Living on the Borderline. Politics of Domination, States of Insanity and the Quest for Female Identity in the Work of Bessie Head.

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Abstract:
Both, Gilman and Head, were treated for the same "insanity" which they attributed to their ficitonal heroines. […] In Head's case it is the socio-psychotic structure of a male-dominated, racist society in which any kind of aberration of the norm must be judged as dangerous and which therefore has created many forms of exclusion. One of these forms is emigration, again in the double sense of inner and outer emigration. An other form is the retreat into madness which then becomes a realm of being where noone else, no violator, no prosecutor, can follow.

1 The dedicated work of feminist critics as well as of female writers - since Mary Wollstonecraft's challenging vindications of the "rights of men and the wrongs of women" - has stated just how dependent on men's approval women are in their self-understanding and in their attempts to formulate their own world view. When they pursue their own way too insistently to be understood or tolerated by men, the label "mad" is readily at hand. It is an old story that goes back many centuries to Greek philosophers and physicians who have described women's deviations from the generally accepted behavioural norms as "madness." This term exerts a particular fascination in European or Western cultural history, as Michel Foucault has convincingly shown. Denoting something as "madness" implies the notion of liminality and of a threshold between the here and the beyond, between sanity and insanity, between reason and its other. Drawing the limits means excluding something which is seen as outside the valid order. This space in-between, this empty space that opens up between inside and outside, between the included and the excluded, tells as much about a society itself as it tells about its values. A society establishes and preserves its values through the continuity of history; through processes of inclusion and exclusion, however, a society makes its significant choices.

2 A paradigmatic and intensively captivating literary rendering of this liminality is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story The Yellow Wallpaper from 1890. It is "a striking story of female confinement and escape, a paradigmatic tale which ... seems to tell the story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their "speachless woe," write Gilbert and Gubar in their illuminating book The Madwoman in the Attic (89). Gilman herself characterized her novel as a description of a nervous breakdown - hence it is very similar to Bessie Head's novel A Question of Power, which will be of interest to my discussion.

3 There are many similarities between Gilman's and Head's stories, in particular concerning the fictionalisation of autobiographical issues. Both Gilman and Head were treated for the same "insanity" that they attributed to their fictional heroines. In Gilman's case it is a dominant, paternalistic physician husband who treats his wife for a severe postpartum psychosis. For a cure he confines her to a large garret room in a house that he has rented. He forbids her to do any writing or reading. As the narrator tells us, her husband fears that

> with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. (15-16)

The fact that she cannot create fictional characters who might help her to externalise her turmoil and anxiety makes her mental condition rapidly worse until she finally imagines "gestalten" in and behind the yellow wallpaper of her room. She creates another woman, her double, who finally helps her tear down the wallpaper altogether.

4 Externalising the double within, turning the phantasmatic figures of the soul into literary characters is a first step out of what Gilbert and Gubar metaphorically call "the attic," the exclusion from the male order. In Head's case the socio-psychotic structure of a male-dominated, racist society judges any kind of aberration of the norm as dangerous. It therefore has created many types of exclusion. One of these types of exclusion is emigration - again in the double sense of inner and outer emigration. Another type is the retreat into madness which becomes a realm of being into which nobody else, no violator and no prosecutor, can follow. Bessie Head will move into the same direction as Gilman and call upon the imaginative creation as a way out of madness.

5 Bessie Head is one of the few female African writers whose name appears in post-colonial readers and anthologies as representative of "non-white" literary reactions to the "Scramble for Africa", thus presenting a paradigmatic view from within.[1] Her name is often mentioned together with that of Nadine Gordimer, who has also closely connected the conditions of female existence - black, coloured or white - with racial and political issues in South Africa. In their fictional as well as their critical writing both authors make it very clear that the women are particularly affected by any kind of political change; women constitute the least flexible social group as they are responsible for the care of their children which they more often than not have to raise by themselves. There are little girls without any mothers to take care of them, children raised in orphanages, women who become mothers without the

[1] "Scramble for Africa" is the title of Thomas Pakenham's study of the period between 1876 and 1912, a phase during which, Pakenham concludes, "Europe had imposed its will on Africa at the point of a gun." And, he continues, it was a lesson that would be remembered, fifty years later, when Africa came to win its independence. See Pakenham XXV.

help of socially functioning role models - childhood emerges as a multilayered metaphor in the writings of South African women. Bessie Head says about her protagonist's son in A Question of Power (50): "People who had mothers like he had were lost if they did not know how to care for themselves." When Elizabeth suffers her first breakdown in the novel she is taken to hospital where she finds an understanding and warm-hearted "Afrikaner man from South Africa," who takes her son by his hand: "My wife will take care of your son until you come out of hospital. We are both refugees and must help each other" (52). In a short dialogue he admits that he suffers, too, because he does not have a country: "A lot of refugees have nervous breakdowns." Elizabeth feels she has to explain, to excuse herself, to make others understand why this happened to her: "I want to tell you something," she said. "There's something torturing me. There are strange under-currents and events here ..." (52). The African man turns his face away; he does not want to listen to any of this: "He did not want to hear details about the country or anything else, simply accepting the fact that she had a nervous breakdown out of the blue" (52).

6 With a few, almost laconic sentences, Bessie Head paints an intensive atmosphere of fright, oppression, and constraint among the refugees. Although they are in Botswana, a "free" country compared to South Africa, they still do not want to talk about the past and about their own histories. The retelling of their individual histories would entail individuation, separation, and particularity; it would also raise questions of right or wrong, of cause and effect, of truth and falsehood. These questions are subject to the politics of interpretation and hence also subject to questions of power. It is important to the refugees to overcome or to neglect differences and to draw strength from the acceptance of a common fate. The politically important message of this scene is a call for solidarity among the refugees, a solidarity which is not based on the memory of a shared past but which grows out of the shared experiences of a common present.

7 Bessie Head was born in a mental asylum in Pietermaritzburg, a small town in South Africa, in 1937. The memory of the place and the circumstances of her birth were to haunt her all her life, as she felt threatened to live a life on the borderline between sanity and insanity, just like her mother. Not much is known about Bessie Head's relationship to her mother or about her own feelings towards her. Did she feel betrayed? Did she hold her mother responsible for the manifold problems and misery in her own short life?

8 In autobiographical writing, in statements Bessie Head made in interviews as well as in the few critical texts which have approached Bessie Head's literary productions, the information we find about Head's family history is sparse and rather vague. Her stories about

her mother's "illicit" relationship with a "farm boy," a "stable hand," or just "a black man," increasingly involve fantastic elements. However, so much seems clear: Bessie Emery, Bessie Head's mother, had an affair with a black man who worked on the family estate; she soon found herself pregnant by him. This relationship could not be tolerated by South African whites in the 1930s.

9 Did her "abnormal" behaviour or did the sanctions the community imposed on her for this violation of the moral code confine her to the mental institution? Was she really insane, or was she just labelled insane because this was the most appropriate punishment for white women who so completely forgot where they belonged - socially, racially and morally? As far as we know, Bessie Head was taken from her mother at birth and raised in a "coloured," that is a mixed-race family. She was educated at a mission school, where - as she tells us in her novel A Question of Power - she was immediately told about her prospective place: "As soon as she arrived at the school, she was called to one side by the principal and given the most astounding information." The principal said:

> We have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native. (16)

Nevertheless, as her mother had left written instructions that her daughter was to be given a good education, the mission school lived up to this obligation as best as it could. Head received a teaching certificate from this school in 1955. She taught for a few years but then gave it up because she did not like it and from then on worked as a journalist in Cape Town and Johannesburg. As a journalist Bessie Head wrote political and critical essays commenting on the situation in South Africa in general, but she also addressed the problems that coloured women had to face under the apartheid regime.

10 In 1960 Bessie married a journalist named Harold Head; but as the marriage ended after only four years, she decided to leave South Africa, and moved to Botswana with her son. Betschuanaland, as it was called then, was one of the three territories that England had "put under protection" so that all those who sought refuge from the Zulus or the Boers could live relatively undisturbed in these territories.

11 In Botswana, Bessie Head began writing novels. Her first novel, When Rain Clouds Gather (1968) tells the story of a political refugee from South Africa who escapes to Botswana, like Bessie Head herself. He moves to a small town named Golema Mmidi where he meets people, most of them fellow refugees, who share the same dreams and the same

political ideas. The village chief, however, is suspicious of these new tendencies and seeks to boycott them. His political scheme does not work out and in the end he commits suicide. Thus, Head's message in her first novel reads: the old political structures must be destroyed so that the world may be liberated.

12 A Question of Power is Bessie Head's best known novel, published in 1973. Intensely autobiographical, the novel retraces the protagonist's geographical movements from South Africa to Botswana as a metaphoric journey on the borderline between sanity and insanity. The protagonist, Elizabeth, had read a newspaper article about teachers being needed in Botswana, but in order to be able to cross the border she had "to take out an exit permit, which, like her marriage, held the 'never to return' clause" (19). Her destination is a small village, Motabeng, which means the place of sand; it is situated "remotely inland, perched on the edge of the Kalahari desert," and she tries to settle there (19). But her instable mental condition does not allow for peaceful and continuous existence. As the narrator tells us in A Question of Power, after a few months Elizabeth feels her equilibrium give way to fits of rage, to feelings of rejection and paranoia: "It was barely three months after her arrival in the village of Motabeng when her life began to pitch over from an even keel, and it remained from then onwards at a pitched-over angle" (21).

13 Critics agree that the novel is a masterwork; they disagree, however, on the reasons. Some read the novel autobiographically as the striking document of Bessie Head's mental derangements, others read it as a negotiation of alienation and oppression on a mental, sexual, racial and political level. Nancy Bazin argues for example that the novel is an example of "the experience of a black African woman driven 'mad' by the madness surrounding her" (140). All these readings are accommodated by the novel; this is what is so fascinating about A Question of Power. By incorporating psychoanalytical, social and political dimensions into the narrative about her heroine Elizabeth, Bessie Head creates a complex literary text, which refers to the inside world as well as the outside world and also to the literary text itself as an intentional construction. The question of power is raised on all levels of the novel. Not only does Head present the story of a woman in the grip of two men who dominate her, chase her around and undermine and destroy her self-esteem, but she also reflects on the cultural constructedness of gender, racial and cultural identity:

> There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality. There wasn't any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. They were races, not people. (44)

The circumstances of Elizabeth's life are very similar to those of Bessie Head herself. Elizabeth also has a young son, whom she has taken to Botswana with her. In one scene, she

has an argument with him. Although the emotional stress, caused by her son's stubbornness, is almost unbearable for Elizabeth. She is able to reflect on the different ways in which women, as opposed to men, cope with the "inner life" (50). In order to evoke the novel's emotional quality, I would like to quote one of those scenes at some length.

> Her head was throbbing with pain from a sleepless and feverish night. She grabbed a pile of his clothes off a chair and said irritably: "You'd like to be slaughtered, hey? Shut your mouth, you damn little nuisance."
> He took all his moods from her and imitated her in every way. A day which started off like this could throw him off balance completely. Suddenly, he seemed to sense something funny in the air and mimicked in a shrill voice: "You'd like to be slaughtered, hey? Shut your mouth, you damn little nuisance." (49)

The scene goes on like this building up more and more tension, until Elizabeth begins to cry. The boy immediately senses that this is no time to play games:

> "I can show you I know how to dress myself," he said haughtily. "I can put my own shoes on. I can eat my porridge." He sat down on the floor again and grimly concentrated on eating his porridge. People who had mothers like he had were lost if they did not know how to care for themselves. (50)

> Elizabeth looked at him in agony and thought: "Journeys into the soul are not for women with children, not all that dark heaving turmoil. They are for men, and the toughest of them took off into the solitude of the forests and fought out their battles with hell in deep seclusion." (50)

Elizabeth's conclusion in the above quoted passage is that the "inner life is ugly" (50). Passages like these reveal an ambiguous attitude towards children and along with it also an ambiguity towards the socially defined roles of women. And because it is ugly, it has to be hidden. Sometimes, however, the inner turmoil is so strong that it breaks out and leaves the individual without shelter.

14 Bessie Head went through this experience again and again; her own background could not have been more traumatic. When she was a newborn she was given up for adoption to a white family by the unsuspecting adoption authorities, but was soon returned because she looked "strange." After that she was adopted by a so called "coloured couple," but unfortunately her adopted father died when she was only six years old. When the first holidays arrived and she thought she could go home to the family she had lived with, she learned in a very brutal way that the woman she had thought of as her mother was not her mother at all. Experiences like these might have shattered women under less threatening political circumstances, too.

15 After some time Elizabeth, in the company of the two male figures Dan and Sello, whom she has created as characters out of her own imagination, recognizes the similarity

between racist and sexist attitudes and calls her two companions "power-maniacs" who live "off other people's souls like vultures" (19).

1. Adopted Motherlands - questioned identities

16 In Bessie Head's novel the protagonist's psychic imbalance not only suggests a focus on displacement, alienation and isolation; it also connects the implied social message with a kind of political utopia. As Valerie Kibera states in her essay "Adopted Motherlands," Head's novels "evince a deep commitment to their adopted societies" (318). Although Bessie Head developed paranoid feelings towards Botswana authorities over the years, her narratives exhibit a "moral idealism" that projects itself in the metaphor of the agricultural co-operative which has a central place in her first and third novels. The co-operative in Golama Mmidi, in When Rain Clouds Gather, is a "unique place" consisting of "individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life" (22). The co-operative in A Question of Power is placed at the edge of the Kalahari desert; both communities are made up of, inspired and run by refugees from deadly places that hold no future, such as South African, Tswana and English refugees.

17 The co-operative is more than a practical organisation for Bessie Head; it operates on a human level; this means that a group of people pursues a common goal such as the construction of a well or the development of food production systems or finding different ways to cope with Botswana's hostile climate conditions. This labour also encourages solidarity among individuals who have nothing in common besides equal working conditions as refugees. For Bessie Head, who had lived most of her life "in shattered little bits," this possibility of establishing meaning, of projecting continuity in activities which definitely reached beyond the limits of the day, meant having positive experiences of a new kind. It seemed as if the shattered bits began to grow together and to form a "sense of wovenness, a wholeness in life here" (Head, Serowe: x), when she had lived for a decade on the Bamangwato Development Farm.

18 Bessie Head uses Elizabeth's breakdowns to signify her own uprootedness. In her fits she feels disconnected, not responsible for herself or anybody else anymore because she does not have to fight for and define a place of her own in the new country. This becomes very clear after her first collapse in Motabeng. After she has been given a sedative, the "storm in her head had subsided." And then she describes how this very individual feeling of disaster enlarges its scope, and sparks cultural reflections on the status of a refugee and the feeling of homelessness:

> It had taken such drastic clamour to silence the hissing record in her head, but it had left a terrible wound. She could feel it bleeding and bleeding and bleeding, quietly. Her so-called analytical mind was being shattered to pieces. It depended on questions and more questions, tentative propositions, with all the time and patience in eternity to solve the riddles, and the joy of friendly and affectionate exchanges.

When she comes out of her stupor and looks up, she sees Sello standing beside her bed, one of the imaginary male figures which her schizophrenic mind had created as her company. He forces her to come with him and face a deep cesspit: "It was filled almost to the brim with excreta. It was alive, and its contents rumbled" (53). Thus, Sello, a strong, virile male, whose will dominates Elizabeth, makes her look at the ugly "inside" without giving her the chance to deal with it.

2. Power relations: Sello, Elizabeth, Dan

19 It is interesting to note that it is Sello who is the first character to appear on the imaginary level of A Question of Power. With the creation of Sello, Head makes an affirmative, but also critical contribution to the value systems in African societies as she experiences them. She depicts a strongly patriarchal system in which the male character sets the pace and dictates what is right or wrong. "It seemed almost incidental," writes Head at the beginning of Head's novel, "that he was African. So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years, that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment" (11). In view of the fact that Sello is Elizabeth's creation - as Elizabeth is Bessie Head's creation - and that therefore his characteristics are projections of Elizabeth's own fantasy, this passage provides an insight into the workings of Elizabeth's mind as she tries to let go of her connections with her mother country and instead attempts to establish a somewhat general connection with the whole world in the form of "mankind." Due to the symbiotic relationship between the narrator and her creation, this extended worldview is also hers. In distancing herself from herself by projecting herself onto another female figure Elizabeth can appropriate the "perfect statements" which he from time to time makes, such the observation that "to him - love was freedom of heart" (11):

> The man's name was Sello. A woman in the village of Motabeng paralleled his inner development. Most of what applied to Sello applied to her, because they were twin souls with closely-linked destinies and the same capacity to submerge other preoccupations in a pursuit after the things of the soul. It was an insane pursuit this time. It did not bear comparing with the lofty statements of mankind's great teachers. Hidden in all their realizations were indistinct statements about evil. They never personified it, in vivid detail, within themselves.

20 The other male figure that Elizabeth creates as part of her "trinity" is Dan; he is a completely different character, who never holds "conversations with death" (12); he much rather puts his virility on display for everyone to see and recognize. Whereas Sello represents the more philosophical, literary and critical mind, Dan is the phallocrat, almost exclusively identified with his sexual organs: "The three of them," so Elisabeth, "had shared the strange journey into hell and kept close emotional tabs on each other" (12). In this triangle Elizabeth becomes the pivotal point; both men, as she describes it, fling unpleasant details at her "in sustained ferocity" (12). As in a horror-stricken Poe story we can feel the walls closing in on Elizabeth; we realise how her space of action keep diminishing and how she is instrumentalised for the narcissistic self-stagings of her two creations: "She had no time to examine her own hell. Suddenly, in one sharp, short leap to freedom, she called it Dan" (12). By giving the phantasmagoric appearance a name, it becomes "real," identifiable, principally manageable. When she calls him by his name, he seems to be "taken off guard":

> He had been standing in front of her, his pants down, as usual, flaying his powerful penis in the air and saying: "Look, I'm going to show you how I sleep with B.... She has a womb I can't forget. When I go with a woman I go for one hour. You can't do that. You haven't got a vagina ...." (13)

21 Death is always around the corner in Head's stories. She calls upon dead people who once were her companions and the metaphoric language that she creates in her novel evokes the atmosphere of the Gothic novel, and with it the notion of repressed, displaced and hidden desires, as we have seen earlier. Although Dan stands for sexual desire and sexual power, this is not the only thematic focus important to Head's novel. Since repressed and hidden desires are also connected with the will to know, with curiosity and inquiry.

22 Hence, her presentation of power-relationships not only refers to political or gender topics but also to the organisation of knowledge and the access people have to it. Writing entails representing the systems of knowledge by which a society is governed. Thus, Or, Trinh Minh-ha suggests in her book Women, Native, Other that writing "reflects on other writings and, whenever awareness emerges, on itself as writing" (23). That is to say that by using images and metaphors, writing displays the value system of a given culture as it exposes the referential system that constructs meaning: "Writing is meshing one's writing with the machinery of endless reflexivity," Minh-ha writes. Elizabeth's attempts to come to grips with the many facets of her personality could be seen as such an enmeshing, such a machinery of endless reflexivity: "Footprints of emptiness multiplied to infinity in an attempt at disarming death. She says to unsay others so that others may unsay her and say: 'It's still not it.'"

23 All of Bessie Head's writing circumscribes these issues of meaning, of reference and of knowledge. A Question of Power is "a powerful portrayal of a woman in the throes of a nervous breakdown," as Gillian Eilersen writes it in her introductory remarks to Bessie Head's collection of short stories Tales of Tenderness and Power (9). In her last novel Head concentrates on the proliferations of "I"s and "Self"s, which she must knit together in order to be able to fulfil the role of the mother to her little son. Although Elizabeth remains "mentally unhoused" by her inner demons, once on her way to achieving a new identity she starts writing poetry. The fictionalisation of her divided psyche allows both women - Bessie and Elizabeth - to step back, observe, reflect and understand their problem.

24 Thus it makes sense that the artist figure is a recurring image in Head's novel; it is emblematic of her own work as the creator of new worlds and new selves. To put this again in the words of Trinh Minh-ha:

> Writing necessarily refers to writing. The image is that of a mirror capturing only the reflections of other mirrors. When i say "I see myself seeing myself," I/i am not alluding to the illusory relation of subject to subject (or object) but to the play of mirrors that defers to infinity the real subject and subverts the notion of an original "I". (22)

Minh-ha also reflects on the ethical question of who speaks for whom with what right to do so - this is a question which is also central to Bessie Head:

> A writing for the people, by the people, and from the people is, literally, a multipolar reflecting reflection that remains free from the conditions of subjectivity and objectivity and yet reveals them both.

25 Minh-ha's summary of this argument could be read as a summary of Bessie Head's project in A Question of Power. Why write at all? Trinh Minh-ha gives the following answer: "I write to show myself showing people who show me my own showing." The mirror, she argues, is not only the symbol of an unaltered vision of things, but also an instrument for self-knowledge. When we conceive of writing as a mirror, one in which we have total faith, this mirror also bears a "magical character" that transcends its functional nature. When she says: "In this encounter of I with I, the power of identification is often such that reality and appearance merge while the tool itself becomes invisible" (22), it reads as if Minh-ha described Head's novel A Question of Power.

3. A Period of Darkness

26 In one of her short stories entitled "A Period of Darkness" from 1977, Bessie Head illustrates Trinh Minh-ha's argument that writing always reflects and refers to other writing. The title of the story clearly reflects Joseph Conrad's novel Heart of Darkness in which

Conrad negotiates the central questions of modern existence, such as personal and collective identity, the constitution of meaning, and the referentiality of language and of texts.

27 In "A Period of Darkness" Head tells the story of an autocratic African Chief, Motswasele II, who, in 1823, subjected the people of Bakwena tribe to a terrible regime of terror which lasted a number of years. During his reign the "people fell into a period of darkness" (Head, Tales 78). Chief Motswasele did not respect any ethical norms, took what pleased him - goods, cattle, houses and women, and his punishment for disobedience very often was the death penalty.

28 Motswasele's rule was so inexpressible, so inexplicable, unbelievable and unheard of that - as Head insinuates - there was no historical precedence and that therefore it was "almost impossible to deal with" (79) for the people. Bessie Head describes his regime in terms that connote extreme experiences such as slavery or the Holocaust:

> He was so impossible to deal with partly because in tradition people regarded themselves as the property of the chief and partly because the unspeakable had crept up on them unawares... It was a demented village of hysteria and fright. For a long while people had presented each other with a wide range of laughter and hysteria in order that they might live with the unspeakable. (79; italics mine)

In the following passages Bessie Head creates the claustrophobic atmosphere of a social and political life in which everybody distrusts everybody else. Although conceived in reference to "Chief Motswasele," it is quite clear that the descriptions aptly apply to all places where and all times when human beings are chased and tortured because of racial difference or religious or political opinion. Although there is no reference to a historical place or time, it is not difficult to guess that Bessie Head had South Africa in mind. The fact that she obviously takes into consideration that many national socialists went to South Africa after 1945 because they found a hospitable political climate there provides an interesting aspect that Hannah Arendt also focused on in her book Origins of Totalitarianism.[2]

29 Among the people suffering under the regime of Chief Motswasele there was one man, Leungo, and his wife, who did not speak. One evening they went into the nearby hills and hanged themselves. When they were found, the corpses were quickly removed so that no trace of the tragedy should remain in the memory of the people. The death of Leungo and his wife Keeme made an impression, nevertheless. If suicide was unheard of until Leungo's death, so was the question of killing a Chief: "There was no precedent for killing a Chief. If it ever happened then or later it was a most rare occurrence; the society was too moral and balanced" (82). Up to the point where Leungo and his wife hang themselves, the story shows strong

[2]Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951; see the chapters "Race and Bureaucracy" and "The imperialist legend and the imperialist character."

similarities with Chinua Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart, a novel which he wrote as an African response to Conrad's Heart of Darkness. In Achebe's novel it is the originally strong male character Okonkwo who finally gives in to the changes he cannot understand. Like Leungo he retires to a secret spot outside the village in order to hang himself - writing apparently necessarily refers to writing, as Minh-ha observed.

30 Bessie Head emphasises the power of literature in the closing chapters of her story. Chief Motswasele wants to force his people into a war against tribes that are much inferior in military power. On the gathering day war was declared and the rituals of praising the Chief begun. But very soon it was clear that the poem which should have been a praise song of Motswasele had been turned into a poem of condemnation, which listed all the damnable deeds of Chief Motswasele. While listening to the song Motswasele took some time to realise that things had changed and that a revolt was coming:

> His eyes widened with fear as he looked out at the assembled men. He opened his mouth, silently gasping for breath. And so he died, with wide-open, terror-stricken eyes. For the men arose and, instead of moving off to war, they moved towards him and one by one cast their spears into his body. (83)

Here the "magic quality" of a literary text manifests itself: through literature something new comes into the world and changes the world. Although there is not much change after the death of Motswasele as another power-hungry and corrupt dictator chief replaces him, the memory of that short period in-between, when the people had united themselves in order to successfully change the political system nevertheless remains. This short period - which is not a period of darkness - is worth being remembered and being handed down to the following generations:

> But in that brief pause a triumphant statement was made - that people had always held a position of ascendancy in matters of government, that people had always lived with the limmerings of a true democracy. (83)

4. Tales of Tenderness and Power

31 Bessie Head's focus in her writing is on the mad nature of the social and political situation in southern Africa. Her texts provide perspectives from which to view a nightmarish past and present. The characters in her stories seek to communicate the horror that they have known as well as their longings for something else for which they do not necessarily have a name; this has become obvious from "A Period of Darkness." Bessie Head's stories revolve around the questions of identity, of belonging and of the transracial phenomenon of power. Like Buchi Emecheta, another African woman writer, Bessie Head makes it clear that the

exertion of power is not an issue of being black, white or coloured. It can be, but it need not be an issue of race. The two male figures, Sello and Dan, illustrate this very clearly.

32 The central question for Bessie Head, it seems to me, is the question of how and why an individual fits or does not fit into the symbolic order of a given society. It is a question of interdependence, of dialectical interaction between the individual psychic apparatus as formed by social conditioning and the social self as conditioned by psychic disposition. Social organizations do not succeed in offering everyone the same way of fitting into the symbolic system. Those who move on the borderline, those who are in the interstices, the spaces in-between - or to use Homi Bhabha's term: the Third Space - are the ones who are endangered or afflicted with madness (see Cixous 7).

33 But as Michel Foucault has convincingly shown in his book on Madness and Society, this existence in-between, in the interstices, both enables and restricts, excludes and includes. According to Foucault, madness and truth of human existence are intricately interwoven. If we transpose this statement to Bessie Head's novel A Question of Power we can say that Elizabeth's madness reflects the madness of the political reality of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, just as Trinh Minh-ha's reflection of writing mirrors the complicated network of re-writings and re-readings in which we live:

> By reconceptualizing culture as a category of translation, as an analytic of "borderline" transformation, we might open up a range of questions that link the growing interdisciplinarity within the academy, with the global and the transnational nature of cultural transformations. (Bhaba 271)

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