against his brother's rulings. Sekoto is chief by virtue of birth and is neither malicious nor a leader but rather a "play-actor on all occasions. He lived life with his face while his heart remained calm, empty and serene" (Head, 2010, p. 204).

Where is the leadership of the village to be found then? Head's answer to the question is not in the old, pre-determined forms of kinship-defined which chieftainship, for example, nor in the colonial administration's detached and lackadaisical approach to "this goddam country" (Head, 2010, p. 206), represented by George Appleby Smith. It appears rather to be in newly defined forms of African kinship, resulting from the "quiet and desperate revolution going on throughout the whole wide world", as a result of which

> people were being drawn closer and closer to each other as brothers, and once you looked on the other man as your brother, you could not bear that he should want for anything or live in darkness. Maybe he [Sekoto] knew nothing about this because this revolution belonged to young people like Gilbert and Makhaya (Head, 2010, p. 206).

It is in 'fictive' kinship relationships that new African realities and new ways of leadership (chieftainship) in the novel are forged. Leaving aside anthropological and sociological debates about definitions, the term 'fictive kin' usefully refers to people who identify as family but who are not actually related and who are ordinarily marginalised for various reasons (age, race, family structure and country of origin) (Nelson, 2013, p. 260). The connections depicted between the characters in the novel are about more than simply the love story or marriage between two men and two women. The links forged are directly expressed in familial, kinship terms. Dinorego tells Makhaya that Gilbert is his "own son" (Head, 2010, p. 24) despite being a white man with blue eyes. Given his immediate trust of and liking for Makhaya, he tells him he too will be his son. These relationships are later cemented with the marriage of Dinorego's daughter Maria to Gilbert, and of Paulina – another newcomer to the village – to Makhaya. Mma-Millipede, an older woman with a "long and close friendship" with Dinorego serves as putative mother, providing Makhaya with "mountains of affection" through her chatty interactions (Head, 2010, p. 77).

The ‘real’ familial links, such as those between Matenge and Sekoto, and which lead to chieftainship, ironically become less socially beneficial than the fictive kinship links we are shown. Chief Sekoto, for example, attends the funerals of poor people, even burying those who would otherwise not have a funeral and has built a school and a reservoir. But as chief, “he lived off the slave labour of the poor. His lands were ploughed free of charge by the poor, and he was washed, bathed, and fed by the poor, in return for which he handed out old clothes and maize rations” (Head, 2010, p. 20). The chief has become “a father figure but somehow thrust to one side, the accent being on nation rather than tribe” (Head, 2010, p. 61). Although Sekoto and Appleby-Smith conspire to approve Makhaya’s application for residence in Botswana, they have different reasons for doing so. Sekoto does it to annoy and frustrate his brother who is targeting Makhaya for being a refugee. Appleby-Smith asks Makhaya if he will stay away from politics to which he replies that he will do the right thing (Head, 2010, p. 65) as a result of which Appleby-Smith endorses not only his residence approved but also his place in the village and thus a new social structure is cemented.

Matenge’s exploitation of people in the village, his obsession with the ‘old’ order and the power he believes it confers on him is threatened by Gilbert and Makhaya. Progress implies loss for Matenge and he does everything he can to subvert and delay Gilbert’s farming and cattle cooperative (Head, 2010, p. 23). There is no ubuntu in Matenge’s way of life. The wise old man Dinorego, is a sage, an elder who sees the cooperative as an extension of the Motswana man’s way of life, of his intent to improve, to try new ideas (Head, 2010, p. 22). The old man’s defiance of Matenge’s way and Gilbert’s steadfastness draw Makhaya steadily into a newly defined community which excludes Matenge and includes more and more of those who gather around Dinorego and Gilbert.

Head’s creation of this new kinship structure comprising Dinorego and Mma-Millipede, Gilbert and Makhaya, and then Paulina and Maria straddles traditional structures and creates a sense of the future in which the poor would be able to meet their own needs. Paulina’s daughter’s mud village with all its intricacies and Makhaya’s additions of trees and grass are metaphorical of the interplay between the old and the new, the present and the future, and the local and the ‘foreign’. Notwithstanding the critics’ views on Gilbert’s approach to the development of Africa, everything he does is motivated by his desire to benefit the lives of the poor, an act of ubuntu and love for his fellow villagers. He acknowledges his limitations, realising that for change to happen the work would have “to follow the natural course of

people's lives rather than impose itself in a sudden and dramatic way from on top" (Head, 2010, p. 28). For Gilbert, Golema-Mmidi is Utopia (Head, 2010, p. 29). Through marriage, two 'brothers' – one black and one white – integrate into village life and a newly defined community, bringing in change and a vision of a future is different to that offered by others. Both seek this out, although for different reasons (Head, 2010, p. 30) and it is ultimately through their shared experiences that they connect (Head, 2010, p. 32).

Significantly, and unlike most other men in the village, Dinorego, Makhaya and Gilbert spend much of their time with the women of the village. In common with many other parts of Africa, the village was "for most of the year, a village of women with all the men away at the cattle posts" (Head, 2010, p. 33). The reality is that if things are to change it will depend on the women (Head, 2010, p. 43). Gilbert's ability to live in the same way as the ordinary villagers do is remarkable (Head, 2010, p. 39) and although everyone is initially suspicious of his motives – "for everyone from the chiefs down to the colonial authorities had lived off the poor in one form or another" (Head, 2010, p. 39), they soon realise that he is to be trusted. As Peterson points out, the colonial state and the move to more industrial societies displaced kinship from its previously central position. Despite this, kinship continues to govern subsistence (Peterson, 2019, p. 68). The novel reinstates a newly defined African kinship at the centre of village life, intrinsically linking it to tobacco and cattle farming with Gilbert and Makhaya leading the way for the villagers with the support of the sages, elders Dinorego and Mma-Millipede.

The new kinship web is what allows Gilbert and Makhaya to achieve personhood. Despite the fact that Gilbert is white, Makhaya is not Botswanan, Paulina is from the north, and so on, all have in the village become 'full' and fulfilled persons through their connections to others and the connection of this to an envisaged future. Writing on the difference between simply being human and becoming a person, Ramose (1999) points out that to be a person, a human "must, according to traditional African thought, go through various community prescribed stages, and be part of certain ceremonies and rituals" to *acquire* personhood (Ramose, 1999, p. 58). In Head's text, there are clear ceremonial markers of the transition from human to personhood, although these are not those traditionally prescribed. Examples in the novel include the marriages between Gilbert and Maria and Makhaya and Paulina; the 'adoption' of the two men by the two elders, Mma-Millipede and Dinorego; and the joining together of the village

community to support Paulina when she is summoned by Chief Matenge to defend herself against an unknown offence.

The inclusion of Gilbert and Makhaya into the world of Golema Mmidi which relies so heavily on the actions of Dinorego, and Mma-Millipede is based primarily on love and ubuntu. Those without ubuntu or love in the novel never integrate into the community and suffer a variety of negative consequences as a result. The principal example of 'non-personhood' offered is the character of Matenge, although Sekoto too is exemplary. In wide-ranging interviews with black South Africans, Christian Gade (2012, p. 498) discovers that it is possible to lose one's personhood, to "go outside the boundaries of ubuntu … [and be] labeled as an animal". Linked to this is that fact that in the Nguni languages,

> *Umuntu* is a person whether Mlungu, Indian or any living person. But ubuntu is something very much different. You can be *umuntu omhlophe* (white person) *umuntu omnyama* (black person) *ongenabuntu* (a human being irrespective of colour without humanity). Therefore humanity is within an individual. Some human beings do have ubuntu some don't (Gade, 2012, p. 495).

Golema Mmidi is "a village of commoners" (Head, 2010, p. 45) who are willing to show their ubuntu and some who are not. But ubuntu and the ability to be a person because of others is not limited to black Africans. The novel makes clear that Gilbert's obsession with the poor is driven by his desire, perhaps for 'progress' as he defines it, but certainly also for others with whom he engages: the women and children of the village who need food to eat, "better housing, water supplies and good education" (Head, 2010, p. 110). In Appleby-Smith's interactions with Makhaya too there are aspects of ubuntu and his decision to assist Makhaya is driven not only by his enjoyment of frustrating Matenge and pleasing Sekoto, but also by a shared humanity ((Head, 2010, p. 65).

4.4. Forms of love

Taken together, the two novels depict some of the different kinds of love Head experiments with fictionally. The early portrayals of love in *The Cardinals* give it the power to transform but also to damage. Broadly, the novella sets out two kinds of love: a raw and rough sexual engagement with no emotion or feeling and, we are supposed to believe, that of Johnny and

Mouse. The problem is that Johnny is a strange character and his love for Mouse is not always appealing – neither to Mouse nor to the reader. He is manipulative and bullying at the same time as he is supportive and enabling of Mouse's skills as a writer. He wants not only to possess her intellectually, but also physically. He says to Mouse "you might prefer to believe that love is moonlight and rosy sunsets. It is not. It is brutal, violent, ugly, possessive and dictatorial" (Head, 1993, p. 103). Jonny's kind of love is in his own words, "destructive" and linked to his "sense of purpose" (Head, 1993, p. 103).

Love changes form dramatically in the second novel. The narrator in *When Rain Clouds Gather* comments that "you have to be loved a bit by the time you die" (Head, 2010, p. 208) and in this novel love becomes more nuanced, with more possible variations, although not yet with the power for change it will begin to have in *Maru*, for example. Makhaya recognises that he needs to wait "until he lost his hate" (Head, 2010, p. 153). Mma-Millipede is depicted as capable of a deep and all-encompassing love. Her love gives ubuntu form: Her home attracts all the children of the village, and she feeds and takes care of them, at the risk of impoverishing herself (Head, 2010, p. 75). She prefaces her sentences with the expression "'Batho,' which means, 'Oh, People," and may be used to express either sympathy, joy, or surprise" (Head, 2010, p. 76), drawing all into her warmth. Mma-Millipede is concerned about the kinds of love that she sees around her. One kind of love is possession, as in Ramogodi, Mma-Millipede's husband, whose desire to own his brother's wife resulted in suicide and alienation from his own son (Head, 2010, p. 74). Another is represented by the meaningless physical relationships and which Mma-Millipede grudgingly prefers to a second "more serious and more rare" which leads to women's mental breakdown and suicide (Head, 2010, p. 109). In this form of love, ostensibly the more typically 'romantic', the women adore men not worthy of such a love. Interestingly, this love involves only two people and its potential for destruction inheres in its form.

Mma-Millipede's love is none of these and, at first, Makhaya experiences her love as odd, as "too extreme. It meant that if you loved people you had to allow a complete invasion by them of your life" (Head, 2010, p. 77). Despite this, after interacting with her he quickly realises that it is this love that will "undo the complexity of hatred and humiliation that had dominated his life for so long" (Head, 2010, p. 77). Makhaya's views on love are complex. He has experienced the Johnny-type love, primarily directed at him by women for whom he has no respect. Early in the novel he comments on this saying: "if love was basically a warmfire in

you, you attracted all the cold people, who consumed your fire with savage greed, leaving you deprived and desolate" (Head, 2010, pp. 30–31). Mma-Millipede's love is ubuntu made real. For example, in her feelings for Gilbert: she "adored him, as she identified him with her own love of mankind" (Head, 2010, p. 108).

From Makhaya we learn that Matenge suffers from a lack of love. He sees in Matenge "the face of a tortured man", being destroyed from the inside out: "the icy peaks of loneliness on which the man lived had only experienced the storms and winters of life, never the warm dissolving sun of love" (Head, 2010, p. 69). Without the ubuntu/love needed to move outside of the binary view he has of himself vis-à-vis the villagers, and white and black, Matenge is unable to progress or change and commits suicide.

How Head handles the love between two individuals when she has already indicated that it is problematic is represented in Paulina's and Makhaya's relationship. Paulina says that she wants a man who is not a "cesspit" (Head, 2010, p. 125) and her view of love and what she sees in Makhaya represents an integration of the individual, physical love/lust with its more metaphysical aspects:

> It never really mattered what kind of man he was or the magnitude of his faults and failings. It was just enough that her feelings be aroused and everything would be swallowed up in a blinding sun of devotion and loyalty. Of course, if she were to find a man who accidentally managed to gain the respect of the whole world at the same time, then this loved one could magically become ten thousand blazing suns (Head, 2010, p. 84).

Makhaya is unaccustomed to being "adored" and sees Paulina's love as "patient and waiting" unlike "plain sexual passion [which] banged everything about" (Head, 2010, p. 156). Although he singles her out for attention, he is also "in a mood just then like a little girl" such as Paulina's daughter (Head, 2010, p. 156). Thus, this love is not like the love that leads to suicide as it draws in family in a positive way. Unlike the stepfather and the young Mouse in *The Cardinals*, Makhaya's connection to Paulina's little girl is fatherly and protective, respectful of her creations and her creative space (Head, 2010, pp. 156–157).

Another kind of love is that between Maria and Gilbert. This is a quiet kind of love which is no less intense for its lack of show, and which is linked not only to the personal feelings they have for each other but also to the role they will play in the community. Maria reassures Mma-Millipede that her love for Gilbert is real, saying "I don't care about myself, but nothing must harm Gilbert" (Head, 2010, p. 98). Maria's love includes a "wide streak of unselfishness" (Head, 2010, p. 91) which makes space for Makhaya's and Gilbert's friendship to flourish. Such loves are shown to be inclusive rather than exclusive and to enable and support the development of other relationships in their scope.

Clearly then love is about family as revealed in the comments about family life in the village. Gilbert wants to recreate 'real' family life with men in the village (Head, 2010, p. 129) to redress some of the imbalances created by the colonial system. Paulina sees the importance of family in Makhaya remarking that a love for children is traditional unlike in this "country of fatherless children" (Head, 2010, p. 133). It is when Makhaya learns that Paulina's son may be dead that he acknowledges his love for her, love and pain are mingled in this realisation (Head, 2010, p. 178), but it is love that spurs him to help her, as she should not face the tragedy alone (Head, 2010, p. 179). Makhaya's relationship with Paulina brings him to the realisation "that it was only people who could bring the real rewards of living, that it was only people who give love and happiness" (Head, 2010, p. 185). Love allows Makhaya to come to terms with being part of society and it is ubuntu that is the base of his re-personalisation – he "needed a woman and children" (Head, 2010, p. 187).

The many forms of love portrayed serve the same end: to bind people together, creating families and consequently a communal web. Love is a "warm outflowing stream", the only counter to the "hollow feeling" in Makhaya's core (Head, 2010, p. 145). Makhaya learns from the elders that he "was a lover of his fellow man" (Head, 2010, p. 147), taking Mma-Millipede's advice to "never, never put anyone away from you as not being your brother" (Head, 2010, p. 146). Brotherly love defines Makhaya's and Gilbert's relationship, with Gilbert calling Makhaya his 'thousandth man' after the Kipling poem (Head, 2010, p. 96). Such love is founded on mutuality, fulfilling them both. It is "an invisible bond," despite Makhaya being a "single, separate and aloof entity" (Head, 2010, p. 106). Although Paulina wonders what Makhaya would love in her, she is presented as his perfect partner, just as Gilbert is Maria's. In both cases, women are not used to men who do not treat them as women, and it is in the common purpose of the work of the village that they forget this (Head, 2010, p. 119).

Love creates new connections, such as in Makhaya's bewilderment at his response to Gilbert, not as a white man, but as someone able to fill him with "a sudden flood of relaxed warmth" (Head, 2010, p. 139). Nonetheless the limitations of love are present in the text, as in Makhaya's grappling with its limits as a catalyst for change:

> There was this curious philosophy. 'Violence breeds hatred and hatred breeds violence. Hatred can only be defeated by love and peace.'
> But had Hitler been defeated by love and peace? (Head, 2010, p. 151).

He questions the love ostensibly at the core of Christianity and which would permit for 'forgiveness' of the sins committed against black or Jewish people (Head, 2010, pp. 151–152).

4.5. Conclusion

Of the two novels surveyed in this chapter, *When Rain Clouds Gather* contains nuggets of how love will be used to undermine the binaries implicit in the worldviews Head traverses in the novels: racism, the treatment of women, aspects of tradition; and modern life in Africa. Despite incongruities and contradictions in the novella and the novel there is a clear coalescence around love and acts of ubuntu as the catalysts for change. The placement of love shifts in the later novels, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, where it is accorded even more power to subvert oppression and tyranny. In Head's last three texts (*The Collector of Treasures*, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, and *A Bewitched Crossroad*), the emphasis shifts from love to (re)created histories and the possibilities of using these as the basis for a re-envisioned future. In one of Head's 'meditations', "Earth and Everything", she clarifies her fixation on love as follows:

> Love is not anything I imagined it to be. Now I rapidly change my views, theories and absurd flights of fancy. I have to ... Love itself is real; at least this love; as real as fresh warm bread, butter and cheese. … So is love: enclosed and safe, renewing, healing the scars, the overpowering need for fulfilment, completeness (Head, 1993, p. 140).

Head's post-oppositional stance gives rise to fictional depictions of love and ubuntu in a variety of permutations, each of which animates a different aspect of her vision. Limited most significantly to individuals in *The Cardinals*, in *When Rain Clouds Gather* it more clearly

articulates as ubuntu, demonstrating that it is “contact with other living beings that a man needed most” (Head, 2010, p. 188).

In conclusion, Head uses love in the text as a lever for change at several levels: individual, family and community or village. Through love and ubuntu, intertwined and interdependent love serves as the narrative tool through which Head subverts some of the binaries implicit in ways of seeing: old and new, religion and politics, love and power, kinship, and the personal and social. Her novels propose alternative conceptions of human dignity, personhood and community drawing on the realities she presents in her texts. Constructed from a wide range of philosophical bases, none of which references rights, Head’s writing depicts Ogude’s pragmatic approach to personhood, as a

> process of deliberate and careful negotiation between those values rooted in communal ethos and those that seek to reach out for individuality and associated elements of freedom to choose and act as free agents of change (Ogude, 2018, p. 260).

Head’s active search for alternatives to writing about protest against apartheid begins with these early fictional efforts to transcend explicit and implicit binaries. “Why do I write?” asks Head, “I write because I have authority from life to do so” (Eilersen, 2001, p. 57). Her writing directly responds to the fact that when people are “faced with a power structure that attempts to destroy their humanity, [they] find ways and means of keeping their humanity intact” (Eilersen, 2001, p. 63). Paradoxically, despite the individual nature of the love in these early novels, the narratives undermine individualist presumptions: it is only when Makhaya accepts love and kinship from the elder sages and acts in keeping with ubuntu that he achieves personhood and becomes an integrated member of the family/community.

Chapter 5: Is love really enough?
Maru and *A Question of Power*

5.1. Introduction

I have argued that in the first four novels, Head offers love as the basis from which ubuntu and personhood are effected, and individual and communal change achieved, as social connections are forged, and people become people through their love-forged interactions with others. The personal and communal dominion of love in the first two novels becomes in the second two novels (discussed in this chapter) a lever of change more valuable than rationality or reason, able to exert a force at universal and metaphysical levels. In this chapter I show how Head expands love from individuals and defined communities, giving it a more expansive and universal reach. I show also how these two novels anticipate the changes in Head's three later publications. Maru and A Question of Power pose the question of whether love and acts of ubuntu as set out in these novels can perform the transformational work Head ascribes to these.

In *The Cardinals*, the goal of love for the individuals concerned is implicit in its link to creative production although whether it succeeds or not remains unaddressed. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, a new form of kinship connects people in a community made real through love and acts of ubuntu. In *Maru* and *A Question of Power* love is presented more overtly as having a power distinct from linear and binary ways of thinking as both the characters and the readers are challenged to appreciate its ability to effect change. In these novels, love is also depicted as work, a link present in various forms across all four novels and an element identified in much of the critical work. There are detailed discussions of artistic production in *Maru* and gardening as creative process in *A Question of Power*, providing excellent and extensive analyses (for example, Agbo, 2021; Coetzee, 1999; Counihan, 2011; Darlington, 2007; Dieke, 2007; Horst, 2021; Olaogun, 1994; Rizzuto, 2020; Talahite, 2005).

In this chapter, I examine how the novels explicate the workings of love and acts of ubuntu against power, particularly where it is put to discriminatory and oppressive use. Love and ubuntu are presented as post-oppositional possibilities for Africanism that Head reworks more fully in the final three texts, and of a substantive African personhood that is incorporative and embracing of difference and a fundamental predicate for broad social change. In these two

novels love is directed at the enormity of abuses of power across the entirety of history, as is seen in the examples of racism, oppression and discrimination that are parsed in the texts. *A Question of Power*, for example, traverses apartheid South Africa (Head, 1974, pp. 44, 45, 47), Hitler's abhorrent treatment of Jewish people (Head, 1974, p. 47), and international development aid work as expressive of a new racism or colonialism in the guise of assistance (Head, 1974, pp. 75–76).

Head makes clear the post-oppositional stance that to rely on the false binaries of race is an insufficient starting point for an analysis of power, creating intense confusion when applied as the means of coming to know the world. In *Maru*, oppressor and oppressed are black Africans. In *A Question of Power*, Hitler and the Jewish people he targets are white. In seeking to get to the heart of what lies at the base of racism, oppression and discrimination, Head looks to a means to create:

> a *new race* of people – not nations or national identity as such but rather people who are a blending of all the nations of the earth. Its beginnings are already there so I do not see any of this as being forced on people, but that it is the natural outcome of mankind's slow spiritual unfoldment over the centuries (Head, 1990, p. 100, emphasis added).

In rejecting simplistic, dichotomous views of oppressed and oppressor, Head displaces racial and other binaries. In the two novels her conception of 'race' is further complicated as, in addition to de-linking racial identity from the cause of oppression, she replaces it with characteristics and attributes of the *type* of person her new race will comprise. In this new 'race', persons are not simply humans. They are, rather, defined by the extent to which they demonstrate their ability to move outside of typical and restrictive binaries, creating new futures and possibilities. In this view, African is not a racial designation but a position adopted towards the world, in which what and who is African depends on the adoption and discharge of love and ubuntu in all interactions.

The spiritual unfolding to which Head refers above is narrativised in the texts as love/ubuntu. In some ways, this view is similar to that expressed by Sobukwe. He wrote that hate can never be a driver of change because "[i]t is too exacting. It warps the mind. That is why we preach the doctrine of love, love for Africa" (Pogrund 1991, p. 36). His view on race is equally

pertinent: "… there is only one race to which we all belong and that is the Human Race. In our vocabulary, therefore, the word race, as applied to man, has no plural form" (Pogrund 1991, p. 92). Similarly, a love for Africa is linked to Head's vision of a new human race. The PAC rejected the multiracialism of the ANC believing that racial groups could not engage in the struggle against apartheid without whites and Asian people taking control. Multiracial thinking, in their view, reinforced "racial thinking because, even while it posited the coming together of racial groups, it did so on the basis of the existence of different racial groups, thus perpetuating the notion of racial separateness" (Pogrund, 1991, p. 100). Head's views differ from this, as she moves outside of a conceptualisation of race and recasts a new race as 'beyond' existing racial categories. In "Africa" Head writes "Sometimes, to spite you all, we think about white men, yellow men, green men, but they are never real. It is you [Africa] whom we love and you who are real to us, and through whom we seek all things" (Head, 1993, p. 142).

One of the paradoxical results of the PAC's thinking was that despite proclaiming there is no such thing as race, they simultaneously asserted that only some people are African, based primarily on the colour of their skin. Head had encountered the problematics of this view when she had been told by PAC adherents that, as a coloured South African, she was not black enough to be considered African. In her writing, she rejects "damn white, damn black" (Head, 1990, p. 6) and inserts in its place an African 'race' to which membership is accorded on the ability to enact love and ubuntu.

To many a post-oppositional resort to love is fanciful, even irrational, the result perhaps of the fact that "[f]rom Plato until the present, with a few notable exceptions, reason rather than emotion has been regarded as the indispensable faculty for acquiring knowledge" and that which is 'rational' stands in opposition to the emotional (Jaggar, 1989, p. 151). In a dual view such as this, reason is associated with the "mental, the cultural, the universal, the public and the male" and emotion is what is "irrational, the physical, the natural, the particular, the private and, of course, the female" (Jaggar, 1989, p. 157). In the context of ubuntu, however, love – or common feeling - is not irrational, nor is it in opposition to anything, it is in fact its basis (Tshivhase, 2018).

Making a similar link between love and ubuntu using its Kiswahili form, *utu*, Kai Kresse argues that love is a "regulative principle" which places moral demands on people, the primary basis of which is that "If you want to live in peace with others, you have to give such love" (Kresse,

2011, p. 255). Of particular relevance to Head's use of the concept of ubuntu is Kresse's comment that in this view:

> If you want the ideal world to have a chance to come about, you have to act as if you were already part of it. This conveys what could be called a circle of the moral sphere:... In such a way, through our moral imagination, we can be aware of an ideal love, and use it for our orientation when seeking to behave as moral beings (Kresse, 2011, p. 255).

Head's use of love/acts of ubuntu is a direct response to the problem of race and identity and the future of Africa. Bhekisizwe Peterson observes that it is in times of crisis that ubuntu is referenced by artists who act as a society's "moral barometers … exploring the instances of moral good or decay in society" (Peterson, 2019, p. 57). He could be discussing Head when he comments that "wrestlings with alienation and the search for personhood and ethical conduct" serve as "framing templates", bringing into relief the "layered textures and problematics" which are multiple and complex intercessions" which disrupt the colonial and apartheid narratives that deride Africans based on their race (Peterson, 2019, p. 58).

Unlike an oppositional consciousness which "represents a binary either/or epistemology and praxis that structures our perceptions, politics" (Keating, 2013, p. 2), post-oppositionality "question[s] the long-term effectiveness of … oppositional politics and thinking" which limits the possibilities of change and transformation (Keating, 2013, p. 3). Opposition to discrimination neither disables nor prevents it and may in fact serve to entrench definitions of self and society as antagonistic, reducing our ability to see connections (Keating, 2013, p. 3). Post-oppositional approaches to socially valuable work require that we move away from dichotomous frameworks that focus on difference and which are exclusionary, underemphasising commonalities. Engagements with dichotomies must take us "in new directions" (Keating, 2013, p. 4), toward compromise, generating "innovative hybrid perspectives that draw from strikingly different views" (Keating, 2013, p. 7). By expressly moving away from a traditional view of racism as a question of white versus black or black versus white, Head's works interrogate the value of the dichotomy itself.

5.2. A philosophy of love in and for Africa

The difference between how love functions in *The Cardinals* and *When Rain Clouds Gather* and in *Maru* and *A Question of Power* vests in the narrative use to which it is put and the suggestion as to how it will solve the problems posed. In both novels, the focus of love remains intensely personal – as in individual, invisible to others, in the mind, imagination, or dreams – but it is simultaneously and almost limitlessly externalised, extending beyond the person and the community and into 'the world', corporeal, philosophical, and spiritual. Love extends beyond the lovers and impacts and undermines the fundamental constructs of race and racism (*Maru*), good and evil, god and the devil.

Head's use of the love story goes beyond using as narrative closure. Megan Rogers (2015, p. 68) notes that feminist critiques of heterosexual love as "closure and patriarchal hegemony" revealed two possible endings for nineteenth century women writers: love and marriage, or death. Twentieth century women writers, conversely, subverted these conventions by developing narrative strategies that questioned romance plots and narratives (Rogers, 2015, p. 68). In the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the limbo in which Antoinette is placed at the end of the novel subverts the typical trope of personal growth (Rogers, 2015, p. 71), creating an "eternal madwoman" and removing their agency (Rogers, 2015, p. 73). Head undermines this feminist trope, by re/integrating the madwoman into the community, in ways that redefined and are bounded by acts of love as achieved through principles of ubuntu. Dualistic views of race, identity and the value of human life are depicted as the insanity, fictionally limiting the possibilities available to the author. South Africa, Head writes, has "no great writer: no one can create harmony out of cheap discord" (Head, 1990, p. 103). Removing the binaries removes the source of the discord, bringing into being fictional and hence real alternatives to such bifurcated views of the world. Head uses love as a "force for social change", in a manner which is not about forgiveness (such as for Tutu) or any nationalistic fervour, but a desire to "form the world" in a "furnace in which new possibilities are forged and brought out of the imagination into lived reality" (Erasmus, 2017, p. 138) and which fosters social justice (Erasmus, 2017, p. 139). Head begins in her first four novels to reconstruct and reconceive Africa, an approach which is extended in the last three texts (*The Collector of Treasures*, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, and *A Bewitched Crossroad*).

In seeking to give voice to her re-visioning of Africa, Head introduces a group of sage philosophers, characterised by their capacity to express the acts of love and ubuntu essential to re-envisioning Africa's past, present and future. In "*Africa*" published alongside *The Cardinals*, Head writes:

> It is as though pain piles on pain in an endless, unbroken stream, until it is the only reality. What do they do, those who love? My world is too subjective and cannot compel me to attempt the satiation of those insatiable desires, longings and urges that harass and harass me. … so be what you are: Africa - the silent, cruel and fickle lover with two sides, and two faces: bland and smiling, and twisting and deceiving, giving all and yet giving nothing. It is not you who needs me, but I who need you: the part of your masculinity that is covered by layer and layer of restraint and tradition (Head, 1993, pp. 141–142).

Head links both the rejection of racism and the freedom of Africa to her own creative possibilities as a writer:

> Without the liberation of Africa, it would have been a super-human impossibility to release the energies, potentials and possibilities of my individuality.
> At least the road is clear now. I am a part of ordinary mankind the world over, and no living man, woman or government can deprive me of it. I am neither above nor below any other man and, as I consider my life to have value and usefulness, so do I have respect and consideration for the value and usefulness of the lives of my fellow men. Though I live in Africa, I do not wish to be cut off, through hatred and fear, from any part of mankind (Head, 1993, pp. 146–147).

The intrinsic nature of the association between Africa, racism and Head's sense of self as a writer is clear. She links revolution and change to "ordinary people insisting on their rights" but also to love as intrinsic to change in her hope that "great leaders will arise there who remember the suffering of racial hatred and out of it formulate *a common language of human love* for all people" (Head, 1990, p. 103, emphasis added). At the root is her view that "African independence had to be defined in the broadest possible terms" (Head, 1990, p. 85), and unlike those authors she sees writing in "reaction against the humiliation of the colonial era" she wishes to "build up an image of Africa" that is "the humble humility of the sparsely furnished

hut" (Head, 1990, p. 79). Her books, she says, were "propelled into existence by the need to create a reverence for human life in an environmental and historical circumstances (sic) that seems to me a howling inferno" (Head, 1990, p. 77). Head's writing is explicitly, deliberately and expressly African and no less universal for this, as the "reach of … [her] preoccupations became very wide" (Head, 1990, p. 67).

5.3. *Maru*

The simple plot of *Maru* is as follows: a baby is born to a Masarwa woman, who dies. The body of the deceased woman and the new-born baby are found by the roadside. Margaret Cadmore is a missionary who oversees the preparation of the dead woman's body for burial. She takes in the baby and calls her Margaret Cadmore too. The baby is raised in the missionary's home where she is treated with kindness and provided with an excellent education. Her results are superb, and it is as a result of her excellent performance that she is employed as a teacher in the small village of Dilepe. Margaret Cadmore, the elder, returns to the United Kingdom. The novel opens with the young Margaret Cadmore's arrival in the village. Although Margaret appears to be 'coloured', she acts in accordance with her adoptive mother's instruction to never deny that she is a 'Masarwa'. The Masarwa are treated badly by most people in Botswana. As a teacher, she is assured of some status, although the contrast between her status as a teacher and her status as 'Masarwa' causes conflict in the novel.

A teacher at the school, Dikeledi, is the sister of the future paramount chief, Maru. Moleka is Maru's best friend and is also a 'totem' – a member of a chiefly family – and Dikeledi is in love with him. The three interact with Margaret in various ways: Dikeledi becomes her friend, Moleka falls instantly in love with her, and Maru decides she is to be his wife and he will give up the chiefship in order to marry her. Margaret is caught in a struggle between Moleka and Maru both of whom claim to love her. Both Moleka and Maru have 'Masarwa' slaves who work for them. Through their interactions with Margaret, these characters influence the villagers. They each in their own way defy what is expected of them with respect to the supposed inferiority of 'Masarwa' people. Maru's and Margaret's marriage at the end of the novel are symbolic of the changes to racial prejudice in Botswana.

Critical reactions to *Maru* have addressed a range of approaches to the text. From magical realism to the "otherworldly" to contributing to "debates about identity politics in post-

apartheid South Africa" and revisionist writings on the "San [which] have become increasingly pivotal subjects" (Lewis, 2007, p. 162), the novel is seen as intervening in contemporary cultural politics (Lewis, 2007, p. 163). Others have read the text as reflective of Head's personal life and of her "great stress and depression" (Lionnet, 1993, p. 146). Receptions of Head as 'deviant' and as projecting a "society of her own" in which this is not the case are also in play (Nixon, 1993, p. 113). Related to this are broad questions of identity such as that presented by Dieke (2007), and the insider/outsider status of both Margaret and Maru (Katrak, 1995, p. 71). Olaogun sees the novel in psychological terms, as portraying in fictional form the "specific ambiguities engendered by the Botswana and South African historical conditions" (Olaogun, 1994, p. 70) akin to schizophrenia.

Other approaches include Joshua Agbo's reaction to *Maru* as expressive of the "theme of black-on-black prejudice … the unifying trajectory that runs throughout [Head's] fiction" which in keeping with exile literature indicates how "identities are brought into question in a place of constant struggle to re-occupy the space that colonial rulers have at least partially vacated" (Agbo, 2021, p. 32). Akin to this is Paulette Coetzee's critique of irony as Margaret's "imprisonment" becoming the "vehicle for liberation" (Coetzee, 1999, pp. 72–73). Zeleza links patriarchal to racial domination (Zeleka, 1997, p. 29), and Yakini Kemp sees the novel as a capitulation to popular romance (Kemp, 1988, p. 9). In Kathryn Geurts's view, Maru and Margaret illustrate how people transcend "caste prejudices and interact as individual human beings" (Geurts, 1986, p. 52). Good and evil, Maru and Moleka, the moon and the sun, neither partner in the binary is "wholly good or evil" (Johnson, 1986, pp. 63–64). For Stobie, the novel contests the nature/nurture debate and the "rhetoric surrounding Westernised biological discourse" and "characters' hearts and bloodstreams grow to signify an interconnected vitality" (Stobie, 2022, p. 17). Margaret's rapid assimilation into village life is evidence of Head's new type of universal personality (Stobie, 2022, p. 17).

Approaching the novel from the perspective of love and ubuntu illuminates the similarities between *Maru* and *The Cardinals*. Just as Johnny expresses his vision for Mouse's life through his love for her, it is Maru's "vision of a new world that slowly allowed one dream to dominate his life" (Head, 2010, p. 223). This dream – expressed as love for Margaret – will wash the earth "clean of all the things he hated" (Head, 2010, p. 223). There are instances of ubuntu in action in the novel, such as in the interactions between Josh and Margaret Cadmore, when he helps her to find food, and tells her kindly, although perhaps incorrectly, "You must not be so

afraid of the world, Mistress … People can't harm you" (Head, 2010, p. 236). Another example is in Dikeledi's rejection of "sham" (Head, 2010, p. 239) which allows her instantly to connect to Margaret's needs, stepping in to care for her and find her accommodation (Head, 2010, pp. 240–241). Ranko too is drawn to help Margaret when she 'loses' her handbag and cannot find her way home (Head, 2010, pp. 262–263).

Love is an overriding and ever-present 'watermark' in the novel. In the opening pages, we learn of the "two rooms" of love: Margaret's love for Maru and her simultaneous and yet 'invisible' (except through her dreams) love for Moleka. These two rooms are carefully and continuously curated by Maru to ensure that Moleka's love for Margaret is contained. Maru impedes this love because and until, in his perspective, he knows whether Moleka's love for Margaret is greater than his own, or whether it is simply that Moleka has greater power. Power cannot be trusted because it "could parade as anything" (Head, 2010, p. 225). The novel introduces an inherent strain between love and power that is explored in greater detail in *A Question of Power*. In *Maru*, it is expressed as follows: if Maru is proved wrong and Moleka's love for Margaret is a greater love, then he foresees that he would have to "surrender his wife to Moleka" (Head, 2010, p. 225). If it is just greater power, then there will be no need for Maru to step back. By implication, power cannot be stronger than love. But they do war with one another. In the post-oppositional state, love is like Maru and Margaret's marriage. It is neither fixed nor immutable and it is precisely the precariousness of its state that instigates and requires Maru's constant attention and control. Like Johnny, Maru is also not the perfect lover. When overwhelmed by jealousy, he is vicious and malicious, telling Margaret that she is not important to him (Head, 2010, pp. 223, 225). In this reading of love, it is important which kind of love it is as, when it is centred on a person as its object, it is not the kind of love that will effect change. When it is about the love itself and he is feeding this love as when he calls Margaret "my sweetheart" (Head, 2010, p. 225), then that love perpetuates the new world and counters the ugliness of racism:

> They were the most precious of words, if only you know the horror of what could pour out of the human heart; a horror that seemed most demented because the main perpetrators of it were children and you were a child yourself. Children learnt it from their parents… Before the white man became universally disliked for his mental outlook, it was there. … your outer appearance reduces you to the status of a non-human being (Head, 2010, p. 226).

Undoing the linearity of love and change that characterises *When Rain Clouds Gather*, in Maru the acts of love/ubuntu and the acts that are their racist and oppressive opposites work together to catalyse the changes that need to occur between the Batswana and the 'Masarwa'. Margaret's spoken and conscious love for Maru and her unspoken love for Moleka maintain a continuously moving and precarious balance which includes the two of them, and also Moleka and Dikeledi, thus maintaining a sufficient amount of tension as it pulls towards these different 'cardinal' points. In Maru's view, Moleka would not be able to withstand the pressures of marrying a 'Masarwa' woman because he is a "tribalist" (Head, 2010, p. 328), "a man who impressed people", who would never have "lived down the ridicule and malice and would in the end have destroyed her from embarrassment" if he had married her (Head, 2010, p. 225). Whereas the object of Moleka's love is the person Margaret, the object of Maru's love is by implication what she represents and is in that sense an objectified love able to withstand the attacks of society. That Maru sees this, however, does not make him perfect either.

Maru and Moleka are both flawed. Both keep slaves (Head, 2010, p. 269) and exploit their masculine and "hereditary privilege" (Head, 2010, p. 273). Nonetheless, and despite her socially determined outward status, Margaret is more than Maru's love equal, looking down at him from a height (Head, 2010, p. 273), perhaps because she has no way of seeing other than beyond the simplistic binaries that constrain others having never seen the world from within them.

The continuous and interdependent balancing between opposing or complementary forces is post-oppositional in its construction. Moleka as the sun and Maru as the moon are indispensable to each other (Head, 2010, p. 268). A balance results from Dikeledi's assertion that "[t]here's no such thing as Masarwa … There are only people," and her prejudice and shock when Maru tells her he is going to marry Margaret, a 'Masarwa' (Head, 2010, p. 275). It is in these counterpoints throughout the narrative that the underlying tugs of a post-oppositional stance become apparent.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the balance in the different forms of love is created between the couples in the novel. In *Maru*, however, the respective natures of Maru's and Moleka's loves are different, the recipient is the constant. The two rooms of Margaret's love maintain the tension and both forms of love are necessary for Maru's "dreams and visions" of the world in

which “not only he but all humanity could evolve” (Head, 2010, p. 316). To make real the dreams which “stretched across every barrier and taboo” (Head, 2010, p. 316) Maru needs to ensure that those with the capacity to create misery were “nailed … to the ground” (Head, 2010, p. 316). By extension, Maru’s manipulation, lies, and cruelty are an essential part of love as a tool for change. Love is not sappy and romantic, it is a powerful force that underpins the objects it moves (as in Tshivhase’s (2018) conception of it as the basis of ubuntu). Individuals in the novel are the narrative ‘containers’ of a post-oppositional view in which the boundaries between good and evil, old and new, independence and dependence are continuously blurred so that they become perpetually pliable continua about where and what Africa is and should be.

The text makes clear that “[i]t is preferable to change the world on the basis of love of mankind” but examines common sense (without love) as an alternative (Head, 2010, p. 228) as can be seen in the two Margaret characters. The older Margaret Cadmore is driven by what makes sense, by what is logical and simple. For this reason she cannot understand “beastliness” saying that it is simply easier and more logical not to be so (Head, 2010, p. 232). Love is not part of the older woman’s view of the world and as a result not part of the younger Margaret’s childhood. The older woman approaches everything so that “emotion no longer interfered with her reasoning” (Head, 2010, p. 233). The older woman comes to the realisation, however, that such a practical, scientific approach to life is insufficient (Head, 2010, p. 230), and sends a tear-soaked letter to the younger woman in which she acknowledges the sacrifice she made in leaving the younger Margaret in Botswana (Head, 2010, p. 231): “I had to do it for the sake of your people. I did not want to leave you behind” (Head, 2010, p. 235). Margaret the elder, having put her common sense to work, sacrifices love and as a result is unable to dismantle the racism at the heart of the younger Margaret’s ill treatment. Although in possession of education and a sound upbringing, young Margaret’s control of her “mind and her soul” (Head, 2010, p. 231) cannot control her emotions as emblematised by the single tear that falls down her cheek in the face of cruelty (Head, 2010, p. 232). Dikeledi too presents as a balance between the rational (as in her education which she puts to good use) and the personal (her love for Margaret) (Head, 2010, p. 238). It is love that guides her approach to the children and Margaret, despite the lack of either Maru’s grand vision or Moleka’s power.

Young Margaret Cadmore prompts intense self-reflection from all the characters. This is true not only for Maru, Moleka and Dikeledi but extends also to the unholy trinity of Morafi, Pete,

and Seth. These three, who are amused by the suffering of others and who thought that God was on their side (Head, 2010, p. 264) lose in all their interactions with and about Margaret.

In summary, a post-oppositional reading of *Maru* allows for the resolution of some of the concerns regarding the novel, and in particular of the harshness of Maru's treatment of Margaret, Dikeledi and Moleka. Uncoupling love from its object in a post-oppositional paradigm means that the contradictory elements are part of the same system. Although discomforting to think of Maru's relationship with Margaret as that of a real-life man and woman, regardless of how Head has written it, when read as a post-oppositional depiction of love and its power some of the unease is relieved. The story is the story of the peoples – in the plural – of Botswana. That some of these are 'Masarwa' and some are 'kings' or 'commoners' means that multiple readings of the text are possible.

5.4. A Question of Power

In *A Question of Power*, as in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, various love forms are presented and it is through the workings of love and ubuntu – as in the actions of Eugene and Kenosi, for example - that peace is restored to Elizabeth, reflecting the peace of life in the village into her state of mind. The plot takes place on two planes: the everyday world of the village, and Elizabeth's bedroom at night. The opening of the novel introduces us to Sello and his wife, a 'coloured' woman called Elizabeth. Elizabeth learns as a child that she had a white mother and a black father. She is told that her mother was insane and died in a mental asylum. Elizabeth grows up, marries and has a son. On leaving her husband, she moves to Botswana, taking her son with her. She is appointed as a teacher in Motabeng.

Once there, she is visited in her dreams by Sello and introduced to Medusa. Medusa and Sello torment and abuse Elizabeth who cannot get to sleep as a result. When Elizabeth breaks down, she is taken to hospital. On her release, she leaves her teaching job and begins work in a communal vegetable garden. Work in the garden teaches her new methods of irrigation and introduces her to new people, including Camilla (a racist Danish aid worker), and Kenosi (a woman from the village who becomes her friend and is a stable presence in her life). After days of work, she is tormented nightly by Sello and Medusa. One night she happily sees that Sello is shrinking. However, the following night Dan enters her room. He is aggressive and sexually perverted and has sex with a variety of women next to Elizabeth on her bed. Elizabeth meets

Tom, a Peace Corps volunteer from the United States of America, and they quickly become friends. Sello identifies with poor people and their suffering but is critical and mocking of them. Dan taunts Elizabeth for not being a real African.

Eugene, a white South African, runs the communal garden and initiates small industries projects. Kenosi displays the vegetables she and Elizabeth have grown which impresses the villagers. Dan tells Elizabeth that Sello is inappropriately sexually involved with his own daughter. Elizabeth has a mental breakdown and is admitted to a mental hospital. On her release, she is visited by Tom. She apologises to Mrs Jones for the way she had treated her in the throes of her breakdown. Despite these friendships and successes, she is still visited by Dan and Sello who compete for her attention. One night, Sello says to Elizabeth love is not like Dan's version, it is "two people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the soul of the other like a ghoul" (Head, 1974, p. 197). From this, Elizabeth is able to defeat Dan, who she learns is Satan. Sello tells Elizabeth he used her to defeat Dan and is sorry for the pain of the experience.

Elizabeth believes that her encounter with Dan has taught her about love and truth. The next day she and Kenosi discuss the garden. Her son writes her a poem that she sees as encapsulating her experiences. She concludes that "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (Head, 1974, p. 206). She falls asleep with her hand over her land.

In reviewing the criticism of *A Question of Power*, I do not focus on critical works which advance the position that the text is primarily autobiographical. Adetokunbo Pearse argues that no African literary text captures insanity in quite the way Head's does (Pearse, 1983, p. 81), a view that is elucidated equally by others. For example, Rose examines the text as elucidating the contentious subjects of universality and madness (Rose, 1994, p. 401); and Elinor Rooks interprets the text as a "vernacular theory engaged with the interactions among power, identity, goodness, and suffering" (Rooks, 2017, p. 75). Beard reads the text alongside Head's correspondence which, she says, demonstrates a "steely narrative control of her fictive conjuration" (Beard, 2014, p. 128).[26]

[26] Beard argues that in her letters, Head expresses the view that the suffering she had experienced and as depicted in the novel promised "new circumstances in the next phase of reincarnation" (Beard, 2014, p. 132).

Danai Mupotsa (2017, p. 26) demonstrates the text's animation of the political aspects of sex, gender, colonisation and inequality. MacKenzie argues that the text is a "novelistic diary" and not "a carefully considered work composed after the event" (MacKenzie, 2014, p. 148). Coletta Kandemiri and Nelson Mlambo (2022, p. 52) look at the relationship between mental illness and a "spiritual ecology in some colonial African settings" and diagnose Elizabeth's schizophrenia in an African paradigm as potentially resulting from "factors as witchcraft" (Kandemiri and Mlambo, 2022, pp. 56–57) and her experiences under apartheid (Kandemiri and Mlambo, 2022, p. 68). Cappelli sees in the work "indigenous feminist historiography and feminist resistance to phallocentric structures" (Cappelli, 2017, p. 161) as the autobiographical text examines male/female relationships in the context of power and powerlessness (Cappelli, 2017, p. 162). Some critics, such as Patrick Hogan, warn against analysing the novel as "autobiography à clef" (Hogan, 1994, p. 97), arguing that it is a literary work and should be treated as such (Hogan, 1994, p. 97). This is seconded by Beard: concentrating on the autobiographical "has been followed ad nauseam and shortsightedly" (Beard, 2014, p. 127).

To what extent does the novel succeed? It clearly does articulate the hope that once freed of humiliation, there will no longer be a belief in the inferiority of others. However, Bangeni argues that what happens is that class emerges as the "category that perpetuates the humiliation and sense of inferiority that before was a result of racial oppression" (Bangeni, 2014, p. 506).[27] The rigidity of the race, gender and the ethnic bases of oppression mirror the notions of difference in people's lives. Head's work challenges the "academy to complicate these categories" (Bangeni, 2014, p. 506). The novel thus examines more than just white/black racism and confronts racism against black Africans by 'coloured' South Africans (Nuttall, 1996, p. 13).[28]

[27] Perera (2015, p. 127) sees the text as Marxist: "dialectical, tentative, open-ended, and ceaselessly critical of its own founding presuppositions". In the text are "the interruptive, disruptive ideals of the itinerant Marx to other spaces and places—psychic and otherwise—that he could not imagine" (Perera, 2015, p. 127). Elizabeth's breakdown "signifies pain and trauma" and the "possibility for reimagining 'the social' through a new dialectical relationship of the self and the world" (Perera, 2015, p. 130).

[28] Gagiano argues that the novel shows how the character's formative experiences impact on her views of Botswana, and that she too "is capable of vicious hatred and of wielding personal power destructively" (Cappelli, 2017, p. 115). The novel forces Elizabeth to acknowledge that "a suffering person cannot expect rescue or protection from a beneficent, omnipotent deity" and the perspective shrinks to the village and magnifies to the universe (Cappelli, 2017, p. 115). Elizabeth is a good Freudian (Cappelli, 2017, p. 116) whose story takes us from Botswana to Elizabeth's and Head's past in South Africa. The novel "de-racialises evil" by 'sidestepping' colour-coding (Cappelli, 2017, p. 117). The closing words of the novel express a "sense of location" to which the mental journey has brought Elizabeth (Cappelli, 2017, p. 121).

Rajeev Patke argues that *A Question of Power* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* "represent an intersection between race, gender and familial constructs of such intensity as to have significant repercussions for the interactive discourses of the feminist, the psychoanalytic and the postcolonial", in ways outlined by Lacan and Kristeva (Patke, 2005, p. 185).[29] Although Rhys's novel ends badly for feminism, *A Question of Power* comes to a "reconstructive end", forcing us to assess "why the world lacks love" (Patke, 2005, p. 191). Patke declares that "[w]hat rescues Elizabeth in the end is the ability she recovers within herself, with Tom's help, for a capacity to acknowledge and to express love, the kind of all-encompassing, non-appetitive love that includes the mineral and the vegetable along with the animal kingdom in its scope" (Patke, 2005, p. 192).

Predictably, several critics focus on the nature of power. Nidhal Chami (2020, p. 25) argues that the symbols of power mean that if the text is read as "a final message of love" then there are many questions unanswered. Similarly, Zeleza (1997, pp. 28–29) looks at power between women and women and "between patriarchal and racial domination", a theme picked up on by Smith (1999, p. 69) as hybridity in people with "mixed racial and/or cultural backgrounds". Head's "painful ambivalence about things African" (Smith, 1999, p. 73) means that she rejects "colonial 'knowledge' about the identity of God", finding "god-in-the-ordinary … [which] is described in much more explicitly African terms" (Smith, 1999, p. 73).

Paustian (2018, pp. 344–345) examines the insensitivities of international development workers from the perspective of marginal women. The novel shows a community navigating differences of race, culture, and history, placing the marginalised "at the origin of a universalist ethics" (Paustian, 2018, p. 344) and forges new narratives of equity and inequity in a "critical humanism" (Paustian, 2018, p. 345). Head is located between anti- and post-colonialism in a "model of neo-anticolonial (or anti-neocolonial) humanism" (Paustian, 2018, pp. 348–349). Kim (2008, p. 39) shows how in the novel "morality" serves colonialist ideology across three moral categories: the "feudal systems of the distant past (Sello the monk) and the bourgeois humanism and nationalist ideologies of the present (Sello of the brown suit), and the postmodern schizophrenia of the near future (Dan)" (Kim, 2008, p. 40).

[29] Lorenz examines dreams "with a presence more real and affective than actual experience" as linked to the "complexity of the issues involved in socially relevant fiction" (Lorenz, 1991, p. 592) contrasting these to Ngũgĩ's confrontational approach and concluding that Head's text reflects "contemporary French feminist thought" (Lorenz, 1991, p. 597).

Some of the critical works which examine Head's focus on the ordinary are particularly interesting given that through the chaotic story of madness runs a consistent and quiet depiction of life in the village, and of women's work. Although in less detail than in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the novel provides evocations of place in "the everyday event of sunrise, the people and the animals of Motabeng" (Head, 1974, p. 11). Beard (2014, p. 126) sees Head's focus on everyday life as "part of an aesthetics of the mundane" in which philosophical and social ideas about social concerns are addressed (Beard, 2014, p. 126). In Head's novels, the allegorical aspects of the descriptions of village life, of gardening, the weather and other contextual pressures are not constraining, provided that we do not restrict ourselves to the kinds of critical approaches that seek to connect the auto/biographical aspects of Head's life with those in the texts. We can read love and ubuntu in *A Question of Power* as allegorical working at multiple levels simultaneously. Thus, for example, we are able to ignore the auto/biographical elements in favour of the fiction, not needing to make the story linear in order to impose sense. As readers, it is sufficient to weave our way through the many and varied meanings it may have, focusing on the post-oppositionality of love as the basis for Head's ubuntu-driven new and future society.

The novel takes us through what love is, and what love is not. Three pages into the novel Elizabeth and the readers are informed by Sello that "Love isn't like that. Love is two people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the soul of the other, like a ghoul" (Head, 1974, p. 13). Love is not Dan's kind of love either, which is "exclusive, between her and him alone" (Head, 1974, p. 117). But this is no binary categorisation. Both what love is and what love is not are variably described in the text, with much of the complexity coming from the excess of hatred and 'not love' in the novel. At the risk of it appearing overly simplistic, *A Question of Power* demonstrates what love is not by noting in detail its absence or its perversion in a variety of contexts.

Thus, for a start, love is not Christianity and the love of Jesus does not awaken "love and compassion" in the hearts of the missionaries who are "tall, thin, gaunt, incredibly cruel" (Head, 1974, p. 16). Although "[t]hey said they were worshippers of Jesus Christ" this does not prevent a Southern lynch mob from committing atrocities against black Americans (Head, 1974, p. 92). The Christian injunction to love one's neighbour **(**Matthew 22:36-40) has failed. The text illustrates Tshivhase's point that love will succeed as the basis of ubuntu when it is

not bound to an object (Tshivhase, 2018, pp. 203–204). Bounded love includes only those "whom one considers close and important" and "excludes those who exist outside the circle of care". In Head's view, love is premised on a lack of discrimination: "be the same as others in heart; just be a person" (Head, 1974, p. 26). In this love's dominion, people regard each other with "tenderness and compassion" and a "lack of assertion and dominance" (Head, 1974, p. 42).

In conversation with Sello, he tells Elizabeth that perfection is love (Head, 1974, p. 34), and that there are people with hearts more generous than hers:

> It was the kind of language she understood, that no one was the be-all and end-all of creation, that no one had the power of assertion and dominance to the exclusion of other life. It was almost a suppressed argument she was to work with all the time; that people, in their souls, were forces, energies, stars, planets, universes and all kinds of swirling magic and mystery; that at a time when this was openly perceived the insight into their own powers had driven them mad, and they had robbed themselves of the natural grandeur of life (Head, 1974, p. 35)

In the passage above, the tensile relationship between power and love is again exposed, and it is the "poor of Africa" (Head, 1974, p. 31) who show Elizabeth that Sello and "his dazzling array of prophets" is not without evil: "He is controlling your life the wrong way, and he does not want to give it up" (Head, 1974, p. 32). The 'love' of the monk, conflated with power and control, is not real love. In a certain context and for certain purposes such as in organised religion, love *is* power and is consequently capable of corruption. In *Maru* we learned that power can disguise itself as love (Head, 2010, p. 225). In *A Question of Power*, we learn that love itself may take various guises, including religiosity, sex and sexuality, none of which are the love to which Elizabeth ascribes the power of change, and none of which are expressed in acts of ubuntu.

In the South African context of which Head writes, apartheid is presented not only as a corruption of power, but also as anathema to and an absence of love. Racial classification undermines "the simple joy of being a human being with a personality … They were races, not people" (Head, 1974, p. 44). But Head knows, from Darwin, that race is not 'real' – that all

forms of being, the results of evolution, are equivalently accidental; the only fixed 'power' is gravity, there is no inherent hierarchy:

> There is a grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one ; and that whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and wonderful have been, and are being evolved (Head, 1974, p. 35).

South Africa's classification of people into 'just' their races perverted how people can simply be people. The observation that racism is not natural, despite its universal existence, is supported by Head's sense that it requires "propaganda" to break "whole races of people" (Head, 1974, p. 47). Choosing the victim of the propaganda is random; it takes place "whether it made sense or not: 'You are inferior. You are filth'" (Head, 1974, p. 47).

The description of living in South Africa is like Dan's world – it is:

> like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out if their way to hate you or loathe you. … There wasn't any kind of social evolution beyond that, there wasn't any life to the heart, just this vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks (Head, 1974, p. 19).

Dan the power-maniac is not white and in his face you see "that he never saw people, humanity, compassion, tenderness. It was as though he had a total blank spot and saw only his own power, his influence, his self" (Head, 1974, p. 19). The titular question of power is paradoxically answered only by real love which is capable of eradicating the abuse of power, and which is defined by its mutuality (Head, 1974, p. 14). The mutual feeding of each other is, as we have seen, one of premises of ubuntu: "we can all flourish as human beings when we recognize one another's mutuality and interdependence" (Deogratias, 2021, p. 37) and in this novel it goes beyond the individual relationships of Head's early novels. Love in *A Question of Power* is the ability to share, even in the suffering of those one hates. Similar to the way in which Makhaya sees Matenge's suffering, Elizabeth's hatred for the school principal is supplanted by her awareness of "subconscious appeals to share love, to share suffering" (Head, 1974, p. 17).

There are three aspects of love in the text that support a post-oppositional reading, and seeing love as the foundation of ubuntu and, for Head, a new African way of being. First, Head presents love as an epistemology. It is how several characters in the novel come to know the world – through the day-to-day operation of love. Second, love is presented as praxis. In the novel, work is how the communal love that is required for change is made tangible, as in the reaction of the villagers to the fresh produce Elizabeth and her friend produce. Finally, in tying together all the contrary strands in the text, love is the only unifying force capable of transforming and evolving society out of the binaries which is at the source of the madness in the novel.

It is significant that Eugene is a white South African man. Considering what has been said of apartheid above, his presence in Botswana signals a choice that has been made. When Elizabeth is in hospital he tells her that "[w]e are both refugees and must help each other" (Head, 1974, p. 52) knowing full well that Elizabeth is unlikely to be able to offer him help. Subsequently, this is adjusted, so that when she is released from hospital and she speaks to him of her troubles, his reaction elicits a simple, "'I'll help you.' It was the only way he revealed his passionate identity with his own country. He had said that to many South African refugees" and Elizabeth can see that he was "working on the simple theory that South Africans usually suffered from some form of mental aberration" (Head, 1974, p. 58). In this view, it is *all* South Africans, regardless of colour, that suffer mental aberration as a result of that context of stark dualities. Eugene too suffers, he is "extremely reserved, aloof and morose by temperament, and often walked around with the gloom of doomsday on his face" (Head, 1974, p. 52). Acting out of love is mutual in the sense that all are connected by the madness of the experience of discrimination and oppression. Elizabeth is impressed by Eugene's sanity which he derives from an acceptance of love for others and acting in accordance with the tenets of ubuntu.

Love embodied in work is premised on a sharing of knowledge and labour: "The Eugene man" is "born to create beautiful dreams" (Head, 1974, p. 150). His work is characterised by sharing resources, knowledge, work – mutual dependence and cooperation which he does without seeking reward (Head, 1974, pp. 150–151). His organisation of the villagers produces confidence but also goods, pottery, bricks and fresh vegetables to the approval of the villagers (Head, 1974, p. 152). Eugene's "practical genius" is characterised by its breadth and impersonality, it is "free and unconcerned" (Head, 1974, p. 61).

The vehicle through which Kenosi expresses her love for Elizabeth and by which she draws her back into the comfort of the sanity of the world is work: “The work must start” she says, “not even allowing a shattered Elizabeth time for tea” (Head, 1974, p. 110). When Kenosi tells Elizabeth that she cannot work in the garden without her, Elizabeth is “brought … back to life and reality!” (Head, 1974, p. 142), with garden work making Kenosi a “pioneer moving into the wonderful unknown” (Head, 1974, p. 143). Similarly, volunteer Tom’s goodness is expressed through his work which is beautiful coming from an “inner world [that] was always one of ease and freedom, no matter what his circumstances” (Head, 1974, p. 111). Tom’s work is undertaken in silence with the “most beautiful expression of deep wisdom in his eyes, and turned and stared at her like an ancient man” (Head, 1974, p. 122). In this respect, Tom is another sage, offering his work as his philosophy of life. The other volunteer, Gunnar, has “the humility and humanity” of the men among whom Elizabeth had grown up (Head, 1974, p. 123). He says, “[w]e must do our best to help others, mustn’t we”, providing that help in the form of work. The success of this work is attributed to it coming from love and not from an exchange of money. From work comes harmony as work has a “melody” to it (Head, 1974, p. 153).

Finally, love is transformative. When we first meet Camilla she is a “half-mad” (Head, 1974, p. 75) shouter of directives who renders grown men into “little boys shoved around by a hysterical white woman” who sees black people as “objects of permanent idiocy” (Head, 1974, p. 76). Nonetheless, Elizabeth recognises that she is “pathetically human” (Head, 1974, p. 78). Birgette comes from the same place as Camilla and yet is quiet, contemplative and “sensitively attuned” to the “feelings of others” (Head, 1974, p. 81). Birgette’s expression of love takes the form of her decision to tell Camilla that she is a racialist and express what Elizabeth and the other villagers think of her (Head, 1974, p. 84). Birgette has a past “where she loved many people” with a “high quality” where there is safety, security and trust. “Love” she says, “is so powerful, it’s like unseen flowers under your feet as you walk” (Head, 1974, p. 86). It is the gentleness of Birgette’s love that leads to Camilla’s transformation so that the next day, she has a “soft, subdued air” of “brooding reflection” as she enjoyed being in the garden with all the others (Head, 1974, p. 87).

5.5. Conclusion

Head uses the poverty and hunger of Africa in ways that are constructive and instructive. She sees dignity not in the abstract existence of the human, but in the coming to personhood that results from communal efforts to counter the ravages of poverty and hunger. For Head, to be African represents a set of values that she believes ought to be universal.

Head engages through her characters' stories with questions of what *Africa* and *African* are, choosing to focus on positive and constructive meanings to forge new ways of being in the world. *Maru* presents the treatment of the Masarwa as essentially un-African, locating it in misguided tribalism. *A Question of Power* dislodges whiteness as the primary weapon of racism, referring rather to the fundamental abuses of power at the heart of all oppressions. The text undermines white supremacy, black nationalism and pan-Africanism, placing them all in the context of a binary she rejects as having value for her analysis of what is wrong with the history of the world. She expands the construct of love – predating the post-oppositional theoretical – and exhibits what Zimitri Erasmus asserts is what love is about: "relational social interdependence conjoined with both social conscience and social consciousness" (Erasmus, 2017, p. 138). She does not, as Tutu does, use ubuntu or love as the means through which forgiveness or reconciliation is sought. She attempts rather to collapse the old binaries in favour of a new love- and ubuntu-based ethic. She creates in her fictional world – the "quiet backwater where ideas and inventions dominate and where people have time to love each other" (Head, 1990, p. 98).

Read together, the novels up to this point signal what is about to be a shift in Head's approach to the future. In a way, the big picture thinking – of couple, to family, to community, to race, to cosmologies – is about to return to a smaller unit of analysis: Serowe. A single village in a single country becomes the intense focus of the next three publications, which I examine in Chapters 6 and 7. Whether Head is writing about the slums of Cape Town or village life in Botswana, she provides detailed descriptions of the backdrops against which love takes on its transformative value. Love and ubuntu result in actions which undermine discrimination and racism at base and create the conditions in which people lead social change. Work with and for others is love made corporeal and it is this which takes Elizabeth away from 'universal' questions of good and evil into a life rooted in those around her.

The gesture of belonging at the end of *A Question of Power* makes clear Head's turn to Africa as cipher for a new way of thinking in which racialised views are replaced by acts of love – this is Head's 'revolution' (Head, 1990, p. 103). *A Question of Power* closes with the assertion that Africa does not overtly "push against those rigid, false social systems of class and caste" but uses "the warm embrace of brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man" (Head, 1974, p. 206). Despite the reach of the problems Head seeks to solve – racism in the world, the problem of good and evil, relations between men and women – it is not in the grand gestures of love that the solution lies but in the quiet everyday acts of ordinary people framed by love and undertaken in the spirit of ubuntu. In rejecting the grand promises of religion and politics in favour of love and ubuntu, Head's attention turns in the next set of texts to history and to a more explicit depiction of the sage philosopher on which to build an African approach to change. Head's post-oppositional stance provides a platform from which she presents colonialism and independence, western and African as not in opposition to each other but as having been inextricably linked for a period of time and from which all can learn.

Chapter 6: The *Collector of Treasures* as liminal text

> *Whatever the truth in regard to this question, it is of no consequence where its discoverer comes from. This is at once the basis of the possibility that we in Africa can learn something from the West and that the West, too, can learn something from us* (Wiredu, 1998, p. 22).

> *I think we are as desperate as anything to make Africa the black man's land because I see no other place on earth where the black man may come into his own, with dignity* (Head, 1990, p. 27).

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that *The Collector of Treasures* represents the first step towards Head's development of an alternative to love that dominates the early texts. In these short stories, she uses a cast of ostensibly oral storytellers to express her syncretic views of the 'traditional', colonial and post-independence realities of Serowe. To lend credibility to her views of Africa, Head advances her storytellers as 'sage philosophers', well-versed in their knowledge and understanding of traditional mores and values, revealing the contradictions in western colonial and Christian impositions.

Although love is not absent in this collection, it is not accorded the same power as had been previously and marks a distinct shift from its use in the first four novels. In these, love is didactic, instructive, a mechanism which is instrumental to change. However, starting with *The Collector of Treasures*, love acts more as a catalyst for change, and it is on change that she focuses. Several stories propose that change, flexibility, and adaptability are inherent to the African way. The didactic power accorded to love in the first four novels moves now to African history. Head plumbs the history of Serowe and Botswana for re/sources, applying a syncretic blend of these in her re-envisioned history of the southern African region. She begins assertively from the premise that despite incontrovertible evidence of the oppression of Africans by their colonisers, African and western *ideas* and *people* were and are on an equal footing in that all were placed in the position of having to make sense of the African/European engagements.

The Collector of Treasures is the fictional bridge between the first four novels and the last two texts. Its stories are rooted in research Head undertook into the history of the missionary John Mackenzie and of Serowe which establishes the themes of the last two texts. Her engagement with history leads her to observe that:

> …some of Africa's present problems are rooted in a *lack of understanding* of Africa's past and African traditions. The *traditions were democratic* and all people *participated* in the government of the land. The people were difficult to rule unless ruled with *justice and affection* (Eilersen, 2001, p. 35, emphasis added).

In seeking to right the wrongs of these misunderstandings, she notes:

> Had I not taken an interest in southern African history, coupled with a concern to assemble my research material in new and original ways, I would most certainly have overlooked a great heritage (Eilersen, 2001, p. 43).

Head uses two narrative methods to invigorate her view: first, presenting as oral both oral and written historical resources and second, voicing a set of 'sage philosophers' to articulate and embody her assertion that the resources for Africa's future lie in its past. African Sage philosophy[30] is likened to Socratic and other traditions of early western philosophy, and need not be written to be philosophy, or to be worthwhile (Masolo, 2016, p. 5). Sage philosophy is by nature syncretic and "fluctuates between popular wisdom (well known communal maxims, aphorisms and general common sense truths) and didactic wisdom, an expounded wisdom and a rational thought of some given individuals within a community" (Masolo, 2016, p. 28). Exploiting the polyphony of history, Head's storytellers are men and women, young and old, white and black, and are drawn from a variety of contexts in the village to speak to different aspects of life, to examine its rural patterns and rhythms; tradition and modernity; Christianity and African tradition; compliance and perversion; and literacy, illiteracy and orality.

[30] African Sage philosophy is "the name now commonly given to the body of thought produced by persons considered wise in African communities, and more specifically refers to those who seek a rational foundation for ideas and concepts used to describe and view the world by critically examining the justification of those ideas and concepts. The expression acquired its currency from a project conducted by the late Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka (1944–1995), whose primary aim was to establish, with evidence, that critical reflection upon themes of fundamental importance has always been the concern of a select few in African societies" (Masolo, 2016, p. 1).

The post-oppositional stance in Head's early texts encompasses in these texts the binaries of the individual and the collective, colonialism and independence, western and African, literacy and orality, tradition and modernity. The stories in *The Collector of Treasures* weave between the binaries, arriving in outcomes where they are not so much in opposition to each other as inextricably interwoven with both salubrious and insalubrious results. The critical responses to this have predictably too been varied.

6.2. The Collector of Treasures in critical context

The *Collector of Treasures* is a collection of 13 short stories, published in the order Head decided. The opening story, "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration" establishes the historical permanence of migration and change. Next are three stories, "Heaven is not Closed", "The Village Saint" and "Jacob: The Story of a Faith Healing Priest" which provide insights into interactions between Christianity and traditional African religion. In the stories "Life" and "Witchcraft" two women confront modern/traditional ways of being with disastrous results in the first, and a happy conclusion in the second. "Looking for a Rain God" explores the dreadful consequences of a misremembered traditional past, while "Kgotla" is a clear assertion of the value of traditional, communal problem-solving. In "The Wind and a Boy" the carelessness of the new order and its potential for destruction takes the life of a young boy, and in "Snapshots of a Wedding" a bride is urged not to forget all the traditional ways in favour of the new. Finally, "The Special One" and "The Collector of Treasures" focus on women as they navigate both the old and new ways to forge new meaning in a complex and confused society.

Critical approaches to the stories are varied. Maxine Sample argues that *The Collector of Treasures* replaces the image of rural life as "stifled and perverted" with one that is "alive with the background scenery", connected to "ancient Africa" (Sample, 1991, p. 312). In the collection, the river comes to embody "group unity" (Sample, 1991, p. 313). Norman Cary's critique acknowledges the value of the polyphony of voices (Cary, 1995, p. 39) in the stories, however Lauren Smith (1999) sees this syncretic approach to religion as a failure. For Smith, the stories fail to engage with "Africans as a colonized people" (Smith, 1999, p. 62), soaked as they are "in Christian themes and images" (Smith, 1999, p. 65). Although we can appreciate that aspects of Head's focus on "abstract questions of good and evil" may be 'European', I do not agree that Head turns her attention "away from history and politics" (Smith, 1999, p. 62).

In my analysis, below, I see these aspects differently and as part of what Head is attempting to achieve in respect of a 'new' African personhood.

Arup Ratan Chakraborty (2016, p. 148) examines cultural hybridity and social liminality and notes that hybridity - sometimes linked to the abuse of "mixed breeds" - is core also to postcolonial discourse deriving from its "in-betweenness" and the way it straddles two cultures, negotiating the differences. Chantal Zabus appreciates this complexity in Head's views, arguing that her liminality derives from her status as a 'coloured' person. Head's liminal status is reflected in her stories as she applies the "techniques of displacement such as swapping gender and race, or male and female" as in *A Question of Power* (Zabus, 2021, p. 389). *The Collector of Treasure* is, in my view, a liminal *text* in that the stories straddle the tensions and ambiguities associated with race, gender, Christianity and tradition in village life, establishing the bases for actualisable social and political changes. Rizwana Latha (2007, p. 131) and MacKenzie perceive Head as writing from inside a culture "with no written history, where storytelling and the oral tradition generally are the means whereby the community explains itself" (MacKenzie, 1989b, p. 17) but by the time Head was writing, this was certainly not the whole truth at all, and not the case in the colonial period either. MacKenzie (1989b, p. 23) argues that *The Collector of Treasures* recreates village life "by reconstructing the way the village explains itself" through the "narrative tale, the primary method whereby oral cultures arrest the inexorable passage of time". MacKenzie sees Head's stories as occupying "an ambiguous literary space: they are lifted from the stream of daily village life for the edification, in the main, of a literate, removed audience" (MacKenzie, 1989b, p. 24).

Head's experiences as a journalist are evident in the depictions of poverty and the impact of apartheid policies and laws in *The Cardinals.* Head's short stories, however, are distinct from the "overtly politicized" urban short stories of the 1970s and 1980s (Fasselt, Sandwith and Soldati-Kahimbaara, 2020, p. 5), Head's rural stories nonetheless capture the "ambiguities, contradiction[s], and open-endedness" typical of periods of disruption (Fasselt, et al., 2020, p. 7). Surprisingly, an article focused on journalism and the South African short story by Marta Fossati does not reference Head (2021), although the author does mention *Drum*. Perhaps unable to account for Head's short stories as distinct from the "extremely heterogeneous" short fiction of the fifties and sixties (Fossati, 2021, p. 261), she misses the opportunity provided by Head's stories for the stylistic marriage between the journalistic and the poetic (Fossati, 2021, p. 256). The short stories bind elements of a 'formal' written history with those of an oral

history or a history from below, bringing alive with vividness the experiences of people living through a wide range of what she depicts as typical events. Subsequent to *The Cardinals*, Head's somewhat journalistic style gives way to more descriptive depictions of physical and social contexts with enable narratorial reflections on the natural and social worlds people inhabit. These 'ethnographically' oriented descriptions include, for example, detailed descriptions of work and lives of women, gardening and farming, practical descriptions of craft, food and other production processes, and so on. These are important to Head, and she relates them to "counting chairs and tables and planning for people, with the same promise of fun and unpredictable humour" one would expect, she says, from Brecht (Eilersen, 2001, p. 64). Head's collection of short stories animates particular 'slices' of Serowe's history. Her beautifully lyrical descriptions of people, places and events are neither historical fiction nor historiography, but can be seen as fictional ethnohistories, expressive of places and times she characterises as typical of an African village. Head's stories "blurred [the] divide between fact and imagination" in the "permeability and contested status of this frontier" (Nagy, 2014, p. 9).

In 2001, Eilersen published a collection of Head's previously uncollected pieces. A reading of these makes clear some of the tensions in Head's published works. By way of example, Eilersen juxtaposes the title of "A Colonial Experience" with its subtitle "A Short Story" (Eilersen, 2001, p. 28) arguing that it indicates unambiguously an "unsettling dissolution of traditional genre boundaries" between the historical (i.e. the verifiable 'facts') and the fictional, which presents details we cannot challenge. Although the story presents a "constantly attuned awareness of the power process" from which "a documentary style emerges" (Eilersen, 2001, p. 9), it is also more than that. Replete with adjectives and adverbs, it posits people's visceral responses to the events of history in ways not ordinarily associated with historical writing. Thus for example, the analysis of power applies as much to the "ravenous European gold greed" as it does to the "military genius" and "driving hatred" of Shaka (Eilersen, 2001, p. 29). The emotive language is didactic, and we are directed to see imperialism in all forms as negative. The piece spans the long distant past right up to the withdrawal of the colonial powers and ends with the following: "Above all that blood and hate a voice of reason and power had to arise in the land and consecrate it anew - linking the future to a beautiful past" (Eilersen, 2001, p. 33).

Eilersen's observations regarding the blend of history and fiction point to an interesting aspect of syncretism in Head's work. Much work has been undertaken on syncretism particularly in

respect of religion,[31] and there is some literature available on its use in literary forms. Applying syncretic studies to cultural forms may provide an "intricate and inclusive picture of human interaction" replacing "inside-out, us-them separatist dichotomies" with nuanced and complex insights into the borders "of lands, positions, forces, or identities" (Lambropoulos, 2001, p. 222). This is a view that aligns to analyses of liminality in Head's texts. What is different, however, is that syncretism actively enables the oppressed to express their agency by combining apparently contradictory beliefs. In religious terms, this would mean allowing believers to consider themselves as adherents to two different religions. Syncretism, some argue, is not as much about a harmony of systems but as about a syncopation of beliefs that "challenge and change the old paradigms" (Atuahene, 2018, p. 185). Syncopation could surely account for some of the more 'off-beat' aspects of Head's narratives.

Kizito Nweke argues that syncretism in African spiritually is characterised by "allegiance and the sense of belonging to one's roots" (Nweke, 2020, p. 81) and that African religious inclusivism, which is inherent and pragmatic, domesticated Christianity and Islam to achieve "existential aims of the adherents" (Nweke, 2020, p. 82). That Head appreciates this aspect is evident in her response to the inclusivity of African thought as expressed by John Mbiti's explication. His views are, she says,

> wide and generous enough to take in all the humble who shall, one day, unexpectedly, inherit the earth … it is easy to imagine a universe and a people instantly immersed in a religious way of life. There are trees in this universe and they might tell a man in his own secret heart that they like to dwell near his hut. Also chickens and birds and rivers and sunsets and everything that flows and lives (Head, 1990, p. 51).

Syncretic approaches are premised on boundary crossing and dismantle "assumptions of cultural boundedness, fixity, and homogeneity" (McIntosh, 2019, p. 114).

[31] Examples include Klass, M., Ferretti, M.M., Ferretti, S.F., Motta, R., Salamone, F.A., Sjorslev, I., Van Wetering, I. and Zips, W., 2001. *Reinventing religions: Syncretism and transformation in Africa and the Americas*. United States: Rowman and Littlefield; Stewart, C., 1999. Syncretism and its synonyms: Reflections on cultural mixture. *Diacritics*, *29*(3), pp. 40-62.

Zuzana Klímová's (2013) applies a syncretic critique to Samuel Selvon's works. A West Indian author and immigrant to England in the 1950s, Klímová argues that Selvon was caught between "cultural traditions with unequal power relations" (Klímová, 2013, p. 93) and expressed his experiences in accessible ways by the syncretic use of language and literary forms. In Selvon's novel, the formation of a West Indian community outside of the West Indies becomes real in the recording and writing of its voices in the context of "the common experience of displacement on the side of the immigrants" (Klímová, 2013, p. 94). Similarly, Head's depictions of patterns of migration, both in the distant and more recent past, work to create the Serowe of her fiction, where different strands of different belief systems intertwine to create her fictional 'reality'.

In retelling the history of Serowe, particularly in *The Collector of Treasures* and *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head returns to older (characterised by many critics as 'oral') forms of history-making. Farina Mir's critique of the English translation of the Persian manuscript, *Char Bagh-i-Panjab* is instructive in this regard. Written by Ganesh Das Vadhera in 1849, the text is a political history, a geography, and a source of information on the social, cultural and religious life of the Punjab. In 1975, the text was published in partial English translation (Mir, 2006, p. 726), and the "curious" exclusion of certain sections from the English version of the text "raises important questions about literature's place in the writing of history" (Mir, 2006, p. 727).

Of particular consequence for Head, is that the translation of the Persian manuscript excludes the fictional romances (*qisse*, stories) which constituted one third of the original description of the Punjab. The *qisse*, which had spread in both oral and written form were central to the original text, suggesting that Vadhera thought them "crucial to an understanding of the Punjab and its history" (Mir, 2006, p. 729). Straddling 'fact' and fiction, the *qisse* did make reference to actual people and events but their value lies in their "engagement with issues that were relevant to Punjab's inhabitants" and it is through these stories that Punjabi poets deliberated on the religious, cultural and social issues of the time. Mir's signalling of the critical role of the *qisse* in setting out the history and geography of the region forces us to reconsider the genre intended by Head in her last three texts. Mir sees the stories in the manuscript as "enigmatic", "clearly fictional narratives, sometimes even fantastical" and "elusive" rather than historical which "*explain[s] their marginal role* in the Char Bagh's English translation" (Mir, 2006, p.

728, emphasis added). Falling outside of the then prescripts of the historical, they had been removed at the time of the translation.

In a similar way, Head's texts marry religion and history allowing her to take advantage of what she sees as Serowe's lack of appeal to 'the historians' who would, she says, simply see it as someplace where people are living (Head, 1990, p. 30). In straddling pre- and post-independence Botswana, Christianity and traditional religion, African and western worldviews, *The Collector of Treasures* provides a stepping-stone into *Serowe* and *A Bewitched Crossroad*. In these last two texts, the narrative moves between the formal, historical register and the fictional and lyrical to set out what she sees as the incorporative value of an African 'way' – a religion in which the minutiae of life such as trees, huts, chickens, birds, rivers and sunsets, and "everything that flows and lives" are included (Head, 1990, p. 51). There is no question that she draws overtly on Christianity, and particularly on her appreciation of Jesus's "ideal service to life" and his strengths as a great storyteller (Head, 1990, p. 96). In *Speaking of Pan-Africanism* (Head, 1990, p. 97), she argues that Christianity gave people "faced with a power structure that attempts to destroy their humanity" a way to keep "their humanity intact", and they were, as a result, "pious, humble, deferential, and saintly Christians" (Head, 1990, p. 95). What they were not, however, as some of the analyses will show below, was compliant with all the missionaries' demands.

6.3. Learning from the stories and the tellers of tales

"The short story" Clare Hanson writes, "has offered itself to losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks - writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling 'narrative' or epistemological/experiential framework of their society" (Hanson, 1989, p. 2). The short story allows its author to exploit its formal properties – "disjunction, inconclusiveness, obliquity" to "connect with its ideological marginality" and express that which has been suppressed or which has been repressed by the mainstream literature (Hanson, 1989, p. 6) or, in Head's case, the mainstream history, whether of colonialism or her contemporary Botswana. Time in the collection of stories is only loosely linear, however, as a more elastic nature suits her perspective. Some of the stories take place in an undefined past ("Long ago … when the people lived together like a deep river" [Head, 1977, p. 1]), or in "the month of July" (Head, 1977, p. 104), and sometimes simply in the context of the age of a person ("well over ninety" [Head, 1977, p. 7]). The elasticity of historical time in Head's stories is deliberate, causing us

simultaneously to suspend disbelief as required for fiction, while leveraging the historicity of the story as a means of establishing its authenticity. Head occupies this hybrid, liminal space between history and fiction, as an 'outside insider' in the way that a participant observer may, and as a result she too becomes a 'sage', delivering to her readers ethnographic content against which the short stories are told, often by two voices. The first, most often the voice 'inside' the story – its teller or hearer; and the second, the guiding voice of the authoritative third person narrator, guiding our interpretations and impressions as readers. In arguing for the liminality of Head's stories, MacKenzie characterises it as the gap between the stories and their readers (MacKenzie, 1989b). I offer that while this is the case and Head's concern is clearly with the reception of the stories by her readers, she is also critically aware of how the characters receive the 'lessons' she is drawing out from the stories within the stories.

The stories initiate the depictions of her later characters as people actively participating in and directing the "transitions from an old situation to a new one, one social position to another" and which perhaps cannot be completed, or be completed successfully (Chakraborty, 2016, p. 146). For example, in "Heaven is not Closed", discussed in more detail below, the narrative moves between the story of the individuals to an evaluation of religions at play. The individual person is not alone. Galethebege is part of a community and the insistence that she reject that community would significantly disrupt not only her life, but the very fabric of the social life of the village. As a result of her being forced to choose between the church and African tradition, her community too makes a choice. Their decision to stop attending church is not made from ignorance or a lack of awareness but as the result of a considered evaluation of the relative goodness of the Christian and traditional Setswana ways. Thus neither Galethebege nor the villagers who support her are victims of the priest. She makes an active and decisive choice to worship God outside of the context of the Church and as the title asserts heaven, as a result, is not closed to her. The story places the colonial Christian in what Head presents as its proper context: a history that exceeds Christianity in reach. Galethebege's wisdom in balancing the threats of the priest against the traditions of her prospective husband results in her choosing 'real' love, and not the 'love' professed by the priest with the result that the vile bullying of the priest is unsuccessful. In this way, the stories depict those liminal spaces, what Chakraborty terms the "interstitial environment in which cultural transformation takes place", a threshold to newness in which subjects are suspended between the old or the same, and the new or the different (Chakraborty, 2016, p. 146). In Head's transitional spaces, however, liminality is not

suspended animation, it is an active and fraught tussle between different forms of thinking, loving and being.

As a result, many of the stories give fictional life to assertions such as Ajayi's that colonialism does not in any way constitute the history of Africa but is, rather, an episode (Falola, 2000, p. 168). In "A Colonial Experience", Head writes:

> In spite of this early contact with a foreign power and fumbling attempts by the Portuguese to gain dominance in the area and a control of the gold trade, life in the Changamire and Monomotapan kingdoms continued *at its own pace of unhurried peace for the next three hundred years*. The land which surrounded the people lay in a majestic sleep and stillness and the stars swung down low in the sky at night and glowed with pure blue lights between the dark black bushes (Eilersen, 2001, p. 29, emphasis added).

I will take one story (out of the sequence prescribed by Head) to illustrate. A critical element of Head's depiction of the positive aspects of African tradition is her account of change as inherently African. Thus "Kgotla" ('court' in Setswana)[32] is not depicted as an anachronistic 'leftover' of a traditional past but as an engaged and worthwhile mechanism for the management of the contemporary lives of people which entrenches and develops customary practices to the best advantage of the community. In Head's depiction of kgotla, the best of the present and the past coalesce. Whereas modern administration "fussed about schools, boreholes, road, development, and progress", it is in kgotla that the "twitter of birds in the ancient shady trees" (Head, 1977, p. 61) is heard and it is here that "people's affairs in the people's place" are heard (Head, 1977, p. 62), and is worth citing in full:

> It was the last stronghold where people could make their anguish and disputes heard, where nothing new could be said about human nature it had all been said since time immemorial and it was all the same pattern, repeating itself from

[32] "The Kgotla system is a platform for regular discussions, consultations and exchange of ideas on major community or national issues among citizens. It promotes and embraces the idea that everyone is entitled to his opinion ("Mua lebe ubua la gagwe"). The open forum encourages tolerance and freedom of expression among people who might have different views. The system further advocates the idea that "ntwa kgolo ke ya molomo" (no fight should result in fistfights; the fiercest of fights is verbal). "Hence, through Kgotla local communities are able to request audiences with their traditional leaders, their representatives in Parliament, and even their President if they feel they have something to get off their chests" (Tlou, 2021, p. 69).

> generation unto generation. There, at the kgotla, it wasn't so important to resolve human problems as to discuss around them, to pontificate, to generalize, to display wit, wisdom, wealth of experience or depth of thought. All this made the kgotla world a holy world that moved at its own pace and time… (Head, 1977, p. 62).

Although the bureaucratic world was "fast devouring up the activities of the ancient, rambling kgotla world" (Head, 1977, p. 62), in kgotla everyone gets a hearing. In "Kgotla" a blind man marries a Sindebele woman who takes up with another woman, making assumptions about his wife's fidelity based on the stories of others. Taking his wife's side is his mother, who is deeply agitated by the fact that he cannot see his wife's value. In the story, all are given the opportunity to speak, the blind man, the mother of the blind man, his wife, his 'other woman', the 'other woman's' supporters, and the advisors to the chief. From "Kgotla", we learn how it works: the old chief presides and has assessors, seniors of the village, who assist should he need to snooze. The story incorporates a range of concerns at different levels: migration between Zimbabwe and Botswana and back again; the impact of jealousy and gossip on a marriage; the pattern of women's work in the village (Head, 1977, pp. 63–64); the potential trouble with not adhering to the customary requirement of a year's passing in mourning; the traditional treatment of foreigners (Head, 1977, p. 66); how respective claims are balanced against each other (there are no absolutes in discussion and assessment of the case); and the role of reconciliation in reaching amicable and peaceful agreements (Head, 1977, p. 67). The resolution of the story comes with the wife's suggestion that she use the earnings from her (modern) employment to pay her husband's debt and reinstate her marriage. Most interestingly, the closing sentence of the story states: "The *forefathers* were right when they said that the finest things often come from far-off places …" (Head, 1977, p. 68, emphasis added). The reference to the forefathers makes explicit that change and its acceptance are part of the traditional flow of things as kgotla incorporates the new into the old.

"Kgotla" establishes the social conditions for the gesture of belonging referenced at the end of *A Question of Power*, demonstrating the post-oppositional strength of the kind of 'revolution' needed (Head, 1990, p. 103). The Sindebele woman's reasonable and gentle suggestion to kgotla has deep ramifications which affect not only her life and that of her family, but also the values and traditions of the community and kgotla itself. *A Question of Power* closed with the assertion that Africa does not overtly "push against those rigid, false social systems of class and caste" but uses "the warm embrace of brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted

everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man" (Head, 1974, p. 206). "Kgotla" shows how it is the quiet work of ordinary people that changes the world as kgotla becomes a microcosm for how such changes may work.

Similarly, the fictionally reconstructed history of the Balaote tribe presented in the "The Deep River" (1977) examines the workings of change through the paradigm represented by the two sages in the story. The first is the old chief Monemapee, who "ruled the tribe for many years as the hairs on his head were already saying white!" and under whom "All the people lived this way, like one face, under their chief" (Head, 1977, p. 1). The second is Monemapee's son, Sebembele who, although younger, is no less a sage, deserving of his leadership role. In Odera Oruka's words, "sages are also thinkers and are rational and critical", opting for or recommending "only those aspects of the beliefs and wisdoms which satisfy their rational scrutiny. In this respect they are potentially or contemporarily in clash with the diehard adherents of the prevailing common beliefs" (Oruka, 1991, p. 51). In the story, Sebembele does not take up the chieftainship to which he is entitled, choosing his love for a woman over his right to succeed. By acting against the will of his father and of his councillors, he critically forces everyone in the tribe to confront their own views, and to choose whether they will follow those that seek to enforce the traditional succession rules and requirements or a new approach in which he chooses a woman and his child over power over the whole community. The two groups are not depicted as lesser or more than, but are different. Monemapee's view is not denigrated but is presented as the basis from which Sebembele is able to consider fully the consequences of his actions and reach his decision. Sebembele's followers see that

> they had a ruler who talked with deeds rather than with words. They saw that the time had come for them to offer up their individual faces to the face of this rule (Head, 1977, p. 5).

Both the older and the younger sage act as interlocutors between the pressures and forces at work in the community, between storytelling and history, and between the old ways and the new. Symbolically, and despite separating from the tribe, Sebembele and his new ways do not constitute a rejection of the old, rather they incorporate some of these as the younger couple takes some of the existing community with them to their new home (Head, 1977, p. 6). The story makes change corporeal in a context where 'tradition' has long been presumed to resist change. In this story, change which arises from considered acts of love, takes place without bloodletting,

without carnage and, critically, without forcing the will of one group onto another. In this way, Head portrays African communities as engaging actively with their traditions and with political and social forces to choose from a range of options before them in ways that allow for the rebuilding of a "world of sweet and courteous exchanges between men" (Head, 1984, p. 75).

Immediately after "The Deep River: A story of ancient tribal migration" is "Heaven is not Closed", a story which examines the interrelatedness of the personal and the historical through the interaction between Christianity and traditional African beliefs. Galethebege, a deeply religious woman, falls in love with Ralokae, "an unbeliever to the day of his death" (Head, 1977, p. 8). He warns that the tribe would "fall into great difficulties if we forget our own customs and laws," a prediction that the old storyteller feels has come true given the thieving and adultery "such as was not possible under Setswana law" (Head, 1977, p. 8). Regardless of faith, however, the story makes clear that goodness must be uncoupled from the religion – Christian or African – one follows. The story makes this clear in the depiction of Galethebege. She is an extraordinarily good person regardless of the measure applied – it is simply the way she was born (Head, 1977, p. 8). Her marriage to Ralokae exposes the flaws of the Christianity of the sort brought by the missionary, while her ability to continue to pray in the context of a traditional marriage reveals the inclusiveness of the latter. Ralokae points out to Galethebege that there is something wrong with a Christian love that enslaves black people (Head, 1977, p. 9), observing that "one never had to cry for love in the customary way of life. Respect was just there for people all the time" (Head, 1977, p. 10). When, as in "The Deep River" Galethebege chooses her partner, she is excommunicated from the church. The priest does not however count the fact that he is competing with "an ancient stream of holiness that people had lived with before any white man had set foot in the land, and it only needed a small protest to stir up loyalty for the old customs" (Head, 1977, p. 11). In contrast to this stirring of support, the 'civilised' church is "harsh" and "evil" (Head, 1977, p. 11) in its treatment of the woman, a fact which the villagers battle to comprehend as a result of Galethebege's goodness.

I cannot agree with Smith's analysis of the stories as evidence of the fact that the characters' successes depend on their behaving in a Christian-compliant manner (Smith, 1999, p. 65). Both Ralokae and Galethebege are 'good' and their marriage, despite her expulsion, is successful. In my view the story does not, as Smith asserts, resort to Christian modes of salvation (Smith, 1999, p. 62) but rather appears to argue that a 'true' heaven is one which recognises goodness rather than the religion from which people come. Secondly, the story is a clear demonstration

of the opposite of Christian compliance, as Galethebege's expulsion for marrying under customary law causes ripples across the village, with many choosing not to attend the church as a result (Head, 1977, p. 12). In distinguishing between godliness (good) and adherence to a particular faith, the story makes clear that the might of the church does not make right, and no attempt to force compliance will succeed in the face of Galethebege's innate goodness. Although Galethebege continues to pray to her god, she does so in spite of not belonging to the church. In the last five years of her life she devotes "her whole mind to her calling" (Head, 1977, p. 7). Her decision and actions are not presented as an either/or – she continues to pray to the Christian god while living also in accordance with traditional mores.

In the final analysis, the villagers and Head appear to align: no heaven should be closed to good people, such as Galethebege and Ralokae as the closing paragraph of the story makes clear: "Wasn't there a place in heaven too for Setswana custom" (Head, 1977, p. 12). Rather than establishing a boundary between African and western religions, and defaulting to Christianity as Smith (1999) suggests, Head links the two belief systems conceptually through goodness and love so that the positive aspects of each are integrated into the other. Ultimately, this will become core to Head's depiction of an African approach exemplified by, for example, the compassion and political astuteness of Khama. African religion "is just 'there,' somewhere in the corpus of one's beliefs, whether one is conscious of being religious or not. It is not institutionalised … It is equally tolerant as it is indifferent", "a religion behind the scenes" (Head, 1990, p. 53). Blind adherence – whether to Christianity or tradition poses the same risks to its followers who have "little individual freedom to assess whether these traditions were compassionate or not" and are simply commanded to "comply and obey the rules, without thought" (Head, 1977, p. 92).

Developing the theme that adherence is not faith yet further is "The Village Saint". Unlike Galethebege, the protagonist in this story, Mma-Mompati, is superficially a supremely dedicated Christian. She has "guarded eyes" and the "professional smile of the highborn who don't really give a damn about people or anything", despite which she assiduously cultivates her image as a "holy woman" (Head, 1977, p. 14). Galethebege's praying is earnest and private; Mma-Mompati's is a display so theatrical it can hardly be real. When her husband leaves her for another woman, the villagers take her side. Her son, Mompati, stays with his mother and like her too builds up a "public acclaim all his own" (Head, 1977, p. 16). Both are surrounded by villagers seeking advice and, for ten years, mother and son dispense their inauthentic wisdom to the

villagers until a crisis occurs: the son's marriage. Mma-Mompati, used to taking her son's salary and giving him a stipend, is resentful of her "weak" and "wilting" daughter-in-law (Head, 1977, p. 17) and after the wedding, spends "an enormous amount [of his salary] at once" (Head, 1977, p. 18). What is left over is not enough for the couple with the result that she lords it over her daughter-in-law for a month. The insincerity we as readers have insight into at the beginning of the story is made obvious to the villagers during this month. When her son hands his next salary to his wife, Mma-Mompati abandons "the pose of God and Jesus" and becomes a "demented vampire" who attacks and undermines her daughter-in-law, making her fetch water outside of her yard. The villagers are shocked at the behaviour of their 'saint' – and "No one ever believed in her again or her God or Jesus Christ" (Head, 1977, p. 18). The two stories expose the values underpinning Christian and traditional ways of living and Head depicts the villagers as actively debating the relative values of both, calling each into question and making their own evaluations.

The story "Jacob: The story of a faith healing priest" again focuses on the religious beliefs of two prophets in the village of Makaleng: Jacob, "on the sunrise side of the village" and Lebojang "on the sunset side" (Head, 1977, p. 20). Whereas Jacob is poor, Lebojang is rich. Lebojang charges handsomely for his services, and "it did not matter to him that people were secretly poisoned or driven mad by his prophecies; he simply took his money and that was that" (Head, 1977, p. 28). Jacob, however, is kind and shares everything he has with those in need; Lebojang is cold and unwelcoming to the poor (Head, 1977, p. 20) preferring to minister to the rich. Jacob shares what little he has with everyone, and his church is made up entirely of children who keep him informed of the happenings in the village and accompany him on visits to the sick or those in need, singing and dancing along the way (Head, 1977, p. 27). The allusions to Jesus's simple lifestyle and the oblique reference to the 'little children' make clear that Jacob's is a truer faith than Lebojang's. Jacob's visitors do not pay for his services and, a few days after visiting him, they receive what they need. Head lifts from the Christian dogma those characteristics she associates with goodness and assigns them to Jacob.

It is never "clear to those who loved Prophet Jacob just who his God was" – sometimes it was Jesus, sometimes it was "the width and depth of his own experience and suffering" (Head, 1977, p. 21). On hearing God's voice, he sends his wife and children away and sets himself up with a "priestly cloak", a cross, candlesticks and bottles of blessed water (Head, 1977, p. 26). He represents no church, nor any god other than 'his'. Lebojang is able to send lightning and snakes to scare Jacob away from the village, which does not succeed as Jacob is secure in the knowledge

that ‘his’ God will protect him. We learn that Lebojang, prophet, sorcerer and ritual murderer, is also a “priest of a Christian church with a big blue cross down the back of his cloak” (Head, 1977, p. 36). In permitting Lebogang to wear the cross, there is an alignment between the negative aspects of Christian churches and those of traditional sorcery.

When God sends Jacob a new wife, Johannah, an unmarried woman with three children (Head, 1977, p. 29), she sees that “There is only goodness here” (Head, 1977, p. 31) and moves herself and her children into Jacob’s home. She then runs this home according to the “traditions and customs of the country” which represent “the correct way of living with others” (Head, 1977, p. 35). The ways of Jacob’s God are as present in Jacob’s simple and Jesus-like ways as they as they are in Johannah’s traditional ones. It is not possible to conclude that the story rejects either one of the two religious traditions, as Jacob and Johannah present a third combination of the best of both worlds.

Jacob’s sun rises as Lebojang’s descends when he is discovered engaging in ritual murder and is caught with a child’s body parts. Head’s story reveals Jacob’s as the ‘true’ God and Lebojang’s perverse and powerful god – whether ritual murder of the Christian cloth – to be tools in his exploitative arsenal. The more ‘Christian’ acts Jacob undertakes – such as sharing his food and water and consoling the sick – are directly reminiscent of Jesus’s acts. And yet he is not depicted as a Christian, and is respectful of the traditional ways his wife introduces into his home, cancelling formal sermons in favour of singing and playing with the children (Head, 1977, p. 35).

The three stories on religion examined thus far highlight the liminal spaces between ‘custom’ or tradition and the ‘new’ forms introduced by Christianity. Critically, however, not one presents this as a straightforward binary, nor as a simple choice between two discrete options. It is not possible at the conclusion of the stories to assert that either Christianity or custom is all good or all bad. On the contrary, the stories highlight the characteristics of conduct (reminiscent of ubuntu) such as those of Jesus or the working of kgotla which, regardless of their origin, are good and benefit life. The stories do not shy away from the negative as in Lebojang’s engagement in sorcery and ritual murder and the priest’s ill treatment of Galethebege. Mma-Mompati’s charitable works are not taken as self-evident acts of goodness, nor is her capacity for ‘kindness’ trustworthy, as her treatment of her daughter-in-law demonstrates. The subtext of individuals and communities engaging in active conversation with the precepts of both religions and traditions is clear.

The treatment of tradition and the treatment of Christianity are similar in that Head exposes the unpleasantness associated with various practices. In "Witchcraft", the accounts people provide of and for witchcraft "were as solid as the reasons people give for believing in God or Jesus Christ, so that one cannot help but conclude that if a whole community creates a belief in something, that something is likely to become real" (Head, 1977, p. 47). The spaces between traditional and modern and African and Christian are tangled webs of values and meanings through which Head shows African people navigating their way, selecting and applying those which make sense. There is a second cluster of stories which takes the reader through the overlaps and undertows between tradition and modernity. The prickly choices presented in "Life" clarify this. Just as Jacob offers for free what Lebojang charges for, the eponymous Life charges the village men for sex they have previously had free, as "a necessary part of human life" which was "available whenever possible like food or water" (Head, 1977, p. 39).

But Head makes sure that we do not see these choices as simple, by ensuring a constant vacillation between the parameters of any potential binaries. While Lebojang's downfall could be attributed to an excess of deadly negative traditions, we may equally conclude that Life's murder is the result of not enough custom or tradition. In other words, there is no balance, so selection of the values that work, as between Jacob and Johannah. As the story relates, Life is not used to the way of life in which "[c]ustom demanded that people care about each other" which is "the basic strength of village life" and which created people whose "sympathetic and emotional responses were always fully awakened" (Head, 1977, p. 43). Thus, for example, it is on the basis of custom that the women of the village enact ubuntu and assist Life when she establishes herself on her arrival from Johannesburg.

When Life marries Lesego she no longer has the "hysteria and cheap rowdiness" to which she had become accustomed before she met him and she "fell into the yawn; she had nothing inside herself to cope with this way of life that had finally caught up with her" (Head, 1977, p. 43). When Life unravels, the women of the village still assist her to the best of their ability, even as they are critical of her behaviour. Even they, however, cannot prevent the tragic ending of the story as Life fails to balance the high tension of the extremities of modern existence as a prostitute with the more sedate requirements of life in the village as a married woman. When she engages in sexual activity with another man behind her husband's back, she is calmly stabbed to death by Lesego. He is arrested and tried but is not sentenced to death, nor even to life, receiving only five

years in prison. The five-year sentence to which the reader must react with disquiet may be symbolic of the lack of a new way, a compromise between Life's need for the excitement of the new, and Lesego's imposition of compliance with the old. In reacting to the murder, the white judge, not familiar with Tswana customs sees it as a crime 'of passion'. It is from Sianana, however, Lesego's friend, that the analysis comes: "Something was eluding him about the whole business, as though it had been planned from the very beginning", and he asks Lesego "Are you trying to show us that rivers never cross here?" (Head, 1977, p. 46). In summing up this story, the judge's, Life's, and Lesego's ways are all inadequate and Sianana's question about the two rivers makes clear Head's search for a third, new way, not found in this story, but alluded to in Sianana's question.

MacKenzie sees the stories taken together as a "complete portrait" of the village, creating the sense that they are "representative rather than unique" (MacKenzie, 1989b, p. 26), exemplifying an issue. *The Collector of Treasures,* he argues, "gives the impression of village life *being lived all the time for all of its inhabitants* (MacKenzie, 1989b, p. 27, emphasis added). I think the analyses above show the value of complicating this view and articulating rather the liminal spaces the stories occupy. Seeing them as exemplifications may 'flatten' them, diminishing the extent to which they can be read as exploratory of new, syncretic ways of being, where values and traditions are selected for their compliance with love and ubuntu as in addressing the question of what is beneficial for all? It is my view that Head does not essentialise in the stories she tells. To this end, Duncan Brown (2001, p. 69) comments that there are many who "police the divides of traditional and modern", arguing that Head's stories do not read as 'fables' or exemplars of types of issues but depict the material ways in which people navigate and negotiate meanings "that swirl together in myriad and ever-changing forms, manifesting themselves in diverse and shifting ways in the historical contingencies of human societies" (Brown, 2001, p. 69). In untangling some of the ways in which Head has made complex the questions of Christian and traditional values in the hands of African characters, I concur with Brown's view. I would, however, add that the stories present in fictional form Oruka's assertion that "the problem in traditional Africa is not lack of logic, reason, or scientific curiosity, since we can find many sages there with a system of thought employing a rigorous use of these mental gifts" (Oruka, 1991, p. 50). Head's sages are ordinary villagers who figure out for themselves what has value and what does not, making meaning in a world in flux. Oral literary forms aside, "communal consensus, a fact typical of most traditional societies, should not be seen as a hindrance for individual critical reflection" (Oruka,

1991, p. 50), as is often posited by the individual view of the western self. In Head's stories, consensus works as much to advance change, not simply to enforce compliance.

Head's sages in these stories are developed yet further in the last two of her works. Oruka defines a sage as a person who is "versed in the wisdoms and traditions of his people, and very often he is recognized by the people themselves as having this gift" (Oruka, 1991, p. 51). The characters Sebembele and Monemapee in the opening story of the collection, "The Deep River," are both sages: the latter in respect of his understanding of Tswana custom, the former in his ability to challenge these customary practices, rationally and reasonably. However, sage status is not simply accorded to all who are well versed in custom, as the story "Looking for a Rain God" demonstrates where a knowledge of custom in the absence of the consensus of the community (as displayed in "Kgotla") has disastrous results. Although the old man in "Looking for a Rain God" has an "ancient memory" stirred no doubt by the extremities of the drought, is neither a memory nor a custom which should be enacted. The third person narrator makes clear that his 'memory' of witchcraft has been overlaid by "mists" which buried the memory under "years and years of prayer in a Christian church" (Head, 1977, p. 59). What is clear is that he has access to a reliable thing: neither actual ritual practice constrained by consensus, nor to Christian prayer. The dreadful result is that he develops a conviction of which he speaks with "unshakable authority" (Head, 1977, p. 59) and the suffering family sacrifices its two little girls to the 'rain god', letting their blood into the ground, with no success. On their return to communal life in the village, their "ashen, terror-stricken faces" trigger "great unease" among the villagers who note the absence of the two little girls and comment on this to the family (Head, 1977, p. 59). The mother breaks down and tells the truth to the villagers revealing an inability to understand or solve the "inconsistencies of their culture" nor cope "with the foreign innovations that encroach on it" (Head, 1977, p. 59). If the antidote to tradition is not Christianity, and the antidote to Christianity is not tradition, the answer must lie elsewhere, a theme explored in the next story under discussion.

In "Witchcraft" again neither Christianity nor ritual sorcery triumph. What does, however, is Mma-Mabele's sagacity founded in an intense practicality and rationality. In the story, Mma-Mabele decides that she does not need a man, for which she is vilified and derogatorily called a he-man. Although she knows of the Tswana baloi – wizards or witches who cause harmful mischief and hurt people with sorcery – Mma-Mabele rationalises that while poison may kill one, there is no such thing as being bewitched (Head, 1977, p. 48). When she becomes the

apparent target of a bewitching, her hair falls out, she cannot sleep, she loses an enormous amount of weight and has the most dreadful headaches. Despite this, she continues to work to feed herself and her family. She steadfastly rejects offers of assistance by the Tswana doctor, Lekena, initially citing her Christian beliefs. When 'the thing' that is tormenting her does not respond to her prayers for protection from Jesus, Lekena attributes this to the independence of Botswana (Head, 1977, p. 55). Left without protection from either Jesus or Tswana traditional custom, Mma-Mabele suffers on for a year, resisting all enticements from Lekena and others. Towards the end of that year on leave from work, she takes to her bed, and is like a dying person for many days. But, "[j]ust when everyone expected news of her death, she suddenly recovered and began to eat voraciously and recover her health" (Head, 1977, p. 55). Questioned by villagers about her miraculous recovery, she responds angrily,

> You all make me sick! There is no one to help the people, not even God. I could not sit down because I am too poor and there is no one else to feed my children (Head, 1977, p. 56).

The answers to the problems faced in the village are in her sage application not of religious or other beliefs, but in rational and practical responses to the needs of self and family, inherent in the everyday work and responsibilities of women.

In "Snapshots of a Wedding", Head depicts the kind of sage Oruka terms the "moralists and the disciplined diehard faithfuls to a tradition" in the sense that are historians and interpreters of the "history and customs of their people" (Oruka, 1991, p. 51). Although some sages may be "wise within the conventional and historical confines of their culture" (Oruka, 1991, p. 51), they are not necessarily capable of navigating new ways. By way of example, when the maternal aunt in "Snapshots of a Wedding" berates her niece to 'Be a good wife! Be a good wife' she is expressing the traditional mores and values she sees as absent in her niece (Head, 1977, p. 80). The niece, clothed in the appearance of custom, has none of the benefits of its teachings, and finds no depth in the modern education and ways she has taken on. The message the older woman attempts to communicate to the younger woman in its outdated language and form misses its mark. But the younger woman who is 'well-educated' has no manners and shows no respect to those around her, fancying herself the better person for being educated and western. Her name, Neo, with its connotations of newness, and her personality stand in contrast to those of her husband-to-be's girlfriend, Mathata. As Mathata is uneducated and 'traditional',

Neo fears no competition from her. She is everything that Neo is not. As it turns out, Mathata is wrong and Kegoletile, her husband-to-be, "spent most of his free time in the yard of Mathata", showering her with gifts that would, ironically, have been more appreciated by Neo (Head, 1977, p. 78). Neo is "false" with "acquired, grand-madame ways"; Mathata is "always smiling and happy; immediately and always her own natural self" (Head, 1977, p. 78). When Neo conforms to a traditional wedding, she does so superficially without no recognition of how these traditions serve to initiate the newly married into family and community. As Neo's own family dislikes her, no-one in her family or in her wider circle articulates the risks posed by Mathata, with the result that she shakily straddles the two worlds with which she is confronted, rejecting traditional ways as outdated. The implication is clear: Kegoletile is marrying Neo for her wealth and earning potential, for material goods. But it is with Mathata that Kegoletile has his only child, and who entrenches his membership in the family and village, a loss Neo does not comprehend.

The stories depict together the difficulties experienced by those caught in cultural, religious and political cross-currents and, despite the ostensible sagacity of the wise ones in the village and although some "of their insights may well be unique or clever, they may not seem like satisfactory answers either to traditional African or to Western questions" (Presbey, 2002, p. 16). The inability to see that both ways have value and that the approach is not an 'either-or' is the source of the trouble for the protagonists.

In the story of "The Special One", Gaenametse's husband torments her with his visits to another woman (Head, 1977, p. 82). Gaenametse and her friend, Mrs Maleboge, who too has been treated poorly by her deceased husband's relatives, pray to Jesus for assistance with the polygamous impulses of the errant husband. Both Gaenametse and Mrs Maleboge do not have a man in their lives once Gaenametse divorces her husband and have in common that they seek the company of young men. They are different in two key respects. First, Mrs Maleboge is hard up whereas Gaenametse is well off. Secondly, and more importantly, whereas Mrs Maleboge does not become emotionally embroiled with the young men she is seeing, Gaenametse is constantly upset, unable to accept the polyamorous nature of her young boyfriends (Head, 1977, p. 85). As a result, she is constantly in an agitated emotional state, seeking male attention.

Happily, for Gaenametse a significant change in her character is noted by the narrator, revealed in the final paragraphs of the story. We learn that Gaenametse has found herself a man for

whom she is his ‘special one’. He is older than she, and a ‘priest’, reading his Bible when the narrator introduces him to the reader. Although we could intuit that it is his Christian beliefs that lead him to monogamy, this is belied by two key facts: one, he is an older man, with greying hair, and thus typically associated with the ‘old’ ways; and two, although Christian (despite it being his own church, he is reading the Bible), he and Gaenametse are not married, and are thus living in ‘sin’. That fact notwithstanding, she is “happy in a complacent kind of way” (Head, 1977, p. 85) and the ‘new’ and happy way is the way of the ‘old’ man whose wisdom is represented by the ‘new’ choice of monogamy.

The penultimate story in the collection and the one for which the collection is named is also the story most written about. Dikeledi is imprisoned in the company of women who have also killed their husbands. Critical commentary on the feminist implications and interpretations of the murder of husbands by their wives, and particular on the fact that the murders are the result of cutting off the men’s genitals is to be expected (for example, Chetin, 1989; Harrow, 1993; MacKenzie, 1989b; Sandwith, Fasselt and Soldati-Kahimbaara, 2022). “The Collector of Treasures” and the final story in the collection, “Hunting”, may be read together. Given the murders that take place in the story, the reference to ‘treasures’ in the title is unexpected. Similarly, the story “Hunting” has less to do with hunting for animals than it has to do with ‘hunting’ through the events and stories of life to find goodness. Together, the stories illustrate several aspects that have already been discussed in this chapter and are used here to reach some tentative conclusions about the narrative direction of the final two publications, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* and *A Bewitched Crossroad*.

In the first of the two stories, Dikeledi is in prison for killing her husband by cutting off his genitals with a sharpened kitchen knife. Once in prison, she meets four other women who have murdered their husbands and Kebonye who has also killed her husband. Kebonye kills her husband too by removing his genitals because he, an education officer who suspended other male teachers who had made school girls pregnant, was guilty of the same crime (Head, 1977, p. 90). The implications of the removal of male genitals are obvious, and although men are presented as the reason for the incarceration of women, the women are more than just murderers. The story focuses on them as constituting a community, and on Dikeledi’s skills with knitting, sewing, and weaving which become apparent as they are required to work in prison. From this community of women, Dikeledi continues to experience kindness and continues to give it to others, just as she did before she was in prison. Kebonye acknowledges

the need for kindness thus: “we must help each other … This is a terrible world. There is only misery here” (Head, 1977, p. 91). The balances in the story belie and reinforce the truth of this statement.

The narrator tells the reader that before the colonial invasion there were strict rules which governed the ways in which all men were required to behave towards women, regardless of what type of men they were. Whether inclined to kindness or inclined to coarseness, women were protected from the worst excesses of men by rules. These were, the narrator asserts, compassionate rules, put in place “for the good of the society as a whole” (Head, 1977, p. 92). Contradictorily, however, the rules were there because not only were there two types of men, but also women “were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life” (Head, 1977, p. 92). Although protections for women were in place previously, migrant labour patterns and the colonial period exacerbated the negatives of the “old, traditional form of family life” which provided for “the childlike discipline of custom” (Head, 1977, p. 92). When men were required to act as carers in their community, the new ways had resulted in men unable to turn inwards and, when they did, found themselves to have no inner resources at all. Dikeledi’s husband Garesego is just such a man – in possession of neither customary constraint nor, despite Head’s generalisations about men, the ‘modern’ ability to define himself.

A completely new kind of man is also offered and Dikeledi’s neighbour Paul Thebolo is one of these. Paul has “the power to create himself anew”, turning all that he has towards his family, and is “a poem of tenderness” (Head, 1977, p. 93). Like Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Paul has a natural sagacity, a wisdom from which he recognises Dikeledi for the good woman she is: “It was the truth, and the gift was offered like a nugget of gold. Only men like Paul Thebolo could offer such gifts” (Head, 1977, p. 98). But in another sense, he is also depicted as the modern embodiment of the best of the customary laws which had governed the ways in which women were to be treated transmuted into a contemporary context.

Dikeledi’s husband, a man on “the bottom rung of government” is characterised as a cock whose place in the hen-pen has been taken (Head, 1977, p. 100). Unable to accept that Paul’s interest in Dikeledi is not sexual, Garesego decides to assert his long ignored marital ‘rights’ over Dikeledi. Although having sought support from him for her son’s education, once Dikeledi realises that he has no interest in the children, intending rather to force himself onto her, the decision to enact her plan is made:

> Her life had become *holy* to her during all those years … she had filled her life with *treasures of kindness and love* she had gathered from others and it was all this that she wanted to protect from defilement by an evil man (Head, 1977, p. 101, emphasis added).

The problem is that love and kindness do not alone protect one from the potential violence and misogyny of men like Garesego. Dikeledi's actions match the ferocity with which Garesego comes back into her life and she meets his arrogance quietly and directly. Dikeledi's actions are the fictional embodiment of where Head has arrived with stories of love: the sharpened knife and a hardworking woman's hands have to excise what is not working. The new way is quite literally to be carved out. On discovering the murder, it is Paul who takes care of the children, embodying the 'good man' and acting on an understanding and acceptance of her actions.

In the final story, we meet Tholo. The other men in the village are unsure of his kind, gentle and quiet ways, wondering whether he is perhaps "a girl or what" (Head, 1977, p. 105). They also, however, see that he is "just like a chief", with the "true power of life in him" (Head, 1977, p. 105). Tholo and his wife Thoko, like Paul and Kenalepe in "The Collector of Treasures", are good people, kind and generous to a fault. Like Paul, Tholo is also a new man, educated in the ways of agricultural college, and in possession of a tractor (Head, 1977, p. 106) but also living in keeping with communal values of ubuntu. He is a man "incapable of hurting life, … he cared about everything" (Head, 1977, p. 107). Although his wife Thoko is from a poor family and is uneducated, she is his perfect match. She is wise and able to think, a trait Tholo's family notes, although negatively (Head, 1977, p. 108). To Tholo's gentle kindness and ways of being a man, Thoko brings her wisdom: the ability to "sift and sort out all the calamities of everyday life with the unerring heart of a good story-teller" (Head, 1977, p. 109). Tholo's summing up of the situation, that "[p]eople don't know how to treat each other nicely" and the narrator's observation that "[n]othing could sort out the world. It would always be a painful muddle" (Head, 1977, p. 109) are the closing lines of the collection.

In "Hunting", what differentiates one man from another is service to others, ubuntu, depicted in Tholo's acceptance that although he is the owner of the tractor and uses it to earn money, it is not he who decides which of the villagers will go hunting with him: "The men drew lots as

to whom would go hunting with him each season, so that the good fortune of hunting wild animals with a tractor could be experienced by every man in the village" (Head, 1977, p. 105). Closing the circle, the men in the village recognise Tholo's value, saying that "We are lucky to have such a good man living with us …" (Head, 1977, p. 105).

6.4. Conclusion

Taken collectively, the stories in the collection make clear that although the solutions to the problems of life in the village are unclear and not always readily accessible, they are there. Neither of the closing stories, for example, settles on the old traditional ways or the 'modern' ways as correct to the exclusion of the other. Many of the stories canvassed posit a third, new way of being in the world. The integration of the beneficial aspects of tradition, for example, and the ways in which women were protected from the worst of men's behaviours does not override the fact that women nonetheless occupied a lower social position.

Similarly, the stories do not propose that *either* Christianity *or* traditional ways are 'right' – but suggest that there is a truth in both of these ways that needs to be accessed. The stories point to the fact that what is needed is a sieve to filter out what can be saved, and what cannot. The filter Head applies is whether the actions or ways of being are expressive of love or, put another way, are in line with ubuntu. Acts of love and ubuntu benefit more than just the individual but speak to a set of shared values. What happens in the stories is that regardless of the source, whether tradition, African religion, Christianity, or western modern ways, those aspects worthy of retaining are those informed by or conform to the values of love and ubuntu in ways already alluded to in the earlier books. Those which ought to be retained must be those that provide women, regardless of education or marital status, with equal consideration in a future as yet to be constructed. In Head's final two books – *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, and *A Bewitched Crossroad* – she steps back into the history to more consistently try to sort out some of the muddle.

In a set of pieces written by Head and published by Eilersen (2001), and in the *Collector of Treasures*, lie the germs of the history to come in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* and *A Bewitched Crossroad*. *The Collector of Treasures* establishes fluidity between story and history through which Head and her characters evaluate events and concepts. The collection demonstrates Head's "concern to assemble [her] research material in new and original ways"

(Eilersen, 2001, p. 8). She sees in the history of the region an "ancient Africa almost intact but with many subtle blendings of everything new and that was introduced to the people over the centuries" (Eilersen, 2001, p. 61). The variability of style and form in the last three texts reflect her view that neither African people nor African history were ever static. Head fictionalises and revitalises key aspects of African engagements drawn explicitly from written and oral histories to portray its unwritten yet remembered past. Critically though, in the selection of short stories surveyed in this chapter, Head personalises the experiences and stories of the region in ways that ensure that they are not read as happening to unnamed, unknown masses of people, loosely gathered into a category called 'Africans'. Head's stories depict the history of the area as stories of individuals, people whose lives we see into, and from whom we obtain an appreciation of the ways in which they impacted on and were impacted by the forces of history. In "The Wind and a Boy" the story of the death of a young boy is not only the poignant tale of a mother's loss and subsequent death from heartbreak, but also the opportunity for the narrator to conclude

> as was village habit, the incident was discussed thoroughly from all sides till it was understood … It looked like being an ugly story with many decapitated bodies on the main road" (Head, 1977, p. 75).

So too are Head's last three published texts.

Chapter 7: An unfinished journey

Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind and *A Bewitched Crossroad*

The story, and it is a beautiful one, has a long thread. (Head, 1981, p. xii)
Serowe's history is "precariously oral", and its monuments do not speak of the drama behind the stone (Head, 1981, p. x).

7.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that Head's sage characters introduced in the early texts are further developed to serve Head's particular purpose in the later texts, in particular *A Bewitched Crossroad*. Whereas the sages in the early texts propel individuals into personhood through incorporation into family and community structures, in the final text the role of the sage extends beyond a storytelling function and into an overt role as interpreter, historian and mediator of Africa's past, present and future. Head presents African personhood and ways of being in Africa as the self-evident conclusion from her reworked appreciation of Africa's past and its engagements with change. Head makes overt her argument that Africa's future depends on drawing from its past, and that true African personhood is achieved through acts of ubuntu or love which move individuals, communities and entire peoples forward.

In contrast to a static view of tradition versus modernity, the ability to move, to change and to adapt, Head's texts propose, is fundamental to the African way of being. Head's 'real' Africans are those whose entire personhood (thoughts, actions and decisions), regardless of race or ethnic identity, animated and motivated by love and ubuntu, are amenable to drive change for the better of the community. *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* presents Head's three wise men (Khama the Great, Tshekedi Khama and Patrick van Rensburg), her 'ideal' African persons. They effect love-grounded, ubuntu-motivated change creating the basis for a new future for Africa. In her final book, *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head uses the fictional interpolations of her most developed sage, Sebina, mining the 'real traditional' history of southern Africa and the western ways of the missionaries for her post-oppositional, inclusive African vision.

Head's views on Africa and African personhood are expressed clearly in two short pieces she penned in 1979 ("Social and political pressures that shape writing in Southern Africa" and "A note on *Rain Clouds*" (Head, 1990, pp. 65–72; 72–73)). In these, she captures her thinking thus:

> If one wishes to reach back into ancient Africa, the quality of its life has been preserved almost intact in Botswana. It is a world that moves so slowly that it seems to be asleep within itself. It is like a broad, deep, unruffled river and as accommodating. Anything that falls into its depth is absorbed. No new idea stands sharply aloof from the social body, declaiming its superiority. *It is absorbed and transformed until it emerges somewhere along the line as 'our traditional custom.'* Everything is touched by 'our traditional custom' – British Imperialism, English, Independence, new educational methods, progress, and foreigners. It all belongs. So deep is people's sense of security that their general expression is one of abstraction and quiet absent-mindedness (Head, 1990, pp. 69–70, emphasis added).

The highlighted sentence provides insight into the way in which Head applies the history of the region to *A Bewitched Crossroad* and *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. In order to make her observations credible and to use these as the basis for an ubuntu-based African personhood, she needs African characters to articulate it. Thus, in the second piece, she says that for a long time she

> held on to the same theme. I would deliberately create heroes and show their extreme willingness to abdicate from positions of power and absorb themselves in activities which would be of immense benefit to people … I built an horizon in which black men of talent were portrayed in activities which were 'a new beginning' (Head, 1990, p. 73).

As the reading of the final two texts below demonstrates, Head offers her readers a deeply syncretic view of Africa and what it is to be 'African' which proceeds from a post-oppositional application of love and ubuntu. To borrow from Stuart Woolman's and Dennis Davis's concept of 'creole liberalism' (Woolman and Davis, 1996) in Head's works the traditional/African and Christian/western are creolised into a new African personhood based on a deep history of change and adaptation. Head's syncretic worldview incorporates a range of religions and philosophies, political standpoints, and psychological interpretations. Where Woolman and Davis show that

judges' interpretations of South Africa's constitutions[33] resulted from a creole liberalism, Head's interpretation of Africa's history is equally a creole of predominantly African and Christian elements. The legal argument can be set out briefly as follows: the initial bill of rights proposed by the drafters of South Africa's constitution embraced the 1923 ANC African Bill of Rights, the 1943 African Claims (set out by the ANC), the *Freedom Charter*, and the ANC's 1988 constitutional guidelines (Davis, 2003, p. 183). In interpreting the constitutions, Constitutional Court judges have turned frequently to sources external to the constitutions themselves, notably to the "grand narrative" of South African history (De Vos, 2001, p. 4). In this way, De Vos argues, the constitutions and their bills of rights provided a 'bridge' between South Africa's heinous past and its newly envisaged future. The *Preamble* to the interim *Constitution* requires the "need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimisation". The final *Constitution* does not mention ubuntu; however, the concept is substantively present in its interpretation (as set out in section 39) (Radebe and Phooko, 2017, p. 7). At the heart of constitutional interpretation is the fact that *all* laws, especially those "affecting the application of fundamental rights", must be interpreted in light of the *Constitution* (Woolman and Davis, 1996, p. 362). Section 39 of the final *Constitution* specifically requires that interpretations of the *Bill of Rights* "promote the values that underlie an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom".

The creole element of this approach inheres in the ways interpretations have deviated from classical liberal interpretations. In these, private relationships are "ostensibly ungoverned" by constitutional scrutiny (Woolman and Davis, 1996, p. 362); however, in South Africa interpretations of the *Constitution* are directly informed by the philosophical underpinnings of *substantive* autonomy (Woolman and Davis, 1996, p. 362). Substantive autonomy requires the recognition of the "socially constructed, *contingent and dependent nature* of the individual" (Woolman and Davis, 1996, p. 363, emphasis added) and an acknowledgement of the fact that an individual can only be autonomous if there is recognition of the economic, social and political contexts into which they are born (Woolman and Davis, 1996, p. 363). The South African state is obliged therefore to determine the "contours of those 'private' relationships which so fundamentally shape individual identity" (Woolman and Davis, 1996, p. 363). By way of example, Justice Ismail Mahomed argued that the *Constitution* is applied to "protect

[33] Democratic South Africa has had two constitutions. The first, the 'interim' constitution of 1993, and the second, the 'final' constitution of 1996.

those who have so manifestly and brutally been victimised by the private and institutionalized desecration of the values" of the Constitution (Woolman and Davis, 1996, p. 374). Justice Tholakele Madala comments similarly that "[t]he extent of the oppressive measures in South Africa was not confined to government/individual relations but equally to individual/individual relations" (Woolman and Davis, 1996, p. 379). Similar to how the judges applied South Africa's history of oppression to interpretations of the bills of rights, Head's sages serve to bridge her reimagined past with a vision of the future. The sages and their stories interpret history in ways that provide new understandings and perceptions which liberate the history from the dualistic views which she rejected.

In a way, the measure of whether something is truly African or not, or of whether it is desirable for a future Africa is the extent to which it accords with love and acts of ubuntu. These two constructs perform in her works – whether fictional or historical – the foundational work needed to move from the history of a 'darkest' Africa and, equally, the impossibility of past perfection, through the realities of the harshness of colonial and imperial rule towards a third, creole option. In Head's creole vision, the African characters she acclaims have always exercised agency and at significant moments have acted in accordance with the 'ancient' values of ubuntu and love. In this way, regardless of source – African or western – Head's sages have incorporated into Africa tradition those Christian and western ways which correspond with the African "feeling of at-oneness with all living things" at "the base of African traditional life" (Head, 1990, p. 51). Head legitimates this view depicting as African sages the three men at the core of Serowe's history (Khama the Great, Tshekedi Khama, and Patrick van Rensburg), and in the character of Sebina in *A Bewitched Crossroad*.

In this chapter, I provide a brief summary of the texts, and highlight some of the key differences and similarities between *Serowe* and *Akenfield* on which it is based. Through the characters of the sage philosopher, I then examine how Head's lens recalibrates as the stories move from characters of her imagination to historical figures from the region. Finally, I examine the use to which Head puts tradition in her last two texts, distinct from the early texts and how orality is applied in *The Collector of* Treasures.[34]

[34] See MacKenzie (2002, 1989b) for a detailed account of Head's use of oral storytelling modes in *The Collector of Treasures*.

7.2. Brief summary of the texts

Serowe is divided into three sections, each of which is "built around the lives and works of three men – Khama the Great, Tshekedi Khama and Patrick van Rensburg" (Head, 1981, p. xii). Part One focuses on the creation of the Bamangwato nation and interactions with missionaries and mission education, focusing on the interplay between traditional mores and methods and Khama's 'reforms'. In Part Two, the interviews centre on Tshekedi Khama's commitment to education and the introduction of medical practices into the area. Part Three, the concluding section of the books, contains interviews with participants in van Rensburg's brigades, or community self-help projects. The epilogue is a 'poem' to Serowe by Head, and the Appendix provides a history of British Bechuanaland. Unlike in *Akenfield*, Head's interviewees are named and she ensured that each received a copy of the book, although some had passed away by the time she obtained these MacKenzie, 1997).

In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head returns to the novel, shaping and remaking this 'rag-bag' to rework the history, blending fiction and fact with interpretation and narrative commentary. The novel opens with a description of the night sky, perhaps in a reference to timelessness: " … the stars swung down low in the sky at night and glowed with pure blue lights between the dark, black bushes" (Head, 1984, p. 9). The very next line locates it in "about the year 1800" when the "restless' desire of all the chiefs' sons [was] to be "rulers in their own right" with the result that many broke from the parent body (Head, 1984, p. 9). That migration and movement to set the tone for the novel are made clear at the outset, as Sebina's people "were to change their name and place of abode many times. Their lives and destinies were to mirror the anguish and wonder of a new era" (Head, 1984, p. 9). What follows is a story of absorption into one clan, and a peaceful period, disrupted by the arrival of the Matabele, "a barbarous foe" (Head, 1984, p. 16). The Mfecane – the 'wars of calamity' – took place between 1816 and 1837, before which there had been peace (Head, 1984, p. 19). Peace was not to follow as tensions between the British and Transvaal Boers affect Africans north of the Cape Colony. As the Boers trek north, tribes from the south attack those in their path, in the search for new places to settle (Head, 1984, p. 41). At the same time, missionaries arrived in the area (Head, 1984, pp. 42–43). In 1848, Sechele (chief of the Bamangwato) was baptised, and relinquished four of his five wives (Head, 1984, p. 45). Attacks by the Transvaal Boers in 1852 result in livestock losses and in the kidnap of women and children as 'apprentices' (Head, 1984, p. 47). In 1862, missionary John Mackenzie arrives in Shoshong, "appointed to a permanent post among the Bamangwato" (Head, 1984, p. 48). Head

picks up on Mackenzie's "broad and generous" sympathies, his humility and belief in the "oneness of the human race" (Head, 1984, p. 48). Christianity causes a rift between Chief Sekgoma and his son, Khama. Nonetheless, Shoshong was peaceful, and the missionaries focused on teaching reading and writing, as the 'People of the Book' studied from the Bible (Head, 1984, p. 49).

A period of civil war follows, and Khama asserts himself against his father and brother, and in 1875 Khama is installed as Chief of the Bamangwato (Head, 1984, pp. 53–55). Khama's changes are described as follows: "[t]he image of Khama now fell upon the land of northern Bechuanaland like a magic bewitchment" (Head, 1984, p. 57). Into Khama's settlement comes Sebina, a fictional character and interpreter for the reader and other characters of both the new and old ways. He brings with him his tribe, seeking refuge and safety from the Matabele ((Head, 1984, pp. 64–65). He is soon joined by Maruapula, the son of a fellow tribesman who fled from the Matabele. Sebina and Christian missionary, Hepburn, discuss religion, custom and faith (Head, 1984, pp. 72–75).

The death of Sekgoma (Head, 1984, p. 85) and the increasing encroachment of the Boers continues (Head, 1984, pp. 85–87) and Khama strategises to protect his people from their vicious and violent ways (Head, 1984, p. 94). In May 1885, Bechuanaland is declared a British protectorate (Head, 1984, p. 102) which Khama saw as the Bamangwato's "only chance of survival" (Head, 1984, p. 115). Nonetheless, they are exposed to Britain's empire-building in the region (Head, 1984, p. 108). The terms of British protection are debated by the headmen, and Sebina's and others' thoughts and observations are offered (Head, 1984, p. 117). Sechele stirs up trouble, agitating against Khama's leadership and unsuccessfully attempts to lead 1000 men against Khama (Head, 1984).

All but one of Sebina's 12 wives and their children wish to convert to Christianity (Head, 1984, p. 129). Sebina's son, a convert, teaches him about the Christian faith which he finds both bewildering and familiar, choosing to remain in his own traditional way with his senior wife (Head, 1984, pp. 131–132) although not preventing the others from choosing for themselves. A group of bright young boys from the ward are sent to Lovedale College for an education (Head, 1984, p. 133).

Disturbances continue as the Boers encroach, trespassing on Khama's land, and killing and poaching animals (Head, 1984, pp. 136–137). Responding to Seleka's collaboration, Khama conducts a successful attack (Head, 1984, p. 139); and also expels the troublesome British traders who are importing brandy into Shoshong (Head, 1984, p. 139). In 1887, Khama is tricked into signing concessions to the Northern Gold Fields Exploration Syndicate, a situation resolved both by the administrator, Sheppard, and on his return to Shoshong, by Mackenzie (Head, 1984, pp. 144–145). As the scramble for Africa intensifies across Mashonaland, Cecil John Rhodes and his rivals vie for economic control of the region (Head, 1984, pp. 154–159):

> A culture like that, a confusion of good and evil, of Rhodeses and Earl Greys, was poised to strike at a culture that still lived along ancient lines of kraals, growers and cattle and was essentially defenceless before its power (Head, 1984, p. 161).

Meanwhile, the water at Shoshong has dried up, and Khama moves his people to Palapye, 150 kilometres away (Head, 1984, p. 161), a trip of a month. In the new capital, Khama further amends traditional practices, abolishing the bride price (in 1890), and Head uses the proceedings to highlight Khama's sophistication and the working of kgotla (Head, 1984, pp. 165; 169–173). British expansion reaches further into Khama's realm and the British government places various "public services" under Moffat's command (Head, 1984, p. 176). In 1891, malarial fever catches up with Hepburn, affecting his reason and resulting in arguments and disagreements with Khama. Despite their long and positive association, Hepburn is asked to leave and does so, ending "a beautiful friendship of mutual trust and o-operation" (Head, 1984, p. 178). By 1893, Khama is surrounded by "crooks and thugs on all sides" (Head, 1984, p. 181). Caught between the British, Cecil John Rhodes, and the Matabele Chief Lobengula, among others, he fears their proximity to Palapye. As stories of the atrocities in Mashonaland and Matabeleland come trickling in with the refugees (Head, 1984, p. 184), Khama looks for ways to safeguard the settlement. In 1885, the Cape Assembly votes to annex Bechuanaland and Khama and other African leaders petition the colonial secretary for protection (Head, 1984, p. 187), sailing to England in August of that year to make their case (Head, 1984, p. 188). Khama's fame and popularity among various humanitarian groups in England offer him protection from the greed and reach of Rhodes (Head, 1984, p. 190), and protection is awarded.

The final chapter of the novel opens with drought – "The whole earth died that year" (Head, 1984, p. 192) – exacerbated by the rinderpest. Desperation results, causing an uprising in

Matabeleland during which 130 settlers are killed. Rhodes, aggressive and bloodthirsty, orders the indiscriminate killing of as many Africans as possible, with the result a "period of darkness when they had no life other than as the servants of the white man" (Head, 1984, p. 193). Sebina dies, and the young men who left for an education return to Palapye. The novel opened with the night sky, and closes with the rising sun as Bechuanaland becomes Botswana in 1966:

> The land eluded the colonial era. The forces of the scramble for Africa passed through it like a huge and destructive storm but a storm that passed on to other lands. It remained black man's country. It was a bewitched crossroad. Each day the son rose on a hallowed land (Head, 1984, p. 196).

7.3. *Serowe* and *Akenfield*: same but different

Given that *Serowe* is modelled on *Akenfield*, targeted comparisons between the texts reveal some of the ways in which Head thought about Serowe and its history. At the outset, it is not entirely clear where Head sees herself in relation to the villages she narrates, whether in *Serowe* or in *A Bewitched Crossroad*. Although not mentioned in the 1969 version of *Akenfield*, in the electronic version republished in 1998, Blythe asserts his right to speak for the village, saying his

> only real (sic) credentials for having written it was that I was *native to its situation in nearly every way* and had only to listen to hear my own world talking (Blythe 1999, n.p., emphasis added).

Head's view of her own authority is a more ambiguous. In the introduction to *Serowe*, she remarks on the view that an outsider might have of the changes in the village, in particular to those relating to the traditional way of life. Whether she sees herself as 'insider' in contrast to this 'outsider' is not clear although hints as to her perspective may be obtained from the language she uses. Initially, she refers to the "Serowe people" as "they", but moves to "we" only a page later (Head, 1981, pp. vii; viii), sharing the common experience with the villagers as "just living" (Head, 1981, p. ix). It may be said then that she is some kind of participant observer, flexing her inside and outside status as allowing her the privileged perspective needed: the detailed accounts of village life, of the working of kgotla and of ancient crafts and practices serve to emphasise the veracity of her descriptions of other aspects of life, and particularly of her view of history and of

her presentation of adaptability and flexibility as inherently African. In *Serowe*, she gestures to the importance of an 'inside' view of African history:

> Africa was never 'the dark continent' to African people and they had passed through Shoshong long before Livingstone with reports of the white man's deeds, especially his land greed. With Khama, one continually gets the impression that he was deliberately reversing the tide that had swallowed up and submerged other black peoples in southern Africa. One of his laws, still adhered to in the land, reads: 'The lands of the Bamangwato are not saleable … I say this law is also good' (Head, 1981, p. xiii).

Another commonality between the two villages is their apparent isolation and, perhaps as a result, their 'need' for a spokesperson. Blythe says Akenfield lies off a "handsome stretch of Roman road, apparently going nowhere … Centuries of traffic must have passed within yards of Akenfield without noticing it" (Blythe, 1969, p. 13). Head had written about Serowe that it holds no interest for the historian who does not write about people or about "how strange and beautiful they are", and who might simply remark that Livingstone was there at some point (Head, 1990, p. 30). Thus, although perhaps not considered remarkable by others, each village is made significant by their respective mediators, and their commentaries interwoven between the words of the villagers frame the meanings of the villagers' stories and draw the readers' attention to the issues of importance.

Whether the reader ought to see the village of the text as 'typical' or not is another interesting enquiry. Blythe presents the universality of the village as a form of life as important, placing clear emphasis on the sameness of 'his' 1960s English villagers to the "the rice-harvesters in Vietnam or the wine-makers of Burgundy" (Blythe, 1969, p. 15). All, he says, are "imprisoned by the sheer implacability of the everlasting cycle of fertility" (Blythe, 1969, p. 15) and the "crushing, limiting power which the village exerts on families which have never escaped" (Blythe, 1969, p. 17). Head's view is markedly different and although there may be aspects of Serowe that she depicts as 'typical' of an African village in her texts, she takes care to communicate why we ought to appreciate Serowe and, by extension, Botswana as unique cases. In Head's hands, rather than restrictive or inescapable, village life provides a "a sense of woven-ness, a wholeness in life here; a feeling of how strange and beautiful people can be" (Head, 1981, pp. viii–ix). Thus although the cycle of fertility which dictates the villagers' work is

common to both, in *Serowe* this is not seen as restrictive or inhibiting but as evidence of creative resilience and resourcefulness: the seasonally repeated decoration and redecoration of mud huts and courtyards by the women as life goes on as it has "for ages and ages - this flat continuity of life; this strength of holding on and living with the barest necessities" (Head, 1981, p. ix).

Migration is also common to both villages, and as Akenfield's residents move in cars, mopeds or busses from village to towns and cities for employment, Serowe's inhabitants move between their various rural homes spread out around the village "all the time", eking out a living, and taking up residence in the village, the cattle post and the lands as required by the demands of the season (Head, 1981, p. ix). In Head's treatment, migration is both a blight (as in the impact on family life), and a blessing (as in when people escape oppression to join the Bamangwato).

Thus, whereas Akenfield is rooted, spreading but never moving, Serowe is only the most recent resting place of a people with a history of continuous movement and migration. Khama moved all his followers (totalling 20 000 people in the late 1800s) from Shoshong to Palapye, who then moved later again to Serowe (Head, 1981, p. x). Akenfield's soldiers travelled to the great wars of Europe; Serowe's inhabitants fled from wars to share in Khama's safety (Head, 1981, p. x). Serowe's refugee population results from a range of wars in southern Africa in both the 19th and 20th centuries to more recent escapees from South Africa's apartheid state. Head's depictions of Serowe serve continuously to emphasise the continuous movement of people seeking to make clear that despite its

> ancient pattern, no other village in Botswana is *as dynamic as Serowe* and no other has seen *so much tangible change*. This continuous change and upheaval was often brought about by *spectacular and original leaders* like Khama the Great and his son, Tshekedi Khama, because Bamangwato people have always had genius in their leadership and tended to identify genius or 'that something different' with traditional leadership (Head, 1981, pp. xi–xii).

Both *Akenfield* and *Serowe* examine the role of religion in the village. The prism through which the events in Serowe are told is Khama the Great, a Christian convert who, while addressing attacks from other tribes, also dealt with the encroaching economic interests of the colonial powers. Engaging with the old and the new, Khama replaced "the old order of tradition, ritual and ceremony" with "a completely new order of things" (Head, 1981, p. x) so that by the time

Tshekedi Khama took over, there was nothing left of the old, traditional order, a situation the older generation found difficult, "express[ing] unease about the future" (Head, 1981, p. x). Similarly, Akenfield's older residents face changes with unease, seeing it as "metamorphosis, neither more nor less" and Blythe comments that one of the old men, Len, is "doing his utmost to comprehend the foreign" (Blythe, 1969, p. 33).

Head's depictions of the old people's encountering change are markedly different. Mokgojwa Mathware's reaction (in *Serowe*) is to respond to "new tools, new ways of living, …[with] an enchanting way of saying: '*Thakaaf*!' which means: 'I'm surprised!'" (Head, 1981, p. 13). Head's driving desire is to depict Khama's changes as liberatory, as representing freedom from the negative aspects of tradition and the overburdensome elements of Christianity, providing African possibilities for "social reform and educational advance which have been a reality of village life" (Head, 1981, p. xii). Interestingly, and similar to the literate/oral interplay in *A Bewitched Crossroad*, at least some of the old and the new in *Akenfield* is characterised as a difference between "the literate and informed" and "the mysterious and intuitive" (Blythe, 1969, p. 17).

The almost ethnographic detail on life, work, politics and change in the village make real the economic, political and social life of Africans as Head speakers lend authority to her views. Through her characters and speakers, as well as the third person narrative voice, Head responds to a racist view which would dismiss Africans as unsophisticated heathens, while also rejecting an overly simplistic pan-Africanist view which would valorise 'rediscovered' traditions as the single and ideal alternative to western ways. In the context of Head's own views on politics, the fictional and non-fictional conspire, creating a creole image of a dynamic culture of African-ness against the fabric of life in one African village.

7.4. The sage philosopher

> *"Khama was a gift of God to the people. He was not educated, you know; he had only a Tswana education but he was in religion and rule what they call a sage"* (Tsogang Sebina in Head, 1981, p. 27)

> *It was not the face of a mean betrayer of trust; it was the face of wisdom. He settled himself at the feet of the old man* (Head, 1984, p. 68).

Cary applies Bakhtin's opposition to "monological ideological authoritarianism" to Head's works, arguing that an author's ideological conflicts may be evident in the fictional conflicts written (Cary, 1995, p. 39). He contends that Head's fictional texts work "intertextually" with the nonfictional works, in a dialogue. In this way, he argues, she seeks to "undermine political, racial, and religious singularity" (Cary, 1995, p. 39). Extrapolating from this, the dialogue between Head's texts is not fundamentally a dialogue between 'fact' and 'fiction' but a dialogue from which a third narrative – what *should* be – becomes dominant. The sages in Head's texts are the narrative devices through which Head expresses her creole conclusions about what constitutes African identity.

Head's rural focus is deliberate and calculated. While it may, as critics have argued, resulted in her being seen as a "literary misfit," Nixon's observation that she be seen rather as

> a writer who anticipated the need to counterbalance … [South African] literature's fixation with male, urban experience and with realms of spectacular conflict rather than quotidian survival (Nixon, 1993, pp. 122–123).

Significantly, the rural setting allows Head to claim direct access to the oral history of the area, and to the older sages and informants on whose memories she relies to establish the groundwork for her approach. She uses the rural history and traditions of Serowe to develop her vision of new worlds and a new race – seeking not to 'liberate' how we see the world from established binaries, but to change the foundations on which these binaries are premised. The texts offer an answer to Mir's question about the place of literature in writing history (Mir, 2006, p. 727), suggesting that Head is seeking in the texts to resolve her "concern to assemble [her] research material in new and original ways" (Eilersen, 2001, p. 8).

In the fictionally reconstructed history of the Balaote tribe offered in "The Deep River" in *The Collector of Treasures* (Head, 1977), both the old chief Monemapee and his son Sebembele are sage leaders. The elder, who "ruled the tribe for many years as the hairs on his head were already saying white! (sic) by the time he died" governed his people, who lived "like one face, under their chief" (Head, 1977, p. 1). Monemapee's son, Sebembele, is equally a sage, however, for his assertion of new ways of being, and no less deserving of the leadership afforded him by his people. Sebembele chooses his love for a woman and his child over the chiefship and the will of the tribal councillors and in doing so forces his people to see that "they had a ruler who talked

with deeds rather than with words. They saw that the time had come for them to offer up their individual faces to the face of this rule" (Head, 1977, p. 5). The shift in the way in which community is conceived of – from one face to many faces – is metaphorical of Head's positioning of the relationship between the person and the collective in the context of ubuntu. The individual's values both integrate with the community or, in reflecting them back to their constituents, create the conditions for self-reflective amendments which drive continuous change and enable adjustment to these changes.

The characteristics of sage philosophers initiated in early characters such as Dinorego and Mma Millipede (*When Rain Clouds Gather*) and Monemapee and Sebembele (*The Collector of Treasures*) reach their apotheosis in the final two books with Head's depictions of the Khamas and the character of Sebina. In a passing comment about Khama the Great, Head says the "Bamangwato had the good fortune to be governed by a sage" and although Khama "moralised to the point of boredom" about alcohol, his intellect was wide and deep and his management of the economic affairs of his tribe excellent. The sages in the final two texts manifest in common a post-oppositional ability to straddle, select from, combine and recombine the various sources and resources they encounter, and to apply this creole mixture to the benefit of their family, tribe, community or village.

Khama the Great's conversion to Christianity and the subsequent amendments to traditional practice are, in Head's narrative, designed to "make his society more compassionate", retaining the courtesies of tradition, and removing the "harmful or brutal aspects of each custom" (Head, 1981, p. 9). Similar to the fictional Sebembele, Khama is "touched by personal insight into human suffering as opposed to *group acceptance* of tradition" (Head, 1981, p. 9, emphasis added). Just as love and acts of ubuntu work in the earlier texts, Khama's actions are not only impactful at village level, but extended to and benefit Botswana as a whole, "for he was the founder of the British Bechuanaland Protectorate who, so people firmly maintain, prevented Botswana from becoming another South Africa or Rhodesia" (Head, 1981, p. 10).

Head's sages display wisdom, analytical ability and strategic ability in making decisions and expressing their accounts in reasoned and intelligent ways. Mackenzie observes that Head adopts an "authorial voice" to frame the oral storyteller's voice (as in "Heaven is not Closed" in *The Collector of Treasures*) and this voice "intrudes at various points to provide perspectives and a linguistic style that would sound incongruous in the mouth of an uneducated old man, but that

make the story successful as a literary work" (MacKenzie, 2002, p. 357). I do not agree with Mackenzie's assertion that such perspectives or style of language are of necessity outside of the scope of anyone based on their lack of formal education or their age, although the point that Head skilfully engages with orality to produce crafted and literary works is well taken.

Head chooses her sages in *Serowe* carefully, drawing on the theme of self-help which she says dates back to Khama the Great's use of the age regiments to perform work for the community (Head, 1981, p. xv). She sees in Khama "the only black man with a voice in Britain during the scramble for Africa and the early colonial period" (Head, 1984, p. 197). The choice of the three men (Khama, Tshekedi Khama and Patrick van Rensburg) is directly informed by what Head sees as the necessity for and naturalness of change at the heart of her vision of *Serowe*. The three sages were chosen for their "responses to the adverse pressures of their time" as much as for their "astonishing record of self-help and achievement" (Head, 1981, p. xiii). They were

> all of the same kind. They wanted to change the world. They had to make great gestures. Great gestures have an oceanic effect on society – they flood a whole town (Head, 1981, p. xiv)

In *A Bewitched Crossroad,* Sebina is equally shown to be not averse to change, to be able to move between the old and new, while retaining his integrity. In the opening pages of the novel, Sebina introduces the initiation ceremonies of the refuges he takes in to his own people, becoming "a great man, famous and respected among all the Bakalanga tribes", establishing the flexibility of traditional leaders Sebina and Mengwe and alerting us to the abiding nature of change from the earliest history of the Bamangwato (Head, 1984, p. 12).

The stories of and by the sage philosophers explicate the history of the village as Head intertwines oral and written sources with her own observations, impressions and interpretations as participant observer with access to the 'real' story. She draws on a wide range of sources, including *Mmegi* newspaper (founded by van Rensburg) (Head, 1981, p. xiv), the Mary Benson biography of Khama (1960), the collected papers and writings of missionary John Mackenzie (dating to 1871), the memoirs of the Reverend J.D. Hepburn (published first in 1895), and the 1969 *Oxford History of South* Africa, no doubt somewhat constrained by what was available to her in Serowe. She supplements these with a collection of oral testimonials. Her assertion that the overarching narrative of the book – "social reform and educational progress" – was adjusted by the oral tales

told by her interviewees is significant as, for example, in the repeated stories of "tribal movement and migration": "I learned to hold on to these stories as they *vividly evoke the ancient African way of life*" (Head, 1981, p. vx, emphasis added), enhancing their authenticity and authorising her resulting depictions of the village.

The stories about Sebina and his people are woven between the more historical and 'factual' descriptions of events of the time. Sebina, however, is the real authority in the novel, and is the sage who, through his age and wisdom, holds *"*open the door to future communication, to learning, to dialogue" with the missionaries (Head, 1984, p. 73). He dislikes "aggressive attitudes of mind", coming from a "rich tradition where the people were governed with affection and justice and where the rules and courtesies of life were always known" (Head, 1984, p. 74). Sebina is a refugee who joins his tribe to the Bamangwato under Khama's rule. Sebina's interactions with Khama's decrees reveal Khama's

> … calm, thoughtful rule of the mind. The chief of the Bamangwato serves his people and he knows that his people have to adjust to the invasion of foreigners which we have no power to hold back I am impressed that the foreigners regard the chief of the Bamangwato with such great respect (Head, 1984, p. 121).

Sebina's consistency and the reliability of his viewpoint is emphasised in the move to Palapye which takes place when he is already an old man. Time and history "had blown like a storm through his life" (Head, 1984, p. 162), although "encounters with new cultures had not been alarming … all the social courtesies had been the same, and predictable" and, regardless of where he ended up, the songs of the birds were unchanging, as was "view of the flat open plains and dreaming hills" (Head, 1984, p. 163). A rigid inability to change is not a facet of age or tradition, as Sebina's character demonstrates.

Head makes clear that sagacity is not a characteristic of age nor even of experience. Rather, it derives from the ability to act in accordance with an approach that Head considers inherently African. In the introduction to Tshekedi Khama in Serowe, Head says it was one of those "rare occasions when the greatness of the father was passed onto the son" (Head, 1981, p. 91). Despite later controversies surrounding Khama's disagreement with Seretse Khama's marriage to a white woman (Head, 1981, p. 94), he proves himself "downright, pragmatic, commonsensical and geared to the real world" (Head, 1981, p. 91).

Patrick van Rensburg is equally sage and, like Khama the Great and Tshekedi Khama is characterised by a stillness and calm, "an air of impersonal abstraction" from which he relegates the personal aspects of his life to "some unimportant backroom" (Head, 1981, p. 165). Establishing the Swaneng school in Serowe, van Rensburg sought to ensure that its graduates would see themselves as "agents for progress", "under some compulsion to fight hunger, poverty and ignorance in their country" (Head, 1981, p. 167). At some point in van Rensburg's story, his individual face, "his actual personality", is lost in the massive development, which means "all sorts of things to all sorts of people but to … [Head] it means respect for the man , no matter who he is" (Head, 1981, p. 169). The ability to lead others to "own the projects they work on" is emphasised despite the questions that are raised in some of the testimonies recorded about their sustainability (Head, 1981, pp. 184, 193).

It is essential for Head's purpose that we do not see the parties to the conversation – African and colonial/Christian – in simplistic racial terms. She takes care to clarify the contrast, for example, between white missionaries David Livingstone and John Mackenzie, and between Mackenzie and Cecil John Rhodes. Head ascribes to Mackenzie an "objective sympathy" in his descriptions of the lives of people, "whether Boer or tribal man" (Head, 1981, p. 229) saying – with no irony – that he sought to rescue the Africans from the "land-grabbing activities of the Transvaal Boers" (Head, 1981, p. 231). By contrast, in 1884, Mackenzie (then Deputy Commissioner of Bechuanaland) was replaced by Cecil John Rhodes whose primary goal was the "[s]eizure of black people's lands and exploitation of their labour and resources" (Head, 1981, p. 235). Rhodes is an "evil genius" (Head, 1984, p. 185), a man of "low calibre" "squatting" on the defeated Lobengula's possessions (Head, 1984, p. 182). It is not only the white colonisers who are described thus, however. Through the experiences of Sebina's tribe's, the Matabele are warmongering "beasts of prey" who "upset this orderly existence" adhering to their own "distasteful way of life" (Head, 1984, p. 183). After a discussion of events involving the Matabele at kgotla, Sebina's son Sephobe observes that

> the people are as afraid of the white man as they have been of the Matabele … They think he [Rhodes] will seize our land and cattle the way he has seized the land and cattle of the Matabele (Head, 1984, pp. 183–184).

The use of oral testimony and giving voice to African sages goes some way towards addressing Mir's question about the "literature's place in the writing of history" (Mir, 2006, p. 727). In the

absence of a recorded, African history of Africa, and given the western voices in the written histories, Head present her works voicing both the 'great' and 'ordinary' sages who tell Africa's history. In weaving together the factual and the fictional in *A Bewitched Crossroad,* Head proposes a new form in which the veracity of the written factual is enhanced by the oral and recalled, and in turn by the fictional, turning the usual relationship between 'fact' and 'fiction' on its head. The reader is asked to take Head's and Hepburn's account of Khama as no less true than the fictionally contemporaneous commentary of her fictional sages. Factual and fictional work together to support Head's literary intent. Hence the missionary Mackenzie's written records of Khama's person and conduct accord with her own, ostensibly derived from the memories of the testimonies she collected for *Serowe.*

In the final analysis, Head's African sages could be Oruka's, capable of

> conceiving and rationally recommending ideas offering alternatives to the commonly accepted opinions and practices. They transcend the communal wisdom. They are lucky if the people recognize this special gift in them. Then they are treated with special respect and their suggestions peacefully and positively reform the people. Should the people fail to recognize their gift, then their safety in the community would demand that they remain silent and keep mum (Oruka, 1991, p. 51).

7.5. The limits of tradition

As indicated above, Head interweaves historical and fictionalised accounts so that the stories of the larger-than-life figures of history who dominate the tale (from Khama to Mackenzie, Rhodes to Lobengula) are interpreted for us by the fictional characters and families of Sebina and Maruapula. The 'big' movements of history are evident in the small, nitty-gritty details of everyday life. In order to create her 'true' African person, Head's history must be sufficiently accurate to be read as historical, while also providing her with the creative space in which to experiment. To this end, the "Author's Note" in *A Bewitched Crossroad* asserts Head's control over the narrative thus:

> The novel is not intended to be an accurate history of the Sebina clan or family but rather that the personality of Sebina was shaped as being *representative of what history could have been like then* (Head, 1984).

One of the ways in which to examine the interplay closely is by focusing on the treatment of tradition.

Head surveys the older villagers' views of tradition and of Khama the Great's reforms in *Serowe.* Mokgojwa Mathware expresses concern that the "[c]hildren no longer know the Tswana way of life … they only know modern things" which he sees as the result of "modern governments and chiefs losing their powers" (Head, 1981, p. 16). Of headman Rannau Ramojababo Head writes, he "cannot reconcile himself to the present political changes in the country … he prefers the personal and known rule of their former great chiefs, like Khama" over the impersonal rule of a government kilometres away (Head, 1981, p. 22). Referencing Khama's expectation that education if given ought to be repaid, Ramojababo says the "old man [Khama] killed us" by educating them to grade 8 and then making them work as teachers for no pay, expecting them to continue to provide for themselves from their cattle and corn (Head, 1981, p. 24). Even when directly questioned about whether Khama's reforms are the cause, for example, of the breakdown in family life, "[n]o one would attribute it" to these (Head, 1981, p. 70), pointing to the fact that their "grandparents and parents had all managed quite well under Christian custom and they had lived for year and years with these changes" (Head, 1981, p. 70). Head expresses concern about whether the force of the Khamas' personalities was sufficient to create the security needed for family life. Without *bogadi*, "the bride price or the offering of a gift of cattle by a man to his wife's family at the time of the marriage", "there seems to be nothing to bridge the ill-defined gap between one way of life and another", striking down the man as the head of family, and replacing him with a "gay, dizzy character on a permanent round of drinking and women" (Head, 1981, p. 72). Nonetheless, in *A Bewitched Crossroad*, this concern is not in evidence and the tribe's overall approval of the changes is presented.

The objections to Khama's changes as raised by the informants in *Serowe* are given a markedly different treatment in *A Bewitched Crossroad*. In *Serowe*, it is made expressly clear that it is Khama who abolishes *bogadi*. In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, however, although it is still Khama's "drastic action", the manner in which the decision is made is presented as a 'good' story (Head, 1984, p. 165). The decision is depicted as arising from the marriage of the widow Sedimo which

was contracted according to custom and involved *bogadi*. She then converts to Christianity, meets a Christian man, and wishes to marry him. But she remains "bound down by the gifts of her first marriage" and, with one family demanding the return of the gifts and the other refusing to do so, a stalemate ensues. In defiance of custom, the couple marries in the Christian church, but when Sedimo falls pregnant, customary law dictates that the child belongs to the family of her deceased husband who had paid bogadi, and not to the father, whom she had married in church. With no clear sense of how to resolve this clash of customs, Khama places the matter before the tribe who will decide how it will be resolved.

We learn through Sebina what happens, and he is "delighted … by the endless intellectual stimulus of his surroundings" (Head, 1984, p. 167). Sebina's wife, unhappy at the thought of the abolition of bogadi which provides security for women and their children, is stirred "out of her traditional, conservative mould" to Sebina's delight (Head, 1984, p. 168). Maruapula too expresses his distaste for the possibility, noting that if Khama "wants to abolish bogadi, he will abolish bogadi and we will help him to do it!" (Head, 1984, p. 168). The matter goes to kgotla where on a "broad base of love and private yearnings, improvements in the status of women and concern for the poor, … [Khama] proposed the abolition of bogadi" (Head, 1984, p. 171). Although in *Serowe* Head notes the lack of a replacement for the protection offered by bogadi, as they leave kgotla in *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Sebina muses:

> Surely this man is a great lawgiver? He tampers with the society but weight for weight, he gives back, in new form, all that he takes away. His changes concerning bogadi are as watertight as all the arguments the ancestors gave forth in favour of bogadi. Surely he is many ancestors all in one man?

Despite Maruapula's disdain for women and their potential equality (Head, 1984, p. 171) and his wife's disgruntlement, Sebina calls his court, including the women, together for the debate. Sebina's principal wife refutes the value of the abolition of bogadi, seen as a "shameful and retrogressive" rejection of the proposal expressed in a "deep, masculine voice" (Head, 1984, p. 173). Ultimately, however, the narrator tells us that Sebina's kind of "flexibility and ease" prevails, and bogadi, "by *general public approval was abolished* from Bamangwato society" (Head, 1984, p. 174, emphasis added).

The manner in which the objections to Khama's proposed reform are treated and the contradictions across the two texts' depictions thereof mean we can read Head's characterisation of the traditional objectors to Khama as her own. Refined to suit her narrative – of kgotla, of compassion, of love and service – Sebina is the post-oppositional foil to Maruapula's dualistic, 'it is tradition/custom or nothing' approach. The effect of this is reinforced by the fact that Sebina's wisdom is not questioned by Maruapula, despite his constant groans and grumbles, nor is Sebina's stature as ultimate commentator undermined.

To emphasise this point, Sebina and Maruapula, a younger man, debate several aspects of Khama's reforms and of life as part of the Bamangwato tribe. At several points in the novel Maruapula challenges the 'peace' commanded by the "Great Man" Khama, a new thing every day, which he sees as forcing the Bamangwato to give up the customs that made them men (Head, 1984, p. 69). His "unconcealed disapproval" includes Khama's banning of beer and brandy, and he argues that Khama's cleverness lies in concealing his will so that it appears that "all the people agree in their hearts" that something is good (Head, 1984, p. 70).

Sebina responds to Maruapula with patience and with laughter, concluding that he is

> too *rigid* and entirely absorbed in his own interests. He lacked any comprehension of life and *blocked all* doors to true communication. His *own interests were paramount* (Head, 1984, p. 71, emphasis added).

By contrast, Sebina's view is that changes to custom – as for example the tribe had experienced when they joined the Barolong – had "brought us no harm but was an enrichment of our lives" (Head, 1984, p. 71). Critically Sebina straddles the old, the new, the detractors and supporters of the changes, dialectic between which is most evident as Sekgoma (Khama's estranged father) approaches his death.

Sebina accompanies Maruapula to Sekgoma's deathbed, where "hostility bridled" and he was guarded by the "old men with fierce, malevolent faces, intent on shutting out anything foreign and unfamiliar" (Head, 1984, p. 86). The chapter closes with startling clarity as Head sets out Sebina's position as member-referee between Sekgoma and his adherents and Khama and his

Christian ways, incidentally a religion and church to which Sebina, to the end a traditional man, does not ascribe:

> And so Sebina was witness to the last moments of the dying Sekgoma; but it seemed as though the whole of custom and tradition were dying with Sekgoma. Feverishly, and with a startling clarity, Sekgoma was recalling his life. Secrets of the rituals of circumcision, rain-making and many other sacred ceremonies were recalled in vivid detail. The fever-racked Sekgoma muttered on and on. *Sebina listened to all this, racked and shaken to the core by an intense pain. Over all these rites, he, Sebina, had officiated, using the selfsame ritual phrases.*
>
> Suddenly the church bell of Shoshong rang out, clear and insistent, calling the Christian worshippers to Sunday service. At this, an abrupt silence entered the delirium of the dying man. He listened intently to the monotonous appeal of the church bell. When it was stilled, the dying man reached his final moment of clarity and uttered a curse on his son and his offspring … (Head, 1984, p. 86).

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Sebina straddles the old ways – aspects of which cause him great discomfort – and the new ways – for which he feels too old. He articulates the necessity for change, while only partially changing himself. He is the progenitor of the 'true' African.

This aspect of his role is most clear in the scene where Sebina approaches Hepburn to arrange for his younger wives and their children to join the church. Hepburn initially mistakes Sebina's decision as resulting from his own preachings, underestimating the "richness and creativeness of the people he worked with" and "the magnanimity of Christianity that drew all people to it" (Head, 1984, p. 132). Perhaps not *all* people, however, as Head describes Sebina as a starkly simple traditional man "in his traditional clothing of animal skin, oil and strong body odours" with, in his eyes, "the supplication of one who would open up *new worlds*, this being the *greatest*, the *highest duty* of mankind", a fact which Hepburn acknowledges with "a sudden warm embracing look" (Head, 1984, pp. 132–133, emphases added). The idealism inherent in the old man's ability to accept new ways, and in the missionary's simple acceptance of the old man's rejection of his faith reinforces the extent to which Head's vision relies on a creole of traditions, regardless of their source.

7.6. Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that Head's sages act as the historical and fictional interlocutors of her views of African personhood. Through their actions and stories, Head reinterprets Africa's history to establish what she sees as the foundations of her vision for its future. Extending the post-oppositional possibilities of love and ubuntu in the early set of novels, Head uses her reworked history of Serowe/Botswana in the last two to frame her vision of an African personhood. Across the two texts, and through the interplay between tradition and modernity, Head sets out what she sees as the fundamental characteristics of the 'new' African. Noting the inevitability of the demise of traditional rule, Head says she selected the Khama pair for their ability to navigate the transition from tradition to modernity: "Tradition, with its narrow outlook, does not combine happily with common sense, humanity and a broad outlook" (Head, 1981, p. xii). What is clear, however, is that her characterisation of tradition in her introduction to *Serowe* diverges from the more nuanced depictions she offers in *The Collector of Treasures* and *A Bewitched Crossroad*. Although she says that the Khamas were the *unwitting* liberators of people from the "old order of tradition, ritual and ceremony" (Head, 1981, p. xii), she presents them as rather more intuitive and visionary in their view of tradition in her final texts.

In *A Bewitched Crossroad,* the historical and fictional sections intertwine as each is used to justify and account for the other. Doing this permits Head to address the constraints of the structure of *Serowe*. As participant observer in *Serowe*, the voices of the villagers have at least as much but probably more authority than hers. And it is clear that they express views about the three great men of Serowe with which she does not always agree. In *A Bewitched Crossroad,* therefore, she takes over, voicing her views of tradition and history, change and African values through the character of Sebina on the one hand, and the third person omniscient narrator on the other. The form of the novel is clearly unpolished and remains significantly experimental. Head is not necessarily concerned about this, saying that she takes her cue from the people of Serowe who "experiment with anything – new ideas for educational progress, new agricultural techniques, new anything" (Head, 1990, p. 99). She credits Bertolt Brecht with allowing her

> the courage to write like that … With him ordinary mankind came into its own and he was the rich, creative artist who could make a dry and difficult doctrine like

> Marxism live … in Brecht this promise was always there – that it would be fun to reshape the world (Head, 1990, p. 99).

Her autodidacticism leads her into a wide range of sources and texts, and as self-taught researcher and ethnographer she makes unconstrained leaps between the forms. Eilersen's comment on Head's final text is relevant. She says *A Bewitched Crossroad*

> can hardly be called a historical novel in the sense that historical novels often have a romantic, adventurous element, for it sticks too doggedly to historically verified events, though its angle is new. Nevertheless, the book is formed as a novel: it has no list of contents, no maps, no index, though all three would have been most useful. However, each chapter is a clearly defined entity, depicting a particular series of events (Eilersen, 1995, p. 313).

In moving from interviewer and recorder in *Serowe* to writer and visionary creator in *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head satisfies Gail Presbey's expectation of the sage philosopher: "to do more than just make a careful record … [to provide] evaluation of and commentary upon the thoughts of others whom they encounter" (Presbey, 2002, p. 17). Both *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* and *A Bewitched Crossroad* are unique in their attempts to provide a written, African, traditional history expressing Head's creole views at the heart of her African personhood.

Chapter 8: Conclusion
An unresolved ending

Flouting the convention that one should never introduce new material in the conclusion, I begin this conclusion with the words of British-American, Ghanian-Nigerian author Taiye Selasi. Selasi expresses her wish for a time when there is no 'African literature', for when there is simply a "human literature" (Selasi, 2013). In her address to an international literary festival in 2013, Selasi argues that the term 'African literature' is worthless and should not be used. Key among the reasons she provides is that using the term African literature

> betrays a disregard both for the complexities of African cultures and the creativity of African authors. If literature is, as its finest practitioners argue, universal—then it deserves a taxonomy neither based on nor supportive of racial distinction, but reflective of the workings of the race-less human heart (Selasi, 2013).

Literature, she says, "erase[s] our personal borders" allowing the reader to "trespass the boundaries of the self and enter the wilds of the Other". In support of her argument, she uses her novel, *Ghana Must Go*, citing the following as an example of the inappropriateness of African literature. Her German publisher was reportedly:

> wary of using the novel's English title "Ghana Must Go." They, like my Italian publishers (who chose the title La Bellezza delle Cose Fragili), *feared that readers* would see the word Ghana and immediately *assume that the novel was about Africa*. Not about a continent, nor a country, nor the human beings who live therein, but the imagined Africa, the single Africa from which African novels come. This is a book about a family, they told me, not about *poverty or hunger* (Selasi, 2013, emphasis added).

She asserts that the challenge faced by the African writer "or the writer with relatives from sub-Saharan Africa—is Kweku's challenge: to be treated as "artist" first, "citizen" second" (Selasi, 2013), noting that her frustration with 'African literature' derives from its suggestion that "African experience stands outside the realm of the Universal". She grapples with how to

decide who is an African person, and with whether white people born in, or black people born outside of, Africa can be considered African (Selasi, 2013).

Author and critic Emanual Iduma takes exception to Selasi's outright rejection of the category of African literature. In arguing in support of its existence as a category of literature, he nonetheless proposes that a healthy scepticism about its construction is needed:

> The fact of Africanness, whether manifest in literature or in personal identity, begins from a scheme of naming perpetuated by thinkers outside the physical entity called Africa ... If Africa is an idea, it is petty and nonsensical to imagine it out of existence. It's rather helpful to ask: what might it mean today, and in what ways can this meaning be deployed in literature (Iduma, 2013)?

As a writer in the 1970s and 1980s, Head was criticised for not being African enough in her engagements with Nigerian and Zimbabwean students. Telling her that her books were too western, and not sufficiently African (Eilersen, 1995, p. 295), the students upset her deeply. In her texts and other writings she engages deeply with how to define for herself and others an African identity. She looks to Africa's history, "ancient and existing since time immemorial" (Head, 1990, p. 86), as a means to understand how to address the abuses of power she sees as inhering in all discriminatory and oppressive practices, not simply those perpetuated by white people on African people, and to which she seeks resolution.

Redefining Africa is, for Head, a matter of rejecting the very binaries that Selasi resorts to in her argument. Rather than seeing Africa as a cipher for poverty or hunger, Head seeks to universalise what she defines as the African to the advantage of all. She sees racism as an example of the natural consequences of bifurcated thinking. Thus for Head, poverty and hunger are symptomatic rather than emblematic of the wrongs that result from seeing the world in dualistic terms. She offers a complex post-oppositional alternative in which she proposes, initially, love and acts of ubuntu as the solution to abuses of power, and later, a re-envisioned history as the basis for a new philosophy of Africa. Head does not reject Africa, she seeks rather to embrace it, while redefining for herself and her readers what it means for a new form of personhood which she proposes as necessary for a post-oppositional future.

At the base of her vision of Africa is the very universality Selasi appears to embrace. What Selasi terms 'universal' is in fact simply that which she sees as 'not African'. Her resort to universality cloaks her fundamentally western views of Africa. Head, conversely, works her way painstakingly through love and ubuntu, and the oral and written history of her place in an African country to devise a response which, while an assemblage of creole ideas and philosophies, tries to redefine what is received as part and parcel of 'African'.

The power she accords to love in the first four books – and to people who express this love through their thoughts and actions – gives way in the later books to a form of being that she presents as inherently African, enabling and encompassing of change. Through the social and historical ethnographic feel of the later three texts, Head presents a group of African sages, whether leaders or commoners, who through time evince what she deems to be a true African personhood. Although love and ubuntu are still in evidence in the last three texts, they are alone insufficient to shift the course of history. For that, Head argues, African ideas such as those present in Africa's past are needed. In Head's hands, the reader moves through time and different literary and historical traditions, as she re-animates African leaders and sages as touchstones of an African personhood rooted in African traditional ways of embracing and sparking change. Distinct from the protest literature of her time, Head's texts make real the assumption that although everyone is human, not all humans are persons, as she asks her reader and critics alike to reconsider what it means to be a *person* in Africa. The 'true' Africans she depicts in her texts are those who act as mediators of change with a set of tools she sees as essential to reconceiving Africa's future. Ubuntu, the basis of which is 'I am because you are; we are because you are' is shown to move beyond the apparent differences between people (such as race and religious belief, for example), uniting them in a worldview in which interpersonal relationships take on a significance beyond the persons involved. In Head's works, Africa – whether traditional and historical, or contemporary and modern – is a complicated muddle of freedoms and constraints, in which the "deep river" of tradition flows within and against the personal and individual freedoms offered by colonialism and the independence of Botswana, and the move from tribal authority to elected national state structures.

In *The Cardinals*, Head explores the freedom of the individual, and of the creative space of the artist, in this case the writer, Mouse. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, individual freedoms (such as those taken from Makhaya in South Africa and given to him in Botswana) are no less present but are used to examine the ways in which individuals and collectives may subvert traditional

binaries to enhance social structures so that communal work, predominantly by women, may address the poverty and hunger and provide the basis for change.

Personhood – defined as being a person because of other people – cannot be assumed but must be achieved through interactions and connections between people. *When Rain Clouds Gather* creates new families, which allows for small communities to develop around work on the cooperative and the significant changes this would bring to the village. In this new kind of rural village, leadership comes not from kinship connections, but from the kinship of those who work together to change the way in which Africa is lived by its people. Through these kinship links forged from love and acts of ubuntu, integration into a new community is achieved.

In *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, Head extends the reach of love and ubuntu, arguing that these are able to undertake the transformational work that would address the kinds of abuses that have characterised the whole of human history, whether African or otherwise. In these two texts, although love is still individually expressed (as in marriage and friendship, for example), Head appears to reach the limit to what love can do to undermine fundamental issues of good and evil that result, for example, in racism and other abuses.

There is a fundamental shift from the first three novels to the short stories and then to the final three novels. Head shifts the basic unit of change from the individual lover to what defines Africa and African. To give expression to these values, of change and flexibility, she develops the African sage philosopher/leader. Head's sages are those able to enact a post-oppositional view of love. They act in keeping with ubuntu, through an express commitment to others or to the 'whole' – the tribe, or the community. These are the people who embody the 'real' Africa and through whom significant change will take place.

A *Question of Power* defines what love is, which includes the ability to share in the suffering of others so that the foundation for ubuntu may be set. Love is also work, and work towards a common goal is a form of goodness which is transformative.

The Collector of Treasures is the segue from Head's early to her later texts in which she introduces us to her 'sage philosophers'. Moving overtly into the historical, Head creates a syncretic, re-envisioned view of African based on her research for *Serowe.* The text deliberately

recreates the history of Africa as democratic and inclusive. She reconfigures the colonial history of the period through narratives designed to support the assertion that the solutions for Africa's future lie in its own past. In rewriting the history of the region so that it is not an aggressor and victim, she offers what she sees as a more authentic Africa. The syncretism at the heart of Head's approach is evident from the way in which *Serowe* and *A Bewitched Crossroad* straddle historical and fictional narrative. It is in this re-envisioned history of Africa that she finds the 'universal', identifying in African traditional thought and mores values in common with Christianity, presenting the result as a verifiable and authentic history and ethnography 'from below'.

Still in the post-oppositional paradigm, the stories play with the limits of binaries depicting in the stories the 'evidence' Head presents for her view on African agency. Recreating past and present village life, Head's characters participate in and drive the transitions in their societies across time and space. The old and the new blend together in sometimes uncomfortable and distorted ways, as in the breakdown of family life or the creation of new religions. However, the amalgamation of old and new critically also serves Head's narrative purpose: it is how positive change takes place, as integral to traditional ways of life as to new ways of being, inevitable and timeless.

In the later texts, Head attempts to account for political and historical forces which fall outside of the ambit of love. In the liminal spaces between 'custom' and tradition and Christianity is the power to make something entirely of both. The parameters are constantly equivocal, however, and everyone is required to engage with what is good and evil about both. No wholesale rejection of either is possible. The stories told seek to assert the authority of the villagers, of the tribe, and of the leaders to determine their present and set out the requirements for the future. The problem of the status of women is a good example of this prevarication. Although women were offered protection by customs such as bogadi, for example, this was demeaning, rendering them second class citizens. Although Christianity teaches that men and women are equal, this is clearly not the case, and the 'protection' it offers fails to ensure equity. Head does not provide a solution to the problem, but the texts do set out her initial attempts to untangle the issue by looking to the causes of the situation. Given the persistence of the oppression of women all over the world, it is unreasonable to expect a solution from Head.

I think it possible that Head, a deeply creative writer, may have been frustrated by the format of *Serowe*. Certainly, the publication of *The Collector of Treasures* based on some of her research for *Serowe* and the return to the novel form in *A Bewitched Crossroad* seem to bear this out. Head cannot resist the opportunity to voice the characters in her grand Botswanan narrative, and *A Bewitched Crossroad* allows her to do so in ways not possible given the setup of *Serowe*.

Across the body of Head's work, it is clear that her particular syncretic views extend beyond the usual application of the term to religion and into her understanding of what it is to be African, her use of different narrative forms, and the expression of her African sage philosophy. The result is a creole view of Africa in which ubuntu and love provide the foundation from which the individual becomes a full person, able to take their place in the Africa she configures in her texts. A person in this view is one who is able to integrate their own interests with those of the community or, if not that, reflects their views to the community, allowing for adjustments and change to the benefit of all to result. Head's persons are expressive of Africa in their wisdom, their ability to analyse problems, their strategic thinking, and in making decisions that advance development, while retaining their own integrity. The consistent and reliable attention to others and to the wellbeing of the whole characterises African sagacity and is, she argued, rooted in Africa's past. Where changes to tradition take place, these are presented as customary, in that such changes have long been part of the history of Africans. In Head's hands, change enriches the tribe, community or village, and provides a dynamic bridge between the past and the future through which core African values are sustained.

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