Writing Between ‘Self’ and ‘Nation’: Nationalism, (Wo)manhood and Modernity in Bessie Head’s The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales

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[O]ne speaks as a woman, although the subject ‘woman’ is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual preference, and others. One speaks as a woman in order to empower women, to activate socio-symbolic changes in their condition: this is a radically anti-essentialist position.¹

—Rosi Braidotti

I have always been just me, with no frame of reference outside to anything beyond myself.²

—Bessie Head.

¹ Writing in “Notes From A Quiet Backwater”, the essay that opens her polemical autobiographical narrative, A Woman Alone, the Botswanan and South African writer Bessie Head observes that:

There must be many people like me in South Africa whose birth or beginnings are filled with calamity and disaster, the story of person who is the skeleton in the cupboard or the dark and fearful secret swept under the carpet. The circumstances
of my birth seemed to make it necessary to obliterate all traces of a family history.

(A Woman Alone, 3).

2 I shall argue in this essay that despite her statement above, Head, when she decided to transform her politicised consciousness into creative writing, was not in the least constrained by the fact that she was a Coloured and hence an O thered South African. Caroline Rooney is correct to argue in this respect that while Head brings to her work “concerns that might refer back to” apartheid South African society, “she always endeavours to move “away from the enclosures of that world.”

3 I shall examine some of the stories in The Collector of Treasures to demonstrate the extent to which Head saw herself as very much a part of Botswanan society. Head not only wrote at length and in detail on Africa’s relationship to Western modernity, but also at a local level examined the social arrangements and relationships between Botswanan men and women. What is more, although writing specifically from the position of a woman, Head spoke for, and on behalf of Africans generally. In the title story “The Collector of Treasures,” for example Head, contends that

The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they delegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of life. To this day women still suffer from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life.

4 While speaking here specifically of Botswanan society, the example Head provides speaks to the situation in Africa generally. Head’s importance within the tradition of African women’s writing in this respect compares only with that of such internally renowned novelists as the Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo, the Nigerians Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, and the Senegalese Mariama Bâ.

5 Straddling the precarious spaces between South African and Botswanan national identities, Head is the only one among the aforementioned writers to have suffered the predicament of being totally rejected from her native home. In all her writing, which includes such works as her very first novel, When Rain Clouds Gather (1968), the highly acclaimed second novel Maru (1971), the controversial masterpiece A Question of Power (1973), and even in her more recent posthumously published works as such Tales of Tenderness and Power (1989), A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings (1990), A Gesture of Belonging (1991) and The Cardinals (1993), Head skilfully engages with the existential anxieties embedded in the notions of ‘self’ and the ‘individual’ vis-à-vis the politics of communal ideology and nationalism. This is commendable given particularly the fact that Head was a social reject, who struggled early in her life to overcome her early marginalisation from South African society. Exiled from South Africa in 1964, she remained an illegal immigrant in her adopted Botswana until a whole decade and a half later when she was granted citizenship. In one of the letters she wrote to her cherished friend Randolph Vigne from Serowe, the Botswanan village in which she lived, Head asserted:

I was just living here like the greatest hermit you can find. Such tremendous pressure has built up against me in this little village and I shall get no help from the police if my life is in danger... The authorities have made no bones about the fact that they don’t want me here. I have been trying in every way to get out. They’re all engaged from the Republic of South Africa. They’ve never stopped at showing me what they think of me.

6 As her biographer Gilian S. Eilersen asserts in a hyperbolic but not inaccurate formulation, Head “seemed singularly alone in the world. As her success as a writer
brought her increasing renown, she began to admit quite openly that she had not known relatives.”

7 Despite her alienation and her lack of a proper sense of family or community, Head herself recognised that her particular situation reflected a general problem within her society.

8 Head often made definitive statements on Africa frequently both at the level of direct personal intervention and through authorial interjection and the characterisation of her women protagonists in particular. Although lonely and almost perennially traumatized by the dominant discourses and ideologies of exclusion that South African apartheid society epitomized, Head nevertheless discovered a sense of self-worth even at a time when she was displaced from her adopted country Botswana. Head’s sense of belonging and her African-ness have not been properly elaborated. Thus Elaine Savory argues, for instance, that unlike other African writers “living in their natal societies and in relatively secure family units connected to a strong community,” Head “always knew herself to be an outsider, even after many years in Botswana.”

8 The danger of argument’s such as Savory’s is that they restrict the definition of what a community or family means. In the particular case of Head, it has engendered a predetermined individualism and permanent sense of alienation as the mode of identity that her life and work best represents. We become less conscious of Head’s unwavering faith in a philosophically affirmed identification with Africa. This is a sad state of affairs for a woman who once described herself as a “great pan-Africanist.”

9 Kumari Jayawardena has argued in Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World that “feminism, like socialism, has no particular ethnic identity”. Extrapolating from Jayawardena, we can argue that Head’s communal awareness required no specific ethnic grounding. Head was not rootless. As I shall demonstrate in the rest of the essay, as much as any other African writer, Bessie Head belonged to, knew, and represented Africa.

9 Refusing to accept the conventional demarcations of space for women and men in Botswanan society, Head examines the nature of social relationships in the story “Life”. The narrative of “Life” concentrates on society’s perceptions of protagonist Life Morapedi, who is projected as an outrageous young woman who returns to her village after having “left... as a little girl of ten years old with her parents” (“Life,” 37). Upon her return home, Life marries Lesego, described as a “king” (43) of his world, monarch of all that he surveys, and a man who “liked women and had been so successful in that sphere that he took his dominance and success for granted” (41).

10 One of the first things Life tells the group of village woman who congregate around her to provide her with moral support is that “‘Money flows like water in Johannesburg ... ‘You just have to know how to get it”’ (38). The villagers, generally “impressed with the smartness” of Life, whom they consider a “city girl” (“Life”, 38) temper their admiration of her generous character and their wonder at her display of material wealth with irony and scepticism. Even as they enjoy the benefits of the things they previously craved for, and which she now provides them, they proceed with “caution”, arriving at the conclusion

among themselves that their child could not have lived a very good life in Johannesburg. Thrift and honesty were the dominant themes of village life and everyone knew that one could not be honest and rich at the same time; they counted every penny and knew how they had acquired it—with hard work. They never imagined money to be a bottomless pit without end; it always had an end and
was hard to come by in this dry, semi-desert land. They predicted that she would soon settle down—intelligent girls got jobs in the post office sooner or later. (38-39)

However, Life’s character is shown to transgress the fixity of gender identities in her village. As the narrative informs us further about Life’s experiences in South Africa, she had had the sort of varied career that a city like Johannesburg offered a lot of black women. She had been a singer, beauty queen, advertising model, and prostitute. None of these careers were available in the village—for the illiterate women there was farming and housework; for the literate, teaching, nursing, and clerical work. (“Life”, 39)

Head is not interested here in any simple polarisations of the moral versus the immoral as far as African womanhood is concerned. Instead, the story and Life’s putatively amoral character is an analytical lens through which Head engages with specific features of so-called African modernity and modernization. The critique of modernity is codified in the story as a phenomenon that “disrupted” the “village life” of a mainly rural” pre-independent Botswanan “country” (37). Groups of migrant workers are also described as bringing back from South Africa with them “bits and bits of a foreign culture and city habits they had absorbed” (37).

Although “the intensely conservative hard core centre of village life” (“Life”, 39) made up of farmers and housewives shun Life when she begins to sleep indiscriminately with the men in the village, Head is more interested in representing how colonialism, rural-urban transitions, and the general expansion of economic activity in African towns gave free rein to a consumer culture informed by the logic of capitalist development. This is reflected particularly in the fact that the capitalist ethos of urban areas like the South African city of Johannesburg are shown to be spreading slowly but surely within Life’s rural village. As the narrator informs us:

The men were paying for her [Life’s] services. People’s attitude to sex was broad and generous—it was recognised as a necessary part of human life, that it ought to be available whenever possible like food and water, or else one’s life would be extinguished or one would get dreadfully ill. To prevent these catastrophes from happening, men and women generally had a lot of sex but on a respectable and human level. (“Life”, 39).

Siniana, a male character in the story describes Life as “a terrible fuck-about” (“The Collector”, 42). Before marrying Lesego, Life was a cheery, outgoing woman, who frequented the local shebeens and went out with different men. After coaxing her into marriage, Lesego warns her “If you go out with those men again, I’ll kill you”, (43), a promise that tragically he fulfils. Angela Carter, who includes “Life” in her comparative anthology of short stories, Wayward Girls, contends that Life is thought to be bad, even wicked, not because she distributes her sexual favours but because she charges money for them, and, by doing so, disrupts the easy-going harmony of her village and transforms its intimate relations into cash transactions. She imports the twentieth century into the timeless African village and she is made to suffer for it.13

My own argument is that Life’s apparently decadent behaviour can be seen also as a quintessential act of transgression and a personalised, individual means of fighting the patriarchal tendencies of her community. Apart from Radithobolo who is murdered by Life’s husband Lesego for sleeping with his wife, the men who sleep with Life, and who like her can be said to have decadent sexualities are generally left unpunished. They are not censured by society, neither are they, like Life, described as being sexually loose. It is women, then, who are Othered within the symbolic and totalising logic of a modernity.
that creates urbanization in areas like Johannesburg and ensures the spread of city life to the rural areas. Given that Life acquires her sexual experiences in Johannesburg, Head intends her story to reflect the anxieties that modernity has wrought on women. It is obvious that Head is contesting conventional assumptions about women’s loose morality and their domesticity in the age of so-called modernity.

In presenting Life as a victim of the developmental logic of a male-dominated modernity, Head is also demonstrating the extent to which, among other newly acquired cultures of consumption and modes of indulgence, it is the desire by men for sex and their need for instant physical gratification that engenders a conducive atmosphere for Life to “make a business out of selling herself”. Thus, instead of depicting Life as a whore, Head portrays unrestricted sexual desire on the part of men as a sign of a counter-productive modernity that creates a culture of bodily consumption. Life, or ‘Woman’ cannot therefore be simplistically criticised for an inherently loose morality. As Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell have argued, “the public/private dichotomy as a principle of social organization, and its ideological articulation in various conceptions of reason and justice are detrimental to women”. At the heart of this mode of organisation is what a host of feminist critics have described variously as “a mystification of the gender-power relations that constitute the subtext of the modern economy and the state”, a “repression of women’s difference and their exclusion from the public”, a “resulting trivialization of women’s moral aspirations and perspectives”, and the “the double bind between home and work resulting from this dichotomy”.

In engaging with these aspects of African modernity and the changing positions of women and men within Botswanan society, Head is taking a critical look at “the Tswana way of life” (43). Botswana society is one in which men are generally permitted to be more sociable and public, while women are domesticated and restricted to the home or so-called women’s duties. It is in this respect that Lesego, the man who marries Life, prefers “lounging around the village” (43), while restricting Life to a life of tedium in the home. By presenting Life as someone who rebels against this arrangement, Head problematises the conventional distinctions in Botswanan society between the public and private as they relate to the roles and identities of men and women because she personally experienced the perils of the oppositional demarcations of space into differentiated socio-cultural and political zones for women and men. Life refuses to be a man’s Other within a patriarchally ordered system. Writing in a 1950s Johannesburg daily, Home Post, Head, by way of introduction to her readers revealed that as a child she “wanted to know all about boxing and race horses and everything a girl shouldn’t know about”.

Rob Nixon points that there is a general “predominance of male urban experience” in South(ern) African fiction which can be taken “to some degree” to be “a consequence of the geography of apartheid, whereby disproportionately large numbers of women were consigned to the impoverished Bantustans”. This situation, of course, occurred, as a consequence of urbanization and exportation from the rural areas of Southern Africa of black South African migrant labour. As a reporter in the Durban of the late 1950s, Head experienced discrimination, as the following comments by both she herself and her biographer Eilersen reveal:

It was in District Six that Bessie lived and was to work. She was the only woman reporter. This meant that she was always being given stories connected with
women and children, ‘while the men reporters get murders and politics to do. One day I [Bessie Head] should like to get hold of a good murder.’

Lewis Nkosi argues that Head is “not a political novelist in any sense that we can recognize.” Nkosi claims further, without however providing any of the “ample evidence” he contends exists, that Head was “generally hostile to politics”. In Nkosi’s view, “this lack of precise political commitment weakens rather than aids” Head. Nkosi’s view suggests a fundamental misperception on his part of the relationship between the private and the political, failing as he does to see that the personal can also be political. His argument is thus predisposed towards what Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith have described as the “totalising tendencies” of contemporary theories on culture and society.

It is ill advised to separate the private, the emotional, and the psychological—in short, what are often ideologically consigned to a subordinate “private-domestic” realm—from a putatively superior “public-political” culture.

While Kibera and Nkosi assume that Head’s personal relationships are far removed from the larger political world of Botswana, it is really the case as my discussion of Life’s character reveals, that private feelings and emotions also have histories and therefore need to be historicized. Readings which consign activities in the domain of the private—what Nkosi calls the close personal relationships, of love, value, and humanity—to that of the irrational and the apolitical have become increasingly untenable particularly in the wake of present-day critiques of the binarisms of the private and the domestic in a variety of disciplines ranging from literature and sociology through to history and political science. In the title story, “The Collector of Treasures,” it is again the irrational sexual drives of Garesego Mokopi that serves as the leitmotif for Head’s discussion of the politics of nationalism. Garesego’s relationship with his wife Dikeledi becomes illustrative of an unfair relationship and the unequal power relations between men and women within the Botswanan nation. Significantly, Head links the oppression that women suffer in Botswanan society with the consequences of national liberation and African independence, as Garesego Mokopi, the husband of Dikeledi engages in a “dizzy kind of death dance of wild destruction and dissipation” (“The Collector,” 92). As Garesego neglects his wife and his children, the bodies of other women serve as a pleasure zone for him:

For four years prior to independence, he [Garesego] had worked as a clerk in the district administration service, at a steady salary of R50.00 a month. Even during his lean days he had a taste for womanising and drink; now he had the resources for a real spree. He was not seen at his home again and lived and slept around the village, from woman to woman. He left his wife and three sons—Banabothe, the eldest, aged four; Inalame, aged three; and the youngest, Mostomi, aged one—to their own resources. Perhaps he did so because she was the boring, semi-literate traditional sort, and there were a lot of exciting new women around. Independence produced marvels indeed. (‘The Collector’, 92)

By showing how Garesego ir responsibilities abandons his family, Head is demonstrating the perils of an individualistic and egotistical approach to life. Here again, it is obvious that Head’s humanistic approach to life gestures towards the preservation of family values and bonding between couples. Head was herself a single mother, and thus herself suffered in her own way if not in directly the same manner as Dilekedi and other women did.

Head and her husband Harold Head are said to have quarrelled a lot, and Head would sometimes rage at him in the presence of others. It was partly because their quarrels got the better of them that Head left with her baby Howard to the British Protectorate of
Bechuanaland. Head’s pre-occupation with African family values is a dominant trope in her fiction. In her historical and ethnographical portrait of the Bamangwato, a sub-nation within Botswanaland, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind,* Head presents a similarly unflattering image of an irresponsible African man, who is described as “a gay, dizzy character on a permanent round of drink and women, full of shoddy values and without any sense of responsibility for the children he so haphazardly procreates”. As my own discussion shows, Bamangwato and Botswanaland are interchangeable tropes of the nation in Head’s fiction.

Head’s faith in familial bonding and marital values come into play here, and one is reminded at this stage of the use that other African women writers have made of the couple and the family as a trope for imagining the nation as a community in which men and women are potentially equal partners. Towards the end of her narrative in *So Long a Letter,* the Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ writes, for instance, that

> To love one another! If only each partner could move sincerely towards each other!
> 
> ...The success of a family is born of the couple’s harmony as the harmony of multiple instruments creates a pleasant symphony. The nation is made up of all the families, rich or poor, united or separated, aware or unaware. The success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family.

However in Bâ’s novel, as in Head’s short story, men abdicate their function. Whereas in *So Long a Letter* Modou Fall abandons his wife of old—Ramatoulaye—for a younger woman—Binetou—and dissipates all the wealth that he and Ramatoulaye have acquired, the level of profligacy on men’s part is even worse in “The Collector of Treasures”.

In terms of defining an African worldview, Head also drew upon lived experience to stress the validity of Tswana custom and tradition. What comes across, for example, in the following statement by Modise, the old man narrator of “Heaven is not Closed”, is a self-conscious dissemination of knowledge about the complicated nature of Botswana’s transition into the new world order that is often described as Western modernity:

> I [Modise]never was like Raloke, an unbeliever. But the man, my brother, draws out my heart. He liked to say that we as a tribe would fall into great difficulties if we forget our customs and laws. Today, his words seem true. There is thieving and adultery going on such as was not possible under Setswana law. (“Heaven”, 8; emphasis added)

Head is describing here the conflictual nature of Africa’s encounter with Western modernity. On the one hand, for instance, the modernity of Christian morality promises its believers and subjects development and civilisation. On the other hand, the increase of immoral acts with the introduction of a new culture of Christianity stands in contradiction to the civilising and moralising discourses of Christianity. This becomes clear as Modise continues his story in “Heaven is not Closed”:

> In the days when they were young, said the old man Modise, it had become the fashion for all black peoples to embrace the Gospel. For some it was the mark of whether they were ‘civilised’ or not. For some, like Galethebege, it was their whole life. Anyone with eyes to see would have known that Galethebege had been born good; under any custom, whether Setswana custom or Christian custom, she would still have been good. It was this natural goodness of heart that made her so eagerly pursue the Gospel (“Heaven”, 8)

The expression “natural goodness of heart” is important because it encapsulates Head’s own philosophical humanism and her general approach to life. As Savory has argued, “the hardships that Head suffered, such as her ill health, sense of displacement, poverty, and isolation, seemed to shape her writing in important ways”. As “Heaven is not Closed” is
also Head’s own account of Africa’s transition to a new modern world order and the complicated nature of that transition. Christianity, which was central to the European ‘civilising mission’ in Africa is shown to have been embraced by many simply because it was a practice that was in-vogue.

Head’s argument is meant to counter the idea that modernity was a movement from barbarism into civilisation or from ignorance into self-knowledge. In contesting ingrained assumptions about African identities, the narrative presents a critical portrait of those who led the Christian European civilising mission into Africa. The focus of analysis is the stereotyping of Africa and Africans in missionary discourse:

The missionary was a short anonymous-looking man who wore glasses. He had been the resident missionary for some time, and like all his fellows he did not particularly like the people. He always complained to his own kind that they were terrible beggars and rather stupid. (“Heaven”, 10)

Head reveals, as Rosi Braidotti has argued, that certain aspects of European identity represent a hegemonic mode of Othering that has managed historically to perfect the trick that consists in passing itself off as the norm, the desirable center, confining all ‘others’ to the position of periphery. It is indeed quite a trick to combine universalistic aspirations with capital-intensive efforts to establish cultural homologation of all peripheral ‘others’.  

The above passage must be read against the background of the fact that Head was a product of South African apartheid politics, and an adopted child, who was sent at the age of thirteen “to a severe mission orphanage for ‘coloured’ girls”, where she was “abruptly told about her real mother and father, described respectively as ‘insane’ and a ‘native’”. She was treated as if she too might be at risk of also becoming insane.” Eventually “cast out as mixed race and abandoned”, and forced to leave apartheid South Africa for Botswana where she lived as refugee for 15 years, she engaged the problems of racism and ethnocentrism at the same time as she sought ways in which to negotiate herself out of the constricting ambience fostered by racialist and ethnocentric attitudes.  

It is further instructive to note that by contesting colonial ideology, Head is speaking on behalf of a broader African audience that has suffered from the debilitating stereotypes of colonial discourse. While it has been suggested that Head “decided to opt for ‘mankind as whole’”, and that “her black nationalist phase was ended” because she felt rejected for “not being black enough”, her politicised consciousness always retained a black or pan-Africanist nationalist disposition. Head speaks again in defence of Africa in another passage from “Heaven is not Closed” where missionaries’ attitudes are alarmingly reminiscent of stereotypes of Africa in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart Of Darkness*.

He [the missionary] stared at her with polite, professional interest. She was a complete non-entity, a part of the vague black blur which was his congregation—oh, they noticed chiefs and people like that, but not the silent mass of humble and lowly who had an almost weird capacity to creep quietly through life. (“Heaven”, 10)

Rob Nixon has argued that Head’s “reliance on the village and the Southern African region as complementary sites of affiliation” presented her with “spaces that offset her estrangement from national and Pan-Africanist identities” in her fiction. This is partially true. However, it is equally important to stress Head’s identification with Pan-Africanist ideology in the instances in which she spoke for Africa generally by contesting the negative stereotyping of its people. Savory has suggested in her short biographical portrait of Head that
There is little in Head’s writing of a sense of community or connection to African tradition… Head is unquestionably an African writer: she was born in South Africa and wrote about Botswana. Her entire life was lived in Africa. But her sense of what this means is idiosyncratic, understandably, given her personal history.

While Savory herself observes that “[m]uch of Head’s writing was an effort to portray the people… of Botswana” so that “Botswana, and particularly Serowe, where Head finally settled… became for her a kind of moral microcosm of the world in which all human traits were in play,” she is unable to come to terms with the fact that Head also often affirmed her African identity in positive and progressive ways.

There is no doubt that Head was to some extent an “outsider,” whose writing is rich and deep for blending the life experiences, ideas and thoughts of different intellectual and revolutionary figures. However, she was simultaneously deeply immersed in theories on revolution in Africa. In typically exuberant language, Head idolized one of her African heroes:

After reading George Padmore’s book [Pan-Africanism or Communism: The Coming Struggle of Africa] my whole manner of speaking and thinking 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… George Padmore is a prophet to me. Over and above that he was the initiator, the liberator of Africa; he was too a kind of John the Baptist crying in the wilderness—make ready the way… What else did the liberation of Africa mean to me but this inner awakening and alertness—as though from some direction I may be given a hint, a clue and eagerly pass on this small grain of truth to some other seeker to question, examine and add his grain.

Head may not seem to have belonged to the nation, even after many years in Botswana, yet her politicised consciousness in relation to both Botswanan and South African national tradition was pan-Africanist in its ideological disposition.

By deploying an interiorised form of narrative self-consciousness, Head projected subversive female heroines within society as part of her revolutionary project of political non-conformism. Her ideological project interrogates normative but dominant modes of existence for women. The transgressive value of Head’s writing derives therefore from its ability to challenge conventional modes of self-understanding. Head’s characters become representative of that way of life that the critic Rosi Braidotti has described as representing a nomadic form of subjectivity.

Braidotti contends in Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory that “[t]hough the image of nomadic subjects is inspired by the experience of peoples or cultures that are literally nomadic,” there is an alternative form of nomadism that refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. Not all nomads are world travellers; some of the greatest trips can take place without physically moving from one’s habitat. It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling.

Braidotti’s argument is of relevance to the ongoing debates on African identity politics in which The Collector of Treasures participates. It is clear, for example, that part of the ideological project of Life’s characterisation is to call into question Lesego’s conviction that “he never really expected his dominance and authority to encounter any challenge” (“The Collector”, 43).
It is important to add, however, in Head’s particular instance, that simultaneously as she remained a nomad extraordinaire, she consistently affirmed through her fictional protagonists her own knowledge of and identification with the social mores, traditions, customs and norms of her adopted nation. Thus “Heaven is not Closed,” “Life,” and “The Collector of Treasures” are stories that do not only delineate the nomadism of Head’s aesthetic and ideological project and her critical meditations on the new world order occasioned by the encounter between Africa and the West, these stories also reiterate the specific nature of Head’s affiliation to Africa.

It has become trendy not only within African literary criticism, but within contemporary literary theory and cultural studies as a whole to posit putatively fluid, complex, dynamic, and liberated postmodernist or post-nationalist concepts, constructs and modes of identification against supposedly, essentialist, parochial, self-serving, and constraining ways of living that are inevitably defined as nationalist. Head’s work belongs to neither of these discursive categories or modes of thinking because her work reflects that fact that all ideologies or theories be they -posts, -isms, etc, are inevitably made up of essences. Writing in a recognizable self-assured voice, and demonstrating her self-awareness in relation to the complex culture, customs and traditions of the Bamagwanto people among whom she lived in Botswana, Head asserts in her ethnographic novel, Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind that:

It was by chance that I came to live in this village. I have lived most of life in shattered little bits. Somehow, here, the shattered bits began to grow together. There is a sense of wovenness, a wholeness in life here; a feeling of how strange and beautiful people can be—just living.33

Braidotti describes a “notion of corporeal materiality” that emphasizes “the embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject.”34 She is concerned particularly with “feminist redefinitions of subjectivity” and the extent to which these constitute “a new form of materialism” and a “rethinking” of “the bodily roots of subjectivity” as the starting point for the epistemological project of nomadism.”35 This way of seeing and doing was the very essence of Head’s life and work. She was a woman who in her own words, lived with and accommodated both the “shattered little bits” and the “sense of wovenness” and “wholeness.” Precisely because of this, her writing, as Randolph Vigne among others has noted, was ultimately ‘a gesture of belonging.”36 A lesson for postmodernism?

NOTES


5. For representative samples of the work of these writers, see Aidoo’s No Sweetness Here, Nwapa’s Efuru, Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood, and Bâ’s So Long a Letter.


Other critics have discussed Head’s solitude. Her fellow South African Lewis Nkosi describes her as “an intelligent”, but “intensely lonely individual, worrying about the problems of belonging, of close personal relationships, of love, value, and humanity.” See Lewis Nkosi, Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature (London: Longman, 1981), p. 99.


12. Angela Carter makes this point with telling effect with the following statement on the identity of the female protagonists, heroines and adventureresses in her collection: these stories would... seem much, much worse if men had invented them. They would be predatory, drunken hags, confidence tricksters; monstrously precocious children; liars and cheats; promiscuous heartbreakers. As it is, they are all presented as if they were perfectly normal. On the whole, women writers are kind to women.


16. Head herself argues in “The Collector of Treasures” that colonialism was largely to blame for this state of affairs:
The colonial era and period of migratory mining labour to South Africa... broke the old, traditional form of family life and for long periods a man was separated from his wife and children while he worked for a pittance in another land to raise the money to pay his British Colonial poll-tax. British Colonialism scarcely enriched his life. He then became the 'boy' of the white man and a machine-tool of the South African mines. (“The Collector”, p. 92).

17. Eilersen, Bessie Head, p. 39.


20. See the essays by Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, and Jane Markus in Benhabib and Cornell eds, Feminism as Critique.


24. Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects, p. 3.


28. Aware of her multiple location as a subject, Head distinguishes different but complementary senses of self in A Woman Alone when she asserts that: “I have my national, my African side but I am also very much an international kind of person”, A Woman Alone, p. 95.


31. Cited in Eilersen, Bessie Head, p. 45.

32. Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects, p. 228.

33. Bessie Head, Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind p. x

34. Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects, p. 3.

35. Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects, pp. 3-4; original emphasis.

36. See Vigne’s comments in A Gesture of Belonging, p. vi on why he chooses that title for Head’s collection of letters.

ABSTRACTS

Le présent article étudie trois nouvelles du recueil Collector of Treasures de Bessie Head, née en Afrique du Sud et immigrée au Bostwana où elle a fait carrière d’écrivain. Hommes et femmes, les personnages de son oeuvre illustrent la relation qui existe entre traditions africaines et modernité.

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