



Global Africa

BESSIE HEAD AND THE TRAUMA OF EXILE

**IDENTITY AND ALIENATION IN SOUTHERN
AFRICAN FICTION**

Joshua Agbo



ROUTLEDGE



Bessie Head and the Trauma of Exile

This book investigates themes of exile and oppression in Southern Africa across Bessie Head's novels and short fiction.

An exile herself, arriving in Botswana as a South African refugee, Bessie Head's fiction serves as an important example of African exile literature. This book argues that Head's characters are driven to exile as a result of their socio-political ambivalence while still in South Africa, and that this sense of discomfort follows them to their new lives. Investigating themes of trauma and identity politics across colonial and post-colonial contexts, this book also addresses the important theme of black-on-black prejudice and hostility which is often overlooked in studies of Head's work.

Covering Head's shorter fiction as well as her major novels *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1973), *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981), and *A Bewitched Crossroads: An African Saga* (1984), this book will be of interest to researchers of African literature and post-colonial history.

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African Fiction

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For the enduring memories of my late parents: Mr. Isalu Agbo and Mrs. Agnes Agbo, and my only sister Jane who passed on during my first year in the university. Now my life, like Bessie Head's, has "no frame of reference beyond me."



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Foreword

This book claims to open up “new possibilities in the field of African literature.” It is not an idle boast. Agbo’s 2010 book *How Africans Underdeveloped Africa: A Forgotten Truth in History*, with its provocative rephrasing of Walter Rodney’s famous 1972 title, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, showed that he has moved beyond the “grand anti-colonial” narratives which marked the first wave of postcolonial criticism. Now, in a world increasingly dominated by reductivist, “woke” identity politics, Agbo remains theoretically eclectic and unprogrammatically. This is an invaluable asset, essential even, for a critic engaging with his chosen subject, Bessie Head, who, as a half-white South African refugee living in what she calls “the worst tribal country of the world,” evades comfortable ideological categories. Agbo rejects prescriptive narratives of “rootedness” *versus* rootless exile. For some exile may be “painful;” for others it may be “celebratory.” “Being alienated from one’s country may also enable the writer to contribute to subjects of universal value,” Agbo writes, and quotes the lifelong exile, Nuruddin Farah: “One of the pleasures of living away from home is that you become the master of your destiny, you avoid the constraints and limitations of your past.” Agbo’s own personal experience in Nigeria has given him a less positive notion of African or black “identity” than that of Africans from securely dominant tribal backgrounds or of European or American anti-racist commentators.

Without denying the painful elements of Head’s exile, Agbo rejects Huma Ibrahim’s view that Head shows an “exilic consciousness,” always nostalgic for home. Instead Agbo sees Head’s work as exemplifying “exilic compromise,” the attempt to make a new identity in a country of exile. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head’s most unambiguously successful and also her most realistic novel, she shows how the exile from South Africa, Makhaya, rejecting the tribalism of the surrounding Tswana culture, builds up a new “modern agricultural state” in Golema Mmidi in cooperation with the white aid-worker Gilbert. In defiance of politically correct anti-colonial pieties, Makhaya accepts European forms of his name in order to evade his tribal identity. “Makhaya’s belonging is not rooted in where he was born but where he hopes to become himself.” Agbo reminds the reader that the white outsider Gilbert is himself an exile. Like his fellow exile, Makhaya, he becomes an intrinsic

part of the community, and marries a black woman. Head's rejection of tribal identity extends to a profound rejection of black-on-white racism.

Agbo's theoretical independence serves him well also in treating the theme of black-on-black racism which is central to the second of Head's major novels, *Maru*. Again the central drive of the novel is towards a Utopian resolution: the Tswana chief Maru marries one of the lowliest of his subjects, Margaret Cadmore, a San or Masarwa (more insultingly "bushman"). Head parallels the tribal black-on-black racism of Botswana with the white-on-black *apartheid* of South Africa. "They had said of the Masarwa what every white man had said of every black man: They can't think for themselves. They don't know anything." Realism is inevitably cast aside in dramatising this unlikely story. As Agbo notes, Head drastically simplifies the tribal realities, focusing exclusively on the Tswana/Masarwa division and ignoring all the other tribal groups in Botswana. Moreover, Margaret, brought up in a white household and possessing a European name, is a very ambiguous representative of the Masarwa tribe. Her identity "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 a tribe or race or nation."

Agbo is illuminating on the contradiction between Maru's role as an apostle of anti-racism, and his role as aristocratic slave-owner. Like the popular romance heroes deriving from Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* and Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, Maru is, as Agbo acutely observes, "both a tyrant and a lover, and the more desirable as a lover because he is a tyrant." Maru's tyranny is indeed one of the prime examples of "black-on-black tribal prejudice" in the novel. The glamorous, virile Maru, Agbo notes, appeals to "a particular kind of masochistic female psychology." As one critic, cited by Agbo, comments "Bessie Head depicts love as a magical force from a fairy tale that overcomes insurmountable obstacles and unites people of different cultures and classes." At the end of the novel Maru and Margaret "depart to where only God knows."

A wide range of theoretical perspectives again informs Agbo's analysis of Head's final major work, *A Question of Power*, "a mad piece of fiction, which is extremely painful to read" written in less than six months during Head's mental breakdown in a psychiatric hospital. Referencing the eclectic "visitor" theory of Carol Boyce Davies and notions of intersectionality, Agbo offers a pragmatic reading in terms of Head's/ Elizabeth's "trauma." (As Head wrote "Elizabeth and I are one"). This Agbo argues is in part the product of "black power," a phrase which may confuse some (particularly American) readers. For Agbo the phrase signifies the power of tribal elite within a majority black society, not the black protest movement within a majority white West.

Agbo relates the theme of political injustice to that of gender. The story of Head/Elizabeth dramatizes "the struggle of a marginalised and dispossessed female character in a hostile society." Head's "mental health problems," her "trauma, hysteria and madness" perhaps take the novel into "universal" areas

of human psychology beyond the racial theme. The passage, where lonely and frustrated, Elizabeth pornographically details the physical qualities of “the seventy-one nice-time girls” who serve Dan’s appetites, takes the reader again, as in *Maru*, but with more troubled personal intensity, into a world of sado-masochistic fantasy. As always, Head evades the neat categories of mainline postcolonial criticism. Elizabeth, though victimised by tribal “black power,” receives sympathetic psychiatric treatment in hospital and it is the white Christian Mrs. Jones, always patient under Elizabeth’s insults, who provides her with a glimpse of a way out of her trauma, through “the ordinary, the human, the friendly soft kind glow in her eyes.”

Agbo’s book should establish itself as the primary critical treatment of this fascinating novelist. Its notion of “exilic compromise,” whereby Head’s Utopian protagonists reject an identity founded on “where they are born as natives of the land,” in favour of “new dreams and realities” which they create for themselves, is of primary importance.

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Preface

Bessie Head was one of the few African writers who received critical attention in the Western academy in the 1990s. In 1987, a year after her death, a joint international conference was held in Canada on Head and Alex La Guma, her fellow South African exile, who also died in the same year with her. In Singapore, an international conference, the *Indaba*, organised by Professor Edwin Thumboo was held on Head alone in 1996. So, too, in Africa, precisely in June 1998, the Department of English, University of Botswana, organised a conference in her honour. In 2007, an international symposium was held on her in Botswana, which was also followed closely by another international colloquium at Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and the papers from these events culminated into the publication of the book, *The Life and Work of Bessie Head: A Celebration of the Seventieth Anniversary of Her Birth*, in 2008, ably edited by Mary S. Lederer, Seatholo M. Tumedi, and Leloba S. Molema. Again, in 1994, eight years after her death, two conference panels were devoted to the critical discourse on Bessie Head by the Modern Language Association (MLA) in San Diego. Several academic dissertations and theses have also been produced on her work all around the world.

Therefore, Bessie Head's work is not idle or forgotten; but when she made a visit to the University of Calabar, Nigeria, in 1982, as the keynote speaker at a conference on "African Literature and the English Language," she came to the realisation that her work was losing some readers in Africa. Again, when apartheid took a dive into the beginning of its own end (i.e., after the official collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1994), and since after the publication of two major books on Bessie Head by Huma Ibrahim in 1996, and in 2004, and also, after the 2008—edited book by Lederer, Tumedi, and Molema—for over a decade, there has been a long break or silence in the production of Head's scholarship, as if it is now a taboo memory to re-member Head and her work in contemporary literary criticism. This book, *Bessie Head and the Trauma of Exile: Identity and Alienation in Southern African Fiction*, is to create a resurgence of interest in the critical study of Bessie

Head, and to make her work unimpeachably inclusive in the canon of world literature—so as to sustain the enduring value of her work, not to go stale.

To achieve this, the book explores a discursive landscape that covers or teases out a deep analysis/critique of the psychologising black-on-black prejudice, as a missing link, as an important, but critically neglected aspect of Head's fiction. It argues that while there are numerous scholarly studies on feminism, post-coloniality, and exile in Head's fiction, there has been a reluctance to address the sensitive issues of relations between different non-white ethnic groups in the post-colonial society Bessie Head writes about.

Concerned with broad thematic trajectories, but to the exclusion of much else, the book focuses on the theme of literature of the oppressed in relation to Bessie Head's life in South Africa and Botswana with a detailed profiling of her biography. It discusses theoretical issues that add to our enlarged understanding of the discourse of post-colonial, exile, trauma, and gender tropes in Head's fiction.

Further, the treatment of the trauma of exile through Head's characters, their oppression in their place of exile, the allegorisation of exile-within-exile through the artistic paintings of her characters, the anomalies of belonging in post-colonial discourse, the retrieving of a past history for the oppressed Bamangwato people (the dialectics of fiction and history), and the writing out of women from their absence/subjectivity—their strength and vulnerability are some of the essential grids that guide my close reading of Head's novels and short fiction, namely, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1973), *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977), *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981), and *A Bewitched Crossroads: An African Saga* (1984)—require new forms of analysis and understanding to help us grasp Head's vision.

More, the book treats the nature of identity politics, migration, inter-ethnic power relations with a view to addressing the questions of:

1. How does Head treat identity politics, power/gender relations, migration, and exile in relation to the psychologizing black-on-black prejudice in post-colonial Africa?
2. And how do the novels themselves portray the shifting dynamics of home and belonging in both South Africa and Botswana?

These questions help me to explore the “post-colonial” with an integrated frame of reference to South Africa and Botswana—Africa—by slightly shifting away from the grand anti-colonial meta-criticisms/narratives. Because when one begins to diagnose the pathologies of the minds of the colonisers in relation to racist project, and the minds of the colonised in relation to black-on-black prejudice within an “objective” anti-colonial spirit, he/she may end up not seeing any clear difference between the two forms of prejudice, because their aim is rooted in hatred. However, this book does not only illuminate

many of the concerns that have permeated the study of post-colonial African literature over the past two decades or so, but also points towards new scholarly possibilities in the field of African literature.

For example, by theorising *exilic compromise*, the book analyses the way Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather* and Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* are ironically forced to learn to live with a version of what they flee from in South Africa. Margaret in *Maru*, the victim of black-on-black prejudice against the San (Bushmen), is not literally an exile, but makes her own hopeful journey to a world elsewhere at the end of the novel, though we are not shown the kind of compromises she might have to make in the future. To weigh the new against the old, *exilic compromise* offers an original way of “creative theorizing,” which, I argue, is a fundamental aspect of the project of home and home-coming. And because Head’s writing constructs a prism of complexities, it embodies and interprets Head’s fiction in a new direction.

One sees through the reading of the novels that the experience of the prejudice, and violence in both apartheid South Africa and Botswana is psychologically heavy for most of Head’s characters to handle and, in the case of Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*, leads to the trauma of her actual mental breakdown. Therefore, Head’s characters are in constant search of a home in a world elsewhere, and never end up where they began. This suggests a heavy sense of loss, particularly the loss of homeland.

Head’s projection of a utopian vision as a remedy to the alienation of her characters, may never depend on its supposed relationship with reality. As it is demonstrated in her fiction, “Head’s resolution, her apocalyptic vision, is but ‘a pre-vision of the failure of [the] process of humanization’” (Hartman, 132). For, as Sara Chetin writes, “the myth is like the deep river whose only existence is in the power of our imagination, but it is the only direction we can travel in if we don’t want to remain in exile” (116).

Nevertheless, Head’s characters choose to remain in exile, as they are more focused on the possibilities of progress in Botswana (their place of exile) than on the old home they left behind in South Africa, so the trauma of exile is not the end-point of Head’s novels and the black-on-black prejudices, which she courageously documents, are not seen as inevitable and eternal. Head has given us a literature of great power, and it is up to us to make the best use of what she has bequeathed to us. And, hopefully, this book will be useful to all those who are interested in Post-colonial African Literature, Africana Studies, African-American Studies, Afro-Caribbean Studies, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, Literary Studies/Criticism, World Literature, Literature of Exile and Trauma, as well as the Critical Study of Bessie Head.

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1 The literature of the oppressed

After my Ph.D. studies had successfully come to an end in early 2018, I began to teach political sociology at the University of Cambridge, in both the post-graduate and undergraduate classes. My friend and colleague, Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley, came up with a programme called “The Cambridge Street Sociology Project.” Our core aim, through the “Project,” was to educate the down-trodden, the prisoners, the poor, the homeless, the drug addicts, and the dregs of humanity. Informed by our engagement with classical literatures, such as the works of two Brazilian educators, Paulo Freire’s *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, we developed a free-of-charge educational programme in form of lecture series to educate them. It was a programme for, and about what Toyin Falola calls “the agency of the poor” (x). It was a spirited effort to draw them in from the margin of their hemmed-in existence. Therefore, having experimented with this group of people, and having seen oppression through the eyes of the “wretched of the earth”—combined with my own peasant origin in Africa, I became interested in the discourse of literature of the oppressed.

In Africa, when we think of African writers, particularly African women writers, who boldly engage with, or who deliberately articulate the discourse of subjectivity, then, we correctly, or, rather, we logically come to the work of Bessie Head, as her work is crucial to the understanding of oppression and subjectivity. We do not only come to her work, but we also bear witness to her life experience of suffering, her tears, her eye-watering de-humanisation, her troubling extension of life in transit from South Africa to Botswana (the old and the new worlds), her restless search for a new life, a new identity in a new space known as Botswana, her melancholia of a ruptured past and the possibility of an unknown future, her permanent reconciliation with her new home in exile, as well as her balanced, but disturbing ideas—her interest in women’s experiences/struggles.

To treat the subject of oppression, either in fiction or in reality, one needs to find the lexicon of compassion and solidarity; the lexicon—which—to use the words of Augusto Boal, “rehumanizes humanity.” Boal’s view is

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relevant to us in the context of subjectivity and oppression. Their views are capable of healing the broken minds and the shattered souls.

In the “Poor Man”, a short story in *The Cardinals*, Head writes: “I am just thinking tonight of myself and all Africans because of the sorrows we are in” (136). She went on to say, “I live in a country known as the Protectorate. I don’t know what kind of protection that is. I think we are being protected from being able to see” (136). This is a form of psychological oppression and I argue that the worst form of any kind of oppression is the prevention from seeing the evil committed against oneself by others, because it is through seeing that we come to know, to understand, and to interpret what is good and what is evil.

Oscar Wilde, in his opening lines of *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, points out that, “it is [much easier] to have sympathy with suffering than it is to have with thought” (8). So, by the moral code of conscience, we are immediately summoned to act in solidarity with the oppressed. We are immediately challenged to apply our humanity by showing the desire to redeem the oppressed people from their abiding human predicaments. But, then, again, Head warns in *The Cardinals*, “A Personal View of the Survival of the Unfitted”, that: “A basically timid and cowardly person dare not presume to speak for others. He [or she] can only speak for [him or herself]” (125). More, she says:

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

(125)

As an instilled minority, a hard-headed bi-racial woman, writer, activist, exile, and “the eternal other trapped in an in-between space that restrains her agency and obstructs her voice” (Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, 122), Head still finds her resistance to oppression in the power of her voice, as she always “marks herself with her voice” (Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, 125). In her encounter with an artist, she writes:

An artist once tried to sketch me and she said she couldn’t come to terms with my mouth. It had not a set pattern—but she sketched my eyes over and over again. In the end she asked me to put my hand over my mouth to get it out of the way.

(Imaginative Trespasser, 167)

By interpretation, Head's mouth is the symbol of her voice, the instrument of her outspokenness and uncontrollable courage. On the other hand, Etter-Lewis observes that, "The artist, not being able to cope with or perhaps accept the *mouth*, mirrors a kind of conventional reaction to a woman who does not know her 'place'—she must be silenced" (125). By extension, the artist's strange reaction is the representation of the societal attempt to silence her. Head is an embodiment of "how everyday people seek dignity and fight back against power" (Falola x).

However, the literature of the oppressed is not just a genre of literature that only evokes pities or documents painful, oppressive experiences/stories of the oppressed, but also charges them to organise, and mobilise their actions so as to lift themselves up in the collective spirit above all shackles of subjugation and oppression.

What some scholars, including myself, call "the literature of the oppressed"—framed within the definite context of South African experience, particularly under the authoritarian apartheid regime, was ideally written for those whom the South African theologian, Allan Boesak called "God's little people"—that is, communities of people who struggle under oppression. Nira Yuval-Davies calls them the "oppressed collectives". For the people of oppressed communities to free themselves, they must, first and foremost, be acutely aware of their oppressions and subjectivities.

Head brings this awareness to her reader through her fiction. Head's fiction, despite its multiple themes and interpretations, in my own view, is best described or classed under the literature of the oppressed. To frame her fiction in the context of oppression, and to anyone, who is familiar with the social, the economic and the political struggles, understands that the literature of the oppressed speaks to the experience of the marginalised, the down-trodden, the poor, the weak, and the powerless. It is about the lives of people, who struggle and continue to struggle under the burden of oppression of any kind. They are provoked to voice or write their resistance to subjugation by taking a step towards the centre to reclaim their being, and their space in order to re-live their lives.

The literature of the oppressed, to Francisco Welffort is, "The awakening of critical consciousness [that] leads the way to the expression of social discontents precisely because these discontents are real components of an oppressive situation" (10). It awakens the consciousness of freedom in the oppressed who were initially afraid, but, now, no longer afraid to speak up. It is a reactionary literature that denounces the "state of oppression that gratifies the oppressors" (Freire, 10). This form of literature orients the oppressed in such a way that:

It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; ... the individual who has not staked his or her life may, no doubt, be recognized as a person; but he or she has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.

(Hegel, 233)

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Hegel speaks to the dialectics of humanisation and dehumanisation, in a way which Paulo Freire frames as,

Within history, in concrete, objective contexts, both humanisation and dehumanisation are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of [his or her] incompleteness.

But while both humanisation and dehumanisation are real alternatives, only the first is the people's vocation. This vocation is constantly negated, yet it is affirmed by that very negation. It is thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity.

Dehumanisation, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human.

(17–18)

Oppression or dehumanisation could take many forms; it could take the form of subtle pressure to conform to the oppressors' dictates, and, as a result, the oppressed may lose their freedom's edge. Head, for example, was a victim of multiple oppressions herself, and that experience shaped the way she lived, viewed, and worked in this world. But Head found her redemption or survival in writing, and Teresa Dovey eloquently sums it up that "Bessie Head's ability to survive, and to transcend in writing, the suffering she endured [while] growing up in South Africa" was "in some sense made possible by the autobiography she constructed for herself" (Teresa Dovey cited in Brown Coreen 37). Head, through her writing, skilfully showed her engagement with existential tensions and anxieties embodied in the notions of "self" and "belonging" in both South Africa and Botswana. Botswana, for Head, was where nothing ever happened. To Head, "There are only people and animals here and starvation, fear, frustration and dog-eat-dog" (Head, *Letter 1*).

It was a place where nobody valued anybody except for what he or she could offer, so everything was rather crazy—something of "survival of the fittest". In the continuation of this same *letter number 1* to her friend Randolph Vigne, Head alarms that: "[She] was just living here like the greatest hermit you can find ... Days and days of silence. I can get by like that and I needed it" (Head, *Letter 1*). And that,

Little by little I became aware of the most terrible brutality in this quiet-seeming village. Such tremendous pressure has built up against me in this little village and I shall get no help from the police if my life is in danger ...

(Head, *Letter 1*)

Botswana was a hell for her, as she cried out to Vigne for help: "I also heard about Amnesty. Could they help me? Could you get at them there in London?"

Even if they could let me out of here—out of Africa which is a peculiar hell just now” (Head, *Letter 1*). Head further claims that:

The authorities have made no bones about the fact that they don't want me here. I have been trying in every way to get out. They're all engaged from the Republic of South Africa. They've never stopped at showing me what they think of me.

(Head, *Letter 1*)

The eyes that look away from the suffering humanity signal more dangers. The eyes that deny what they see about the deplorable conditions of human suffering create more sorrows. Because the eyes of persons of abuse or oppressed people of any colour, race, language, tribe, land, nationality, gender, sex, class, and ethnicity are definitely full of agonising pains. But the eyes that weep for the suffering and the oppressed anywhere in the world are the eyes of angels (i.e., the eyes of compassionate people). Randolph Vigne is one of such compassionate people. Head acknowledges this fact in one of her letters to Vigne, “Writing to you puts me in good mood. You are my best friend” (69). Compassion is a medicine.

Head, no doubt, was a brave woman, and her bravery was displayed when she ventured into the outside world. Head left South Africa in 1964 when she was 26 years old—mainly for two reasons: (1) because of her divorce, and (2) for the lack of freedom for her writing. She went into self-exile in Botswana without knowing what awaited her outside of South Africa, as South Africa of the 1960s and 1970s was largely soaked in racism and political rebellion.

She left South Africa and her past life and sought her own community of belonging beyond the borders of the South African apartheid state in Botswana. She went in search of a sense of roots, of historical continuity as an African woman. Botswana was (in her view), a country largely untouched by the disjunctions of colonialism and racism.

(Van Wyk Smith 116)

It was very African and that was what she wanted. She first arrived in Botswana as a refugee from South Africa—where she was a stateless person for over a decade—trying to escape the tyranny of apartheid to find a place where she could live as a normal human being. Head asserted: “I am not exactly by the Batswanas [*sic*] here” (Head *Letter 1*). Again, she felt the ravages of racism from her early childhood, and she went to Botswana—bearing scars of racism in her mind, scars of racism in her soul, which she inherited from the apartheid state of South Africa.

To this end, she writes in her letter number 30 to her close friend Paddy Kitchen that, “I suppose when you have a break down [,] nothing is coherent. I am so used to them, these long periods of darkness when every effort is painful” (8). At this point, Head was already facing a severe depression.

Gillian Eilersen, Head's friend and biographer writes, "Bessie Head's spirits were mercurial. Perhaps a naturally exuberant nature had been marred by a traumatic childhood of rejection and isolation, and an adult life marked by intense suffering" (97).

Head has two worlds: (1) the world of her realities, and (2) the world of her hopes, dreams, and fantasies. Sometimes, Head was two people: (1) she was that person who lived her realities, who understood her tortures, and (2) she was that person who could stand back—who could stand outside of her society to look upon her life, upon her soul to produce literature of great power—of great resistance.

In her letter number 21 to Kitchen, she wrote, "I liked such a situation because I have learnt to pull tricks and poverty in my second name. I am at home in a situation where there is nothing and I force something to happen" (Head, *Letter 21*). Head has all the characteristics that made her the best that she was. Therefore, Head's fiction is fundamentally about the trauma of exile and the black-on-black prejudice as a post-colonial theme in her fiction. It is about exile and the trauma of it. It is also about the politics of belonging in a post-colonial society, where oppression is often meted out against the "Other" who is perceived as an alien by the natives.

Biography of Bessie Emery Amelia Head: an African literary tigress

By the way, who was Bessie Emery Amelia Head? To answer this question correctly is to journey through her biography, which consists of her life, times, and works. Bessie Head, as she was popularly known, was one of the leading South African women writers, born on July 6, 1937, at Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Her mother was a white South African and her father, a black South African—although the real identity of her father is still unknown.

The black-and-white union that produced Bessie Head took place when interracial relationships—that is, the prohibition of interracial marriage act of 1949 was still in full force, and that consequently caused Head's existence to be a taboo—which also narrowly placed her in the category of the social rejects or the rejected humanity in South Africa. The apartheid belief of racial purity drove Head to face harsh and bitter realities, as well as stigmas throughout her lifetime.

Head felt alone and different because of the apartheid's terrible rules of discrimination, and stigma. As a child, she was rejected by her foster parents because she was said to be too black. M. J. Daymond, the editor of *Everyday Matters*, explains that "Nellie Heathcote, Head's adoptive mother could not afford to keep her after Heathcote's husband died" (83). More, Daymond writes, "Bessie loved and believed [that Nellie Heathcote] was her birth mother" (83), by this, Daymond shows the closeness between Nellie and Head. Also, the Principal at Saint Monica's Anglican School where Head attended for six years, would not allow her to see her foster mother during