"Head Tells Stories": A Scandalous Emancipatory Strategy

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Summary

The autobiographical material relating to Bessie Head's origins was not only adhered to by her in her life but is also inscribed in her fiction, notably in *A Question of Power* and *Maru*. The "truth" of her story of origins has been the subject of heated academic exchanges in South Africa, her country of origin. Head's story is examined as a paradoxical emancipatory strategy which both locks her into South Africa's most banal racist metaphor and also releases her to negotiate her empowerment.

The paper examines the racist discourse of pre-apartheid South Africa which produced Bessie Head's story of her origins and which continues to operate as a sub-text to contemporary discourse. The two early novels, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, are examined as re-writings of Head's story, in which the conflict between racial identity and subjectivity is a central thematic concern. The novels are read as testimonies both to the power of ideology to affect the material and discursive subject and to Head's struggle to find her voice as a women writer of mixed ancestry in Africa.

Opsomming

Bessie Head het nie net gedurende haar lewe by die outobiografiese gegewens wat verband hou met haar oorsprong gebly nie, maar dit is ook in haar fiksie ingeskryf soos blyk in *A Question of Power* en *Maru*. In Suid-Afrika, haar land van oorsprong, was die "waarheid" van haar weergawe van oorsprong die onderwerp van hewige akademiese debatte. Head se weergawe word ondersoek as 'n paradoksale emansiperende strategie wat haar beide in Suid-Afrika se mees banale rasistiese metafoor vasvang, en haar in staat stel om te beding vir haar bemagtiging.

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die rassistiese diskoers van voor-apartheid Suid-Afrika wat Bessie Head se verhaal van haar oorsprong opgelewer het, en wat steeds dien as sub-teks tot kontemporêre diskoers. Die twee vroeëre verhale, *Maru* en *A Question of Power*, word ondersoek as herskrywings van Head se verhaal, waarin die konflik tussen rassistiese identiteit en subjektiwiteit 'n sentrale tematiese kwessie is. Die verhale word beskou as getuienis, beide van sowel die mag van ideologie om die materiële en diskursiewe subjek te beïnvloed as van Head se stryd om 'n stem te verkry as vroue-skryfster van gemengde afkoms in Afrika.

> Apartheid – may that remain the name from now on, the unique appellation for the ultimate racism in the world, the last of many.
>
> (Derrida 1986: 330)

Apartheid, however, as McClintock and Nixon remind Derrida, is only a single term in a series of racist lexicons. Neither the first word nor the last, it has "its own history, and that history is closely entwined with a developing ideology of race which . . . can also be seen to be intimately allied to different stages of South Africa's political and economic development" (McClintock & Nixon 1986: 340). I shall situate the subject of my paper in that history and in the discourse of racist ideology in which the term "apartheid" is embedded, for I shall examine Bessie Head's story of herself, and it is not yet possible for South Africans to speak or write their stories without acknowledging, even in defiant or contradictory ways, "the definitive role of race in the constitution of identity" (Coullie 1991: 9).

Head was born in 1937 and died in 1986. She reached maturity in a country regulated by and increasingly repressive legal apparatus, where "the personal is political" had its own sinister meaning. She died in Serowe, Botswana, finally a Botswanan citizen after many years as a stateless person. She did not write her autobiography but has described her novel *A Question of Power* as "totally autobiographical". She has also left us this account of her origins:

> I was born . . . in Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital, in South Africa. The reason for my peculiar birthplace was that my mother was white, and she had acquired me from a black man. She was judged insane, and committed to the mental hospital while pregnant. Her name was Bessie Emery and I consider it the only honour South African officials ever did me – naming me after this unknown, lovely, and unpredictable women.[1]

In the year of Head's death a South African woman academic, Susan Gardner, published an article on Head. Its title, "Don't Ask for the True Story: A Memoir of Bessie Head" is misleading for it sets itself up, unasked, to provide the "true" story of Bessie Head's origins. Briefly put, Gardner's research, coupled with the diagnosis *in absentia* of a white male psychiatrist, enables her to reject Head's story and to replace it with a scenario stripped of overt political content and of the dignity of autonomous choice.

Gardner finds no record of Bessie Emery's committal to the Pietermaritzburg institution, but finds a record of her earlier committal in another province. Across a letter written by Emery to the authorities there, a psychiatrist has scrawled "She suffers from Presenile Psychosis" (quoted in Gardner 1986: 124). Gardner's conclusions are the following: Bessie Emery was not the victim of a punitive medico-legal apparatus; she was suffering from a degenerative condition which denied her the possibility of making rational choices. Head's birth, then, is the outcome of and encounter between a diseased and degenerating white woman and a black man who took advantage of her helpless state. There is also a suggestion that "Bessie Head . . . might be suffering, as her mother apparently was, from a progressive brain disease. . . ." (Gardner 1986: 124). Not only is Head's story false, but it is also a diagnostic tool, to be read as a psychotic text. That this diagnosis has a racist base is patent from the comments of a white male psychiatrist on "A Question of Power", whom Gardner quotes uncritically:

> All my Black psychotics claim they have a white parent. Even the family romance and schizophrenia take a racial form in South Africa.
>
> (Gardner 1986: 122)

It will not be my task to intervene on Head's behalf and to argue for "her freedom as a writer, the freedom of her writing" (Dovey 1989: 35). This has already been done most ably by Teresa Dovey in "A Question of Power: Susan Gardner's Biography versus Bessie Head's Autobiography". I intend to demonstrate two things. Firstly, I shall show that Head's story is produced by and within the racist discourse to which the surveillance of the sexuality of white women was an essential component. I shall show, moreover, that the white psychiatric establishment on whose judgement Gardner relies formed

part of an ideologically determined medico-legal state apparatus. Secondly, I shall contend that Head's story, fact or fiction, functions as a liberatory strategy which enables "her freedom as a writer, the freedom of her writing" (Dovey 1989: 35).

The term "miscegenation" which originated in the "scientific racism" of the late nineteenth century was still current in South Africa in the 1930s. Part of the discourse of degeneration, it embodied not merely a fear of inter-racial sexuality but also of its supposed consequence: the children of such unions would inevitably be physically weak and/or mentally and morally defective, threatening the extinction of the "superior" white race. In this context white women, as wives and mothers, took on a new iconic significance as the guarantors of the untainted circulation of "white" blood. To the customary control of women under patriarchy was added a hegemonic racial dimension. Beall quoted this illuminating extract from the 1913 *Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Assaults on Women*:

> Violated chastity, especially where the offender is a male of inferior race, is keenly felt among white people as an irreparable wrong to the victim and her relatives and an outrage upon the white race...
>
> (1982: 133–134)

To this unholy alliance of race and gender must be added the issue of class which within the Victorian metropolitan context had been "resolved" through the discourse of degeneration. The first decades of this century witnessed the emergence of a new social and economic order in South Africa. A strongly imperialist ruling class was bent on creating a modern capitalist state. The dispossession of blacks, the impoverishment of rural Afrikaners and the Great Depression resulted in a massive influx of unskilled people of all races to the urban areas. A new black and white proletariat was created in the slums clustered around South Africa's few cities, and a culture of the proletariat began to emerge, cutting across colour lines. This threat to white domination in general and emergent Afrikaner Nationalism in particular, demanded an immediate and permanent alignment of race with class. Brink quotes aptly from the social work quarterly "Vrou en Moeder" (Wife and Mother), of the 1930s:

> ... the failed poor white on his unhappily low standard of living can so easily become the companion and roommate of the non-white. Here, as well as at the communist meetings, the non-white learns to resist the idea of white guardianship and to regard himself as at least equal to the white.
>
> (Brink 1990: 287)

The danger is clear: both groups are in danger of forgetting who they are.

Segregationist policy, grounded in "scientific racism", was designed to reinsert the "poor whites" into the dominant social formation; blacks were to be reminded of their "natural" inferiority. Deviance was accordingly diagnosed differently for these groups: black deviance was biologically determined; white deviance was inscribed as the sign of racial degeneration.

The surveillance of sexuality was an essential project on two counts. Any "mixed" union was a threat to racial hegemony, but a white woman who chose a black lover betrayed her iconic value as custodian of white moral worth. The state responded in two ways: sexual acts between black and white became crimes in terms of the Immorality Act No 5 of 1927 unless the couple were legally married, and inter-racial sexual activity by white women[2] became a prime marker of deviance, degeneration and mental defectiveness.

The psychiatric establishment, which Gardner accepts uncritically, became preoccupied with testing and classification according to a taxonomy of racist stereotypes. Linda Chisholm has shown that in the 1920s and 1930s doctors and psychiatrists conducted extensive tests on black and white juvenile delinquents. Their results "prove" a connection between delinquency and mental abnormality, and find a much higher incidence of "mental defect" among sexually deviant white girls than in any other group. Chisholm's study also reveals that whereas in her sample the majority of white boys committed to reformatories had been convicted of illicit liquor-selling (a thriving cross-colour trade among the urban poor) – just over half the white girls had been sentenced under the Immorality Act. Chisholm's study is also illuminating in terms of the status of psychiatric certification. Her research documents the certification and committal of a number of girls at a reformatory on such grounds as "very immoral. . .very untruthful and dishonest" (quoted in Chisholm 1990: 302) and the carry-all for unruly women everywhere: "violent attacks of uncontrollable rage" (Chisholm 1990: 303).

Within this discourse Bessie Emery's "progressive brain disease" could without difficulty have been diagnosed with the support of her choice of a black lover/s as collateral. Such a diagnosis might all the more readily have been arrived at if class considerations were taken into account. It is clear that both class and race are implicated in the South African discourse of degeneration. Bessie Emery, however, according to Gardner, was not a member of the "poor white" class but of the white elite:

> I do not give her maiden name[3] here, for it would immediately reveal her identity to those familiar with South African "higher society" circles.
>
> (Gardner 1986: 129)

Emery's betrayal is triple: race, gender and class.

What I have been at pains to demonstrate is not so much the "truth" of Bessie Head's story as verifiable fact – such an unmediate truth is certainly irrecoverable in this instance and, it is contended, in all instances, mediated by discourse. I have wished rather to show that Head's story reproduces and is produced by the ideological discourse of "scientific racism". To the extent that Head may be considered the author of her story and thus of her identity, we must view her not

> as the autonomous creator of her . . . own identity or text, but as someone who is interpellated into available *subject* positions
>
> (Coullie 1991: 3)

While language and culture generally

> determine the range of subject positions in that they pre-exist the individual participant's interaction within them
>
> (Coullie 1991: 7)

the specific discursive, material circumstances of South African racism may be regarded as prime determinants of identity.

It is, however, also accepted that the author, in telling her own story, selects, shapes and designs her narrative. In the case of Head, the story she elects to tell also shapes two fictional narratives: the early novels *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. I intend to examine this triple writing of her story as:

> Head's expression of an impossible but liberatory desire to be simply identical to herself, to avoid the passage of the self through the Symbolic system, in which the individual receives a name and an identity.
>
> (Dovey 1989: 34)

Maru and *A Question of Power* are set in Botswana, outside the codified South African system of racism. Both present a woman protagonist whose identity is imbricated with questions of race. In *Maru*, however, Head presents a woman whose racial origins, at least are unambiguous. Margaret Cadmore, despite her "white" name, is a Masarwa, a Bushman. She is inserted into the Botswanan social formation as a member of a despised group: landless, powerless, often enslaved.

Her identity as a Masarwa is nonetheless problematic. The child of unknown father and a nameless Masarwa woman who dies giving birth to her. Margaret is named, raised and educated by a middle-class white woman, the "original" Margaret Cadmore. In terms of an ethnic identity, of which race is only one determinant, Margaret is significantly Othered. Educated within the Eurocentric model in a Botswanan community, Margaret knows neither the language nor the culture of the Masarwa. Indeed, although Masarwa slaves prop up the households of all the other principal characters, Margaret never makes contact with them. Yet her destiny is mapped out for her by the white woman who views her rearing of the child as a social experiment: "One day, you will serve your people" (*Maru* 1971: 17).

Narratorial comment, however, places the young Margaret beyond such identification:

> [She] was hardly African or anything but something new and universal, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as tribe or race or nation.
>
> (Head 1971: 16)

There is an inherent contradiction between the racial identity by which she is inserted into the Symbolic order and the non-racial, non-ethnic identity granted her by Head. Her identity as a Masarwa effectively silences her; in inter-personal contacts, she is reserved, almost insignificant – except for her refusal to deny her (problematic) Masarwaness. It is as an artist that Margaret speaks. Her drawings and painting reveal to Maru not merely "a great woman

in herself, with no other attachments or identification", but also a woman who is "a symbol of her tribe, and through her he sought to gain an understanding of the eventual liberation of an oppressed people" (p. 108).

As the representative of the oppressor, Maru also articulates the master's repressed fear of the slave. Enslavement of the Masarwa may have eroded the Botswanan power base, so that he reads the message of the paintings as:

> ... it is I and my tribe who possess the true vitality of this country. You lost it when you sat down and let us clean your floors and rear your children and cattle. (p. 109)

This "true vitality" becomes Maru's by right of sexual conquest. He harnesses Margaret's autonomy as artist to his aspirations, projecting his dreams into her unconscious so that she no longer produces, but reproduces – painting Maru's images as a "true and sensitive recorder" (p. 104). Her love for Maru's rival, Moleka, is not part of the great scheme of things. Moleka is manipulated into a marriage, while Margaret is abducted by Maru and his men.

Head does not resolve the ambiguities of Margaret's identity/ies. As Maru's wife, Margaret offers the hope of freedom to the Masarwa people, for whom "a door silently opened on a small dark room in which their souls had been shut for a long time" (p. 124). Her destiny is fulfilled through her sexuality. Her conscious life is lived through and for Maru, and only in her dreams does she weep for her lost, entirely personal love. (Even in the unconscious Maru dominates, for, since he dreams her dreams *and remembers them*, he knows her as she does not know herself.)

It is clear that in this text Head attempts the impossible – to make her protagonist functional both as symbol of an oppressed people and as an individual subject. And it is significant that it is only as artist that Margaret is capable of representing both elements. The resolution of the narrative, however, represses the artist figure, and reinscribes the story of Bessie Emery and the ideology which produced it: the conflict between racially determined identity and an autonomous subjectivity is sited in the body of a woman.

Perhaps more significant is the textuality of the narrative. Whereas Head employs the strategies of realism in her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, in *Maru* she brings into play the elements of African oral tradition. Her stated purpose is didactic and her choice of a parabolic form aligns the texts with the traditional African tale, bearer of communal values and norms. Realistic detail is presented on the same level of authenticity as magical and cosmological signs and wonders: characters are not required to cohere to the dictates of logic; the reader must accept Maru both as an ordinary subject and as a being with supernatural powers.

Thus, while the artist within the text is silenced by the dominant culture, the artist of the text absorbs the power of that culture into her own voice.

A Question of Power is a radical departure from this African mode. As autobiography, it is one of those notable exceptions to Coullie's observation that

> introspective, highly personal autobiographic writing in contemporary South Africa is so uncommon . . . as to be almost definitive of the genre in its absence (1991: 15)

As fictional narrative it surprises Larson

> not solely because it is an introspective novel by an African woman but because the topics of her concern are also, for the most part, foreign to African fiction, . . . madness, sexuality, guilt (1976: 165)

(Larson, in fact, aligns the novel with the work of two white South African writers, Lessing and Gordimer, rather than with Head's African contemporaries.)

The text overtly mirrors both Head's story and her history, the story of her origins and the recorded events of her later life: her marriage, its failure, the birth of a son, the departure from South Africa, the first years in Botswana during which Head suffered a breakdown, was certified and committed to a psychiatric institution. It is, however, in no sense a realistic text. The narrative voice, like that in Morrison's *Beloved*, moves freely outside realism and its assumptions about "truth", refusing the division between subjective and objective, metaphor and fact (Anderson 1990: 138). Unlike *Maru*, however, this blurring of conventional boundaries is not legitimated by Afrocentric narrative structures which are grounded in communalism. The narrative voice, "a true and sensitive recorder" (*Maru* p. 104), occupies itself only with the world, real or illusory, as Elizabeth experiences it. Head herself describes the text thus: ". . . it invites people to fill in gaps . . . where the author has left blank spaces" (*Between the Lines* 1989: 27). What concerns me here is the rewriting in this mode of that familiar triad; madness, sexuality and racial identity.

Elizabeth, like Head, leaves South Africa with a negative identity: "a coloured person", according to the Population Registration Act of 1950, "is a person who is not a white person or a native". She was never a member of the dominant white group but in Botswana the other half of her negation comes into focus – she is not "a native" either. The title of the novel is frequently read broadly as setting in question the relative powers of good and evil. For my purpose, it can be more narrowly interpreted: the question of what power a woman may have to distinguish between the two, whose societal identity is not both/and but neither/nor. Whereas in *Maru* Margaret is granted interior resources and a protective mask, Elizabeth has almost no defence against proliferating images of aggression, filth and degeneration and, since the borderline between external reality and interiority has been destabilised, these images reproduce themselves in what for others functions as the rational world. Elizabeth has no power over the manifestations that torment her over a period of several years.

What is remarkable is the naked racism and sexism that these manifestations produce. Sello and Dan, the two principal figures who invade Elizabeth's life, are male and black and their immense powers are related directly to maleness and blackness – a repetition of the racist stereotype of South

African ideology. Their attacks on Elizabeth come essentially from these quarters: she is not a "real" woman and she is not African. That sexuality and race are signifiers in a single system is patent from the image of "nearly all" Coloured men as camp homosexuals. The clear racial identity of the African man enables him to maintain his maleness in the face of emasculating legislation; the Coloured male becomes neither one thing nor the other. In the discourse of degeneration, male homosexuality and Colouredness are equated – both liminal societal states which "people in general accepted ... as a disease one had to live with" (p. 45). Elizabeth must accept this identity: "That's your people, not African people" (p. 45).

In this framework of distorted logic, female identity is sexual, racially specific and male-determined. Elizabeth is Coloured therefore she has no vagina and therefore she is not a woman. The seventy-one orgasmic "nice-time girls" who perform nightly with Dan are truly women because they as Africans can satisfy the black male. Impotent on all counts Elizabeth is the constant butt of their mockery: "they had what she had not got" (p. 164).

The potency of blackness and sexuality is nevertheless invested with an extreme ambivalence. African power has a dark underside of witchcraft and cruelty; sexuality is not merely loose and carefree – it is obscene and perverse. Elizabeth experiences "a revulsion, an overpowering horror of men" (p. 139) and of "all things African [as] vile and obscene" (p. 137). Against this the voice of reason does not prevail:

> I'm not like that. I've never been a racialist. Of course I admit I'm a Coloured. I'm not denying it. I'm not denying anything. Maybe people who are Coloureds are quite nice too....
>
> (*Between the Lines* p. 47)

Both Elizabeth's committals are precipitated by outbursts in which the discourse of racial and sexual hatred speaks itself through her. Both public displays occur at the post office, the centre of written communication in the village. She is forced to go public, to end her private torment by finding a scapegoat, one the discourse of degeneration has always produced: "Oh you bloody bastard Botswana!!" (p. 51); "Sello is a filthy pervert who sleeps with his daughter" (p. 175).

In her doubly negated position, Elizabeth is trapped in an extra turn of Fanon's "Manichean delirium". Good and evil, black and white, are binary absolutes which demand demarcation yet she herself is a third term, an object that by its very existence denies binary separatism. "Madness" is the necessary condition of one who does not have a subject position from which to speak. Perversely, Elizabeth's "mad" outbursts are an attempt to gain stability by identifying with her own oppressor.

Head's two writings of her story operate in different modalities, the mythical and the pathological. The first inserts the Head figure into an African cultural formation; the second, Western, mode inscribes the Head figure as the paradigmatic product of racist discourse. They must I contend, be read as testimonies to the struggle of the woman writer of mixed ancestry to find her voice in Africa.

Head never again wrote either pure or autobiographical fiction, Her last works are grounded in the history and stories of the Botswanan people. When MacKenzie speaks of her co-authorship with the villagers of Serowe (1989: 45) in *The Collector of Treasures* and in *Serowe*, he foregrounds the accommodation she finds between her desire for self-validation and her yearning for a communal identity. She becomes a story-teller, selecting, shaping and designing the stories of others. Similarly in her last work, *A Bewitched Crossroads* she rereads and rewrites the history of the Botswanan region from an Afrocentric perspective.

A particular set of material and discursive conditions produced the story of Bessie Head's origins, a story designed to subject her to negativity and silence; Head's insistence on telling and retelling this story paradoxically makes it her own. The story of which she has been the subject becomes the subject of her story. Head thus liberates herself from co-optation into a co-operative project, for in the stories she tells, the subjects are always and only telling the stories they tell themselves about themselves.

Notes

1. Preface to "Witchcraft", *Ms Magazine* November 1975: 75.
2. A previous Transvaal ordinance criminalised sexual contact between white women and black men only.
3. Bessie Emery apparently married an Australian miner of that name in 1915.

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