

# A Method to her Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* as South African National Allegory

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## **Summary**

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974), is often thought to be her most personal and least political novel. Read through the lens of Fredric Jameson's concept of "national allegory", though, the novel takes a whole new shape. In Jameson's formulation of "national allegory", he urges readers to think about the equivalences of allegory as shifting through time, not the fixed one-to-one of traditional allegory. He insists that reading "third-world" texts through the concept of "national allegory" allows readers to see the connection of individual to nation. Through the nonlinear narrative of Elizabeth's mental breakdown, Bessie Head takes us on an allegorical tour through South African history. While Elizabeth literally struggles to save herself from the demons of her madness, Head allegorically works through a diagnosis of apartheid era political problems. Through the figures of Dan and Sello, Head explicates oppressive and liberatory political ideologies. Reading *A Question of Power* as a national allegory interested in linking the struggle of the individual against oppressive political ideology and the struggle of the nation against oppressive political ideology, aligns Head's other political writing with this seemingly private novel.

## **Opsomming**

Bessie Head se *A Question of Power* (1974) word dikwels beskou as haar persoonlikste en mins politiese roman. Deur die lens van Fredric Jameson se konsep van nasionale allegorie neem die roman 'n nuwe gedaante aan. In Jameson se formulering van nasionale allegorie dwing hy die leser om te dink aan die ekwivalensies van allegorie as veranderend deur tyd – nie die vaste eendimensionele ekwivalensie van tradisionele allegorie nie. Hy hou vol dat die lees van derde wêreld tekste deur die konsep nasionale allegorie die leser in staat stel om die verband tussen individu en nasie te sien. Deur die nie-lineêre narratief van Elizabeth se geestelike ineenstorting neem Bessie Head die leser op 'n toer deur die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis. Terwyl Elizabeth letterlik 'n stryd voer om haarself te bevry van die demone van waansin, werk Head deur 'n diagnose van 'n apartheidera politiese probleme. Deur die figure Dan en Sello ontvou Head onderdrukkende en bevrydende ideologieë. Die lees van *A Question of Power* as nasionale allegorie wat gemik is daarop om die stryd van die individu en dié van die volk teen onderdrukkende politiese ideologie met mekaar in verband te bring, bring Head se ander politiese tekste in lyn met hierdie oënskynlik persoonlike roman.

In his 1986 essay, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", Fredric Jameson controversially asserts, "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (Jameson 1986a: 69). In this essay he emphasises the conflation of the public/private split, a split that is indicative of the Western Freud/Marx debate, in "third-world"<sup>1</sup> literature. Jameson attempts to correct his "first-world" colleagues' readings of "third-world" literature, which render a text either only overtly political or overtly personal. Instead, he suggests that to read "third-world" texts as always both personally invested and as national allegories is to understand their importance in the "third-world" culture from which they emerged. This form of reading "third-world" texts is not a possibility, but rather an "epistemological priority"(p. 86) for Jameson.

While I take seriously the various objections critics have with Jameson's use of the three worlds model and his reductive approach to literature from three quarters of the world, because this is the percentage that fits into his definition of the "third world," I feel his question: "What do these novels tell us about the nation?" is a worthwhile one. I wonder how individual novels function in the process of defining and building a whole nation – a nation that exists as a community of interests<sup>2</sup> not just as a political boundary. If Jameson is right about the "third-world" novel's place in a cycle of interdependence, it creates and is created by the culture/community from which it emerges, and politics, if we can indeed read *some* "third-world" texts as national allegories, then I wonder what such texts say about the concept of a particular nation as a whole. Do novels affect our understanding of nations? Does how we read a nation's literature affect how we view that nation? What do we as readers and critics gain by understanding texts from "third-world" countries as national allegories? Must this principle apply generally, to all "third-world" literature, or can we apply Jameson's theory selectively?

Jameson's interpretation of the term "allegory" is the key to understanding how it functions in "third-world" texts:

Our traditional conception of allegory is that of an elaborate set of figures and personifications to be read against some one-to-one table of equivalences: this is, so to speak, a one-dimensional view of this signifying process, which might only be set in motion and complexified were we willing to entertain the more alarming notion that such equivalences are themselves in constant change and transformation at each perpetual present of the text.

(Jameson 1986a: 73)

For Jameson, then, allegory, or the nation, is not a fixed point for which some literary figure might stand in eternally.<sup>3</sup> Jameson's explanation of allegory, in terms of a signifying process, helps us to understand that reading Head's text in 2002 will evidence equivalences that it may not have had in 1974. Each "perpetual present of the text" teases out connections Head could not have foreseen. Mandela's rise to power, his insistence on passing down leadership responsibility, and the current project of Mbeki's "African Renaissance" lead us to read Head's prophecy as prescient instead of ridiculous.

For the purposes of testing Jameson's theory I propose to see how Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974) fits into the category, "national allegory". I would like to offer not a general survey of "third-world" texts, but the specific example of how *A Question of Power* bears out Jameson's contention. I will explain how the history of South Africa and the history of Bessie Head's life as articulated by *A Question of Power*, seen as her least political and almost essentially autobiographical novel, fit into this category of national allegory. Using Jameson's concept of allegory, I read this novel as an allegory of the history of South Africa beginning from around 1900, a diagnosis of the nation's inability to create community in the midst of a painful history, and finally a remedy for healing from that history. Head examines the ideology of racial and political divisions within South Africa through the lens of madness. Elizabeth's break-down is an allegorical way to explicate the political crisis of apartheid South Africa. Elizabeth's madness can be read as the only fitting explanation of a dysfunctional system unable to render any of its participants human. Head's contemporary South Africa, then, is personified through the characters of Sello of the Brown Suit, Sello of the White Robes, Medusa, Dan, and the 71 Nice Time Girls. Ideologies have no face, but in Head's allegorical personification, each ideology carries a face and a personality that lives out that ideology. The tension in this story is certainly psychological and confined to Elizabeth's delusions, but what it allegorises is the tension outside Elizabeth's head, the struggle of South African history and politics.

Intervening in the critical debate about this text seems to me of the utmost importance because feminist and psychoanalytic criticism to date has located this text as an autobiography invested in purely personal healing.<sup>4</sup> While I do not deny its emphasis on the self, understanding what type of novel Head has written seems to me the key to understanding its literary and ultimately its political project. This novel cannot be a simple and pure autobiography, uninspired by the politics that surround its writer, because it is those very politics that pushed Bessie Head to write. Even for Bessie Head herself, the separation between personal politics and national politics is a tenuous separation at best:

My third novel, *A Question of Power*, had such an intensely personal and private dialogue that I can hardly place it in the context of the more social and outward-looking work I had done. It was a private philosophical journey to the sources of evil. I argued that people and nations do not realize the point at which they become evil: but once trapped in its net, evil has a powerful propelling motion into a terrible abyss of destruction. I argue that its form, design, and plan could be clearly outlined and that it was little understood as a force in the affairs of mankind.

(Head 1990: 69)

In the essay I have just quoted, Head speaks of how the specifics of South African politics – “police states, detentions, sudden and violent mass protests and death” (Head 1990: 65) – influence her writing. Yet, as is evidenced in the preceding passage, she cannot separate the ignorance of “people and nations”. She begins by saying that her novel is intensely personal and that she cannot contextualise it in the world around her; yet, her statement ends in a discussion of the “affairs of mankind”, which is hardly a purely personal concern. The personal is more than political as the individual lives out the fate of the nation and vice versa, a literary explication that seems unavoidably conscious in Head’s case.

The political landscape of South Africa’s call for national identity shape both Bessie Head’s life and writing. Born in 1937, to a white woman and a black man, Head was born into a nation that was only twenty-eight years old. Under the new South African Constitution of 1909, adopted after Britain enacted the South Africa Bill ensuring South Africa full autonomy, no Bill of Rights was adopted and no check on the strength of the Parliament and Executive branches existed. Only the Atlantic Charter of 1941, adopted by all countries in the United Nations, guaranteed any kind of human rights. The segregation that would later lead to the official policy of apartheid was in full swing: white labourers were given wage subsidies while any attempt at black worker unionisation was met with police force and arrests. The passage of the 1913 Natives’ Land Act confiscated ninety per cent of black Africans’ land. Repeated attempts by the Western educated elite of the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), the African Political Organization (APO), and a few white liberals to legislate moderate equality were thwarted by parliament’s white majority (Beck 2000: 116-117). The South Africa that Head was born into was fragmented into Black and White, Afrikaner and British, African and Coloured. Afrikaner dissention over South Africa’s involvement in World War II and strong alliances between Dutch Afrikaner political strategies and Nazi political strategies led to the official policy of apartheid. The year 1948 witnessed the white majority, the Afrikaner-led National Party, officially legislating apartheid without the

Supreme Court weighing it against the Atlantic Charter (Beck 2000: 123-124). Intensification of racial stratification and oppression were in store for all non-white South Africans.

The narrative structure of *A Question Of Power* accentuates as it mirrors the exchanges between these racially demarcated categories. Not entirely linear, the novel follows the main character Elizabeth through her childhood, her education, and into exile from South Africa along with her son. After she arrives in Motabeng, her adopted Botswanan home, she takes a teaching job and then has a nervous breakdown typical of the nervous breakdowns South African refugees suffered after leaving the apartheid regime. Her salvation comes in the form of the international community she finds in the agricultural project she joins.

The novel overtly concerns itself with racial and national categorisation. It seems crucial to any political project that Head puts forth that Sello of the White Robes, an African and one of the main spirits that haunts her madness, and Elizabeth, Coloured and South African, are “twin souls with closely-linked destinies and the same capacity to submerge other preoccupations in a pursuit after the things of the soul” (Head 1974: 11-12). Head begins *A Question of Power* within the framework of this rigid racial categorisation, describing Sello as only originating from a black body and a black soul.

It seemed almost incidental that he was African. He preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment. And yet, as an African, he seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements; “I am just anyone”. It was as though his soul was a jigsaw.

(Head 1974: 11)

Sello is not just one man, one body, one race. He is the culmination of all of Africa, of all of the histories of African nations. Rather than being an essentialised representation, he is an equalised representation; he is an amalgam of Africanness and his wisdom comes from this place of confluence.

The specificity with which the narrator describes Sello’s beliefs later in the chapter makes his status as a “jigsaw” quite important. He is, in the narrator’s explanations, linked with Buddha, Osiris, Medusa, Isis, and various unnamed prophets. He may begin the chapter described as African, but that is clearly only one of his pieces – he is, after all, a “perfect statement” and also “just anyone”. He begins speaking to Elizabeth from his identity as an African. He helps her to realise:

Africa had nothing, and yet, tentatively, she had been introduced to one of the most complete statements for the future a people could ever make: Be ordinary.

Any assumption of greatness leads to a dog-eat-dog fight and incurs massive suffering. She did not realize it then, but the possibilities of massive suffering were being worked out in her”.

(Head 1974: 39)

The seeming paradox within Sello, his singularity and his omnipresence, seems expertly crafted to represent the paradox of South Africa. What one person can properly represent the Afrikaner, the British, the many different tribes, the Bushman, and the Indian? And these are only the racial demarcations. If one adds in class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, community, region and all the other factors that constitute belonging in South Africa, only a figure like Sello, who is a jigsaw, can allegorise the multiplicity of South Africa.

Head explicates the possibilities of massive suffering through the systems of class, race, and gender oppression through the body of Elizabeth and her interactions with Sello and Dan. However, Elizabeth also marks a point of confluence as black and white mix within her. Sello's jigsaw includes Elizabeth even though she is Coloured and Sello is African; their destinies do not foretell opposition and competition; they are “closely-linked” even at the textual level.

Sello's blackness and his shifting position between demon and angel in Elizabeth's mind – there is Sello of the White Robes who trusts Elizabeth's strength and Sello of the Brown Suit who tries to devalue her humanity – links him to the position of all Africans<sup>5</sup> in South Africa. Both Sellos, like Head, resist monolithic political ideology; black Africans in South Africa espoused various political ideologies differing in the intent of their activism, the place they believed race relations should occupy in politics, and in their visions for the future of South African politics. Through the figure of Sello, Head challenges the logic of apartheid separateness, exposing the double logic at work in apartheid ideology: two identical figures do not have identical goals for human relations: ostensive categorisation does not ensure similarity.

Elizabeth's mind separates out the major schools of thought that govern two political platforms: nonviolent and militant. The dogmas, though, are not to be confused with the people who espouse them. The narrator makes it abundantly clear that Sello, the man of the brown suit and Sello, the spirit of the white robes are not the same: “At first she was extremely curious about the living man, Sello, thinking that in some way he corresponded to the white-robed monk who sat on the chair in her house”(Head 1974: 27). Appearances deceive Elizabeth.

Dan, the other major demon in Elizabeth's psyche, and Sello are, for the most part, figures. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator explains to the reader the power these figures have over Elizabeth:

The woman [Elizabeth] had at first possessed the arrogance of innocence, and had grown over a period of four years to despise the man Sello. He had freely disclosed some unpleasant and horrific details about his inner life, which damned him as a monumental sinner in her eyes. But once her relationship with the man, Dan Molomo, could be looked at with clear, hard eyes, she had turned again to Sello and held out her hands and said: "Thank you! Oh God, thank you for the lever out of hell! ..." now, she spent hours and hours undoing the links which bound her to Dan, whereas at one time it had been a fierce, forever relationship with wonderful music and fantastic thrills and sensations. If Dan hadn't been such a hard spitter (he spat with glorious contempt at things he dominated) she might have permanently made excuses for the other side of his song. As it was, she said: "I might have died under the illusion that I loved him".

(Head 1974: 12)

This wonderfully evocative passage does several things in terms of national allegory. First, it points to Elizabeth's ignorance: her inability to distinguish political truths from the lure of flashy political statements. The political struggle against apartheid raging at the time Head leaves South Africa (1964) has two approaches battling for the dissolution of apartheid: the peaceful nonviolent approach and the militant retaliatory approach. The ferocity with which Dan approaches "domination" – here read as liberation – allegorises the underground Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) movement, which attempted sabotage to destroy the country's infrastructure without taking human life and the Poqo who were responsible for several bombing attacks in the early 1960s (Beck 2000: 144). Dan, however, also dominates the 71 Nice Time Girls, the women he has sex with to torment Elizabeth, pointing out the internal problems of sex, race, and class the oppositional political movements suffered. Throughout her life, Head was always critical of the inherent problems in dogmatic adherence to political ideology in general and party ideology in specific. In this novel, Head points to Dan's ability to make Elizabeth feel good, enmesh her, and retain her against her will as the danger of committing fully to a flawed political logic.

The white establishment, too, correspond with Dan's expressed brutality. The Father figure, another subject of Elizabeth's visions, presents himself as a Ghandi-like figure who resists Dan's violence only to return after Dan has killed him:

"The Father" was frantically pushed over cliffs, sent hurtling to his death in a wildly out-of-control motor car, but he had nine thousand soul-lives. He always turned up again. He made no counter-attack on Dan. He passively offered himself for each death, only to soar back into life again.

(Head 1974: 118)

The Father watches over Elizabeth, unbeknownst to her, until Dan literally tries to kick him out of Elizabeth's house. The Father is not dissuaded by Dan's violence, rather he perseveres in his presence until he can tell Elizabeth, "He's going to blow you up so hard, there won't be anything left of you. Try and protect yourself in some way" (p. 118). The Father's determination is to deliver a message of resistance. He will not cease his presence until that message is delivered. The passage where Dan tries to kill The Father is reminiscent of the March 1960 police killings in response to the peaceful demonstrations to repeal passbook laws. The demonstrators, like The Father, would not stop their demonstrations because of the threat of violence. Rather, their message of liberation and resistance is so powerful that death cannot extinguish it. The passbook demonstrations of the 1960s continued and the police continued to meet all peaceful demonstrations with violence. "The Father" figure, peaceful in his presence to Elizabeth, shows the kind of undying adherence to nonviolent principles that constantly enraged police and other White officials. "The Father's" willingness to sacrifice himself only makes Dan angrier.

In addition to the police, the White Parliament is an arm of oppression, legislating the humanity out of Black, Coloured, and Indian by a rigid categorisation of their race. Dan's hypercategorisation of the 71 Nice Time Girls personifies this excessive taxonomy:

Miss Pelican-Beak, Miss Chopper, Miss Pink Sugar Icing, whom he was on the point of marrying, Madame Make-Love-On-The-Floor where anything goes, The Sugar-Plum Fairy, more of Body Beautiful, more of The Womb, a demonstration of sexual stamina with five local women, this time with the lights on, Madame Squelch Squelch, Madame Loose-Bottom – the list of them was endless.

(Head 1974: 148)

Each woman has a symbol by which to identify her, a passbook of sorts. Each woman is also judged, used, and subsequently rejected by her sexual abilities alone. This absolute reduction consolidates power for Dan in much the same way the passbook system consolidated power for the White government rigidly reducing individuals to one sole trait.

Dan is also indicted in the founding of South Africa as a nation and in White domination as a whole. "He had not yet told the whole of mankind about his ambitions, like Hitler and Napoleon, to rule the world" (Head 1974: 14). "Dan had decided that he was a much better manager of the universe than Sello. What was eating him was that no prophecies had preceded him; and yet in some way he had gained directorship of the universe in 1910" (p. 25). 1910 refers to the Act of Union, the date the White government of South Africa



declared itself a union and began self-government, effectively disenfranchising any non-white people from an effective and legitimate place in the governmental structure. While this process of exclusion had been in effect before the date of 1910, the Act of Union gave institutionalised support to this type of exclusion". The Napoleon reference dates back to 1806 when the Treaty of Amiens was dissolved after Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz. The Treaty originally established in 1802 that Batavian officials would rule the colony. Their immediate goals were unity of the races and reform of the British governmental system. Napoleon's victory returned British rule to the Cape and halted any egalitarian politics (Beck 2000: 45). Hitler, as another historical reference, links the set of beliefs Afrikaner nationalists espoused post-World War II with Dan's political project. The National party's official policy of apartheid was loosely based on Hitler's project of racial purity. These explicit references to people and dates central to South Africa's political history place the novel as allegory. Therefore, Dan's racist, militant, oppressive, and sexist politics: "You are supposed to feel jealous. You are inferior as a Coloured. You haven't got what that girl has got" (Head 1974: 127) line up with the rhetoric and actions of the South African National Party and other oppressive national politics at the time Head was writing. As Jameson's definition of allegory points out, though, Dan need not be a one-for-one stand-in. *A Question of Power* embodies Jameson's concept of allegory as it sees beyond simple equivalences to the heart of ideological embodiment. Rather than simply offering a symbolic fictional character for a real life embodiment, Dan for Verwoerd, Head offers Dan as the flawed ideology as inherent in many different people and many different movements.<sup>6</sup>

Sello also embodies an ideology, standing in for the African National Congress. This is an elemental, rather than a total similarity as Sello does not contain every aspect of the ANC, like its radical wings. Instead, he embodies the mainstream parts of the ANC's ideology without its complexity. In short, Sello embodies simply the ANC's emphasis on unity: "a spectacular array of personalities moved towards her, crowded with memories of the past" (Head 1974: 24-25). They were all Sello in his work, as the prophet of mankind" Sello clearly aligns himself with the ANC's goal of unity. The ANC called for members "who [were] willing to subscribe to the aims of the Congress and to abide by its constitution"(quoted in Barber 1999: 127) and drafted the *African Claims*, which urged "common citizenship and individual rights irrespective of race" (Barber 1999: 127). Foremost in the political project of this group was an emphasis on not racially dividing and privileging Africanness over any other racial category.

First in Sello's character, though, is "freedom of heart" (Head 1974: 11), a value that was clearly articulated by Nelson Mandela during his 1962 speech: "I have fought against White domination, and I have fought against Black

domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die”(Mandela quoted by Beck 2000: 145). Again the allegory here is not one-to-one, but instead elemental. Elizabeth explains that Sello’s outlook is similar to Mandela’s:

It seemed to me that his job was religion itself, because he moved towards me like that, then right in front of my eyes did a slow, spiritual strip-tease act. He half showed me that the source of human suffering was God itself, personalities in possession of powers or energies of the soul. Ordinary people never mucked up the universe. They don’t have that kind of power, wild and flaring out of proportion. They have been the victims of it ...

(Head 1974: 190)

Sello helps Elizabeth to see that Dan’s call for omnipotence is an oppressive call. The true power for Mandela, the ANC, and Sello is recognising the power in ordinary equality. Both Sello and Mandela practise what they preach as both of their emphases lie in truth before power. God, in Sello’s approximation, offers a model for absolute control and power that is ultimately harmful for people.

Through her breakdown, Elizabeth engages in a struggle to accept these truths about political and personal power without letting them kill her. The key to Elizabeth’s survival is her recognition of the importance of the day to day in spite of the endless cycles of oppression in her visions, i.e. South Africa’s history, which is why her concern for her son saves her. The truth of history only has the power to overwhelm her when she forgets the possibility of each day. In nations, the type of traumatic history that South Africa has lived through leads either to amnesia (Japan and Korea) or reconciliation (the Truth and Reconciliation Hearings). Dan allegorises the possibility of historical amnesia; he wants Elizabeth to be consumed by the sins of the nation. Sello allegorises the possibility of reconciliation and acceptance, a way to heal from history.

The key for Elizabeth, in her process of healing, is to recognise the true nature of Dan and the true nature of Sello. Her sanity is not in question; her power to heal is her power to recognise the faces of good and evil. Botswana, as her country of exile, allows her clarity of vision that her residence in South Africa did not.<sup>7</sup> Friendships anchor Elizabeth to the very tangible world of Motabeng and help her see the value in ordinariness.

The love of friends ultimately makes the difference for Elizabeth. It is what allows her to “make the great leap out of hell” (Head 1974: 188). Her friends’ very real concern and attention to daily details during her breakdown, their

delivery of food and care for her son, allows her to recognise the outside reality framing the internal debate between Dan and Sello. This contextualisation is both a forecast and a diagnosis of a national problem that Head witnesses in South Africa: political dialogues are too concerned with the nature of “men’s” souls to worry about clean water and healthy children. One must stop and look around to get an idea of the problem, not simply discuss the problem in a closed room.

Connection to the land is Elizabeth’s gesture of acceptance of the reality outside her head:

There was no direct push against those rigid, false social systems of class and caste. She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man. As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over *her* land. It was a gesture of belonging.

(Head 1974: 206; my italics)

Love, then, between *all* peoples and between the people and the land on which they live, is the only possibility for breaking the cycles of oppression and subjugation. Elizabeth cannot be in the midst of oppression and subjugation and realize love’s potential; she must be safe in order to heal. South Africa, too, must be free of the “rigid social systems” before it could understand the ordinariness in gestures of belonging – the simple act of voting, walking freely through the streets of Johannesburg.

Jameson ends his essay declaring the importance of “the principles of community interdependence” (Jameson 1986a: 86). The community as a whole is expressive of the interwoven nature of politics and individual destinies. Motabeng, Elizabeth’s adopted village and the agricultural project she works on, depend on one another for the very sustenance of life. The whole community not only survives, but thrives, when they recognise their interdependence: the agricultural project depends on the village for labour and investment and the village depends on the project for vegetables and goods. Communication between these two spheres is crucial for their integration. This relationship of interdependence is excellently diagnosed in *A Question of Power* in terms of lack as the problem with South Africa as a nation. This lack comes from South Africa’s reluctance to turn outward for help and its tendency to turn inward for meaning. In Head’s estimation, South Africa spends its time looking for the false prophets like Dan, preaching power as salvation without realising what that word “brotherhood”, or “broederbond”, really means. Head’s novel, then, is part allegory of the nation and part prophecy for the nation. If South Africa cannot see its own tendencies toward evil, embodied in the consolidation of power, if it cannot see the truth of its

past balanced with the necessities of its present, then it cannot pull itself out of the madness of hell.

Bessie Head did not live long enough to see the dissolution of apartheid and Bishop Desmond Tutu's spearheading of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee Hearings, but she did predict they would need to happen in order for the nation to unify and to heal from history. Her political commitment, not simply in the form of party support, was to the equality of all peoples. Ultimately, she felt that should be the nation's commitment. Reading *A Question of Power* through the lens of Jameson's version of national allegory helps align Head's own personal process of healing with the nation's political process of healing.

## Notes

1. Although I find the term problematic, I use "third-world" throughout the remainder of this essay because it is the term that Jameson utilises.
2. I am thinking here of the arguments of Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* where he explains that a nation cannot come into being politically (in terms of national borders) without first existing in the minds of the members of that nation. Interestingly, he cites print capitalism as primary in the dissemination of an imagined nation – a move that seems to be backed up by Jameson's theory that novels have a practical function in defining the history (political and personal) of the nation.
3. While I acknowledge many different definitions of the term "allegory", I will be focused solely on Jameson's interpretation of the word in the aforementioned quotation. I would, however, direct Jameson to Dr J. I. Okonkwo's 1984 essay, "From Allegory to Exposition: Developing Techniques in the African Novel" (1986b), in which he explains that parable/allegory is linked to a moral edification developed in the folktale tradition. This form is short and characters do not so much exist as characters in allegory, but specifically as symbols. Dr Okonkwo explains that a properly African concept of novel writing incorporates this folkloric allegorical tradition with the Western influence of narrative. In an African novel, therefore, both traditions hold equal sway and "the techniques adopted by African novelists have alternated from the parabolic to the expository in accordance with the intention of a writer either to set forth a moral lesson, or to discourse his perceptions of life" (1984: 193). Jameson's discussion of Sembene Ousmane's *Xala* would do well to incorporate an Afrocentric perspective on African allegory.
4. Both Jacqueline Rose (1994) and Elizabeth Evasdaughter (1989), psychoanalytic and feminist critics respectively, indicate that Elizabeth's and Head's madness is something that just happened to them. This is not to suggest that

mental breakdown is a choice. But, if I may read Elizabeth through Head, it seems odd to me that any critic would read their struggle for survival as simply being afflicted with a psychic breakdown. Rose, in typical psychoanalytic fashion cautions readers not to see “the unconscious as a challenge to the dominant” (p. 417), not to read the personal (emotional) as political. I see Head’s acceptance and even indulgence in the very political dimensions of her visions as an engagement with ideology that has the power to either kill or liberate her. Her move to Botswana seems an outright acceptance of the strength of those ideologies to determine one’s life. Head’s willingness to document these visions and her unwillingness to slough off the trappings of survival (she brings her son to the hospital before anything tragic happens despite being in the middle of a suicidal delusion) seems to me to indicate the necessity of working through apartheid logic before she can truly belong in Botswana.

5. I use the term “African” not to denote a racial category, but rather a national, or continental affiliation.
6. Here Head seems to be combining a metaphorical synecdoche with allegory. This type of experimentation of style takes Jameson’s explanation of allegory’s multidimensional signifying process one step further by including synecdoche as a literary mode also capable of multiple levels of signification.
7. Head’s status as an exile contributed to her breakdown because she spent seven years before she was able to gain Botswanan citizenship, reporting at the refugee office every week. However, Botswana also allowed her a greater freedom than she had ever known. Head, therefore, recognised varying degrees of freedom that many exiles might not have known had they not tried so fiercely to become part of their new country of residency. One wonders if Head would have come to the same conclusions about community’s role in the healing of the nation had she not ended up in a country so fiercely dedicated to communal life.

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