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**"SOMETHING HAD GONE WRONG BETWEEN SLEEPING AND WAKING":
THE POLITICS OF THE "SMALL ME" IN BESSIE HEAD'S
*A QUESTION OF POWER***

by

Carole Sweeney

B.A. Hons, Portsmouth Polytechnic, 1986

**THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
in the Department
of
ENGLISH**

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

JULY 1992

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ISBN 0-315-83766-7

Canada

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DEGREE: Master of Arts (English)

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ABSTRACT

Previous critical commentary on Bessie Head's *A Question Of Power* has not recognized the novel as part of any political tradition of resistance literature. Critics have insisted that the text declines any position of political or ideological commitment since it appears to be concerned with the personal and the private. Such readings of *A Question Of Power* enforce a separation between public and private discourse whereby the realm of the public is privileged as the site of political activity.

Using the tropes of current postcolonial theory, this thesis challenges the public/private opposition and argues for an approach which allows for the possibility of alternative locales of political agency. I suggest that In *A Question Of Power*, Bessie Head creates a narrative from the smaller, interstitial spaces which have often not been critically recognized as political. The "unheimlich" figure of Elizabeth--the Coloured female exile--narrates the text from the spaces which exist in between the public/private split.

A Question Of Power disturbs the symmetry of the public/private opposition through the disruptive movements of Elizabeth's madness. The incidence of insanity allows Elizabeth to create a narrative from the spaces of the "small me". Elizabeth constructs new scripts from within the dramas of her madness which allow her to cast herself in a role as something other than intransigent difference. In disrupting the discursive order of sanity through the dis-ease of Elizabeth's insanity, *A Question Of Power* allows the Other to interrogate for herself the validity of racial and gendered discourses which have framed her as the silent figure of taboo.

For...

All of you
from all your places
the emigres I found here

from Widnes and Winnipeg

Dublin and Regina

Guelph and beyond

especially for you M.E. and
all your little earthquakes

...and for my parents. To Agnes
and her fragments of blue letters. Thank you.

"I have continually lived with a shattering sense of anxiety--that human beings are set down in unholy places, and South Africa may be the unholyest place on earth."

**Bessie Head *A Woman Alone:*
*Autobiographical Writings***

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my patient committee who gently guided me through the postcolonial critical morass and encouraged me to write on an, as yet, little known writer such as Bessie Head.

This thesis originated in a reading class with Professor Paul Matthew St Pierre who introduced me to the new literatures in English beyond the canon.

Thanks to Professor Leith Davis who kept me informed of current postcolonial debates and controversies. She also weathered the vagaries of my erratic punctuation throughout numerous drafts.

Also many thanks to that group of graduate students at Simon Fraser English Department for keeping open the channels of thinking against the odds.

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Part (i)

Naming The New: Postcolonial Theory and the Name

The increasing accessibility to non-European and non-Western texts has opened up new locales of literary and cultural theory. Western academics--attracted by the possibilities of moving beyond the Great Traditions of the English canon--are currently participating in a number of critical and theoretical dialogues which are engaged in the construction of new theories of reading. This interest in non-Western texts has raised a number of challenging issues which have compelled us to re-think and re-locate our theorizing. One of the issues I am particularly concerned with in this paper is our attempts, as critics, to usefully name or describe those texts written out of traditions other than the white Western centre--however mythical that centre may be.

The processes of naming are in a critical dilemma. Specifically, how do we avoid the impulses of neo-colonisation through theoretical totalization while mapping useful paradigms for current and future critical debate? It is this dilemma which we face when reading texts such as Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*.

The vast body of texts produced since the ostensible demise of Western imperialism has been given the label "postcolonial literature". There have been variations upon this name, such as "commonwealth literature", or "emerging literatures in English", but it is the moniker of "postcolonial" which has gained the greatest theoretical momentum. There are, however, critics who appear to use the terms "postcolonial" and "third world" as interchangeable

generic labels. Our desire for a satisfactory name for non-Western texts often prompts us to create categories such as "third world" or "emerging literature". These names serve as catch-all labels that conveniently homogenize the immense differences of race, gender, ideology and material conditions which constitute these other/Other cultures. My concern with avoiding such homogenizing labels is consonant with the theoretical approach I wish to take in this project: namely, constructing a strategy of reading which permits an examination of each text in its particular and local context. This approach attempts to avoid imposing any totalizing theory onto *A Question of Power* which demands that the text conform to the generic limitations of labelling.

Much critical commentary on *A Question Of Power* has been based on the desire to name or label the text into generic paradigms for non-Western writing: specifically, those of the political text of resistance or commitment. I will argue that in the case of *A Question of Power*, the totalizing label of "political" has severely limited readings of the novel to a specific set of criteria and parameters. Such a limited/limiting definition of the political realm of Head's writing often presumes that her apparent disavowal of African political movements is evidence of her collaboration with an oppressive regime. These limitations of the space(s) of the political are, I want to suggest, in many ways symptomatic of broader questions involving the processes of naming or labelling non-Western texts. In order to address the construction of the political in the novel, I will first address these larger systems of naming wherein we have constructed theories surrounding "third world" or "postcolonial" literature.

The urge to fix a name upon the text seems to be a noticeably urgent concern in postcolonial criticism. This urgency may be attributed either to our critical impatience to describe and evaluate this literature, or to a reluctance to

surrender our own unchallenged "first world" position which has hitherto constructed the notion of the third world and is now reluctant to admit the possibility that it is often an inadequate critical trope. In the case of Africa, Homi K. Bhabha views this desire for the unproblematic name as the reluctance of the European critic to deal with the continent in "all its dazzling racial, tribal and regional multiplicity" (1990 237). Thus, the differences, tensions and contradictions of Africa should necessarily prevent us from capturing its diverse texts in a single, totalizing name such as "third world"; and yet, this does not seem to have been the case. On the contrary, the names given to works by critics of the colonial process (the generic labels of protest and resistance literature) have often tended to close down, rather than open up, the textual possibilities of non-Western works such as *A Question of Power*.

To reject the absolute authority of such categories does not suggest that the concept of a postcolonial literature is necessarily invalid as a framework which helps us organize and theorize a body of texts. Rather, I am suggesting that when a label is employed, we should demand that the critic use it to open up and set into process the possibilities of differences and specificities within texts, instead of homogenizing them into a more easily comprehensible series of quasi-universals. Abdul JanMohamed describes such a quest for theoretical cohesion within non-Western texts as comparable to the liberal humanist search for a "currency which can collapse non-identical, singular beings, experiences and achievements into commensurable and identical ones" (1984 295). What I am suggesting in this project is the development of what Gayatri Spivak calls a strategy, rather than a theory of reading (1986). This strategy involves recognizing the potential for generic over-determination and hence a form of theoretical neo-colonisation by the academic, what Wole Soyinka calls

a "second epoch of colonization" (1976 x). Many critics, both Western and non-Western, have pointed out the potential for a theoretical neo-colonisation, yet the dilemma remains as to how we can find a space from where we can describe this literature without falling back upon any homogenizing impulses. Christopher Miller sums up this task of finding such a space as the process of "establishing guidelines for a kind of reading that lets the Other talk without claiming to be possessed of the Other's voice" (*Out There* 1985 282). This approach, or strategy, must be wary of readings which finally reduce the complexities of the individual text to a narrow and rather prescriptive set of criteria and labels.

Neil Lazarus, amongst other postcolonial critics, recognizes that we need to examine the ways in which we can move from "totalistic considerations of African fiction", by creating an approach which allows a "more subtle and nuanced inquiry into the teeming and refractory particulars of everyday life in specific African communities" (*Social Text* 1986 57). In a collection of essays on marginal (or minority) literature, entitled *Out There*, Cornel West joins Lazarus in calling for the creation of a "new politics of difference". This new politics rejects "the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity". Such a rejection, West continues, must be accompanied by a suspicion of "the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular". West goes on to describe this strategy of reading as a gesture towards contextualizing and pluralizing the "contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing" (1991 19). Within such a strategy there is little use for theoretical positions which cannot accommodate textual complexity (even ambivalence) and the specificity of the individual writing situation. *A Question of Power* has often been subject to readings which have not allowed for its specificity and

paradoxes. Thus, critics such as Christopher Heywood have described the text as one which is outside of "matters of politics and power" (1976). It is the definition of what we recognize as these "matters" which I intend to consider in my discussion of Head's novel.

My own challenge to these totalizing theories which have been employed in the majority of the readings of *A Question of Power*, will first take into account the ways in which these paradigms of postcolonial theory--specifically those labels of the text of resistance and commitment--have effectively discounted Bessie Head from serious consideration as a political writer. However, in challenging these paradigms, it is crucial that we remain wary of simply replacing these models, which have rejected Head's work as literature of protest or commitment, with equally restrictive definitions of the political. Fredric Jameson's notion of the "third world national allegory" is an example of such an over-determination of non-Western literature. Jameson's position simply reduces the "third world" text to, what Aijaz Ahmad calls, an "ideal type" (1987 11). Jameson's notion of the "third world" text as *always* containing a "political dimension in the form of a national allegory" ¹ (1986 69), illustrates the extremes of this "new" theoretical homogenization. There is a careful line we must walk between the "old" totalizing theories, which disavow *A Question of Power* as a political novel of any significance, and Jameson's stance which ignores the vast differences in writing situations outside of a European context. What I intend to consider in this discussion of Head's novel is the possibility of a number of discursive spaces between these two paradigms in which the realm of the political can be questioned and re-conceptualized. Such a reading of *A Question of Power* would avoid reducing

1. Jameson's notion of the "third world text" is clearly grounded in his theorizing in *The Political Unconscious*.

the text's complexities and ideological ambivalence to Jameson's ideal type whereby "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (Jameson 1986 69).

The spaces of the political in *A Question of Power* are the areas which Head herself has described as the "small me". From these small experiences of the home, the body, and the disordered psyche, Elizabeth explores the various discourses which have publicly constructed her as a figure of silent, disempowered taboo. Through the ordeal of her insanity, Elizabeth disrupts the symmetry of the Manichean binarity of Self/Other which is, of course, Apartheid's epistemological ideal. In upsetting this carefully constructed symmetry, she offers a challenge to the segregation of public and private discourses. Elizabeth constructs a space--albeit a tormented and often self-destructive one--from where she may pose questions of power.

Chapter One of this thesis examines the dissolution of the public/private split in the novel, which takes place as Elizabeth becomes increasingly involved in the "shows" where the "ugliness of inner torment [is] abruptly ripped open and exposed to public view" (*A Question Of Power* 50). I will argue that Elizabeth's descent into the relatively unrestrained territories of madness allows her a partially autonomous position from where she may interrogate the elaborate networks of discourse which constitute power and truth in her world.

Chapter Two goes on to consider the construction of racial identity as the result of the highly organized Manichean discourse of Apartheid. The racist ideology of South Africa is not discarded by Elizabeth's withdrawal to Botswana; rather, it is shown to be deeply inscribed within the psychic terrains of the self and the body. The veneer of order and sanity which

Apartheid has manufactured as truth is made uneasy (dis-eased) by the "unheimlich" figure of Elizabeth. Through the internal dramas created by her psychological dislocation , Elizabeth is able to position herself in a space from where she can observe the "source" or "roots" (53) of Apartheid's power.

The intersections of racial and gendered discourses are considered in the final chapter. Both discourses have framed Elizabeth as the silent figure of racial and sexual lack. As the "king of the Underworld", Dan plays out a grotesque mimicry of the colonizing, phallogocentric discourses of white South Africa. Elizabeth recognizes that the tactics of white male colonizing have been assimilated (mimicked) by black political powers which have all but excluded the voices of non-white women.

Part (ii)

The Space(s) of The Political: Bessie Head and The "Small Me"

Considerable critical attention has been given to the notion of the text of resistance or commitment in literature written outside of a European context. It is evident in current postcolonial theory that the concept of a literature of resistance carries considerable ideological weight. In their comprehensive overview of current work on new literatures in English, *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin outline what they see as some of the characteristics of the postcolonial text. Firstly, they argue, there is an explicit refusal of the "categories of the imperial culture" and its "aesthetic" (38). They expand upon this broad outline when they propose that such texts take the language of the imperial centre and make it "bear the burden of one's own cultural experience" (39). By this definition, the postcolonial text has become virtually synonymous with a counter-hegemonic discourse that explicitly refuses the imperial centre.

These two criteria posited in *The Empire Writes Back* have in many respects become prerequisites for the postcolonial writer concerned with actively constructing a process of textual resistance to the past and present hegemony of the imperial centre. Such a project of narrative resistance is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's writing on colonialism in *The Wretched of The Earth*, where Fanon defines the project of Third World (his term) cultural politics: "It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of man [sic] which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will not forget Europe's crimes" (1968 51).

According to Fanon, a narrative of resistance is one which desires not only a rupture with the past plots of white hegemony, but also seeks new tropes for literary and cultural critique. Fanon implies that the writer who engages in intellectual resistance should be acutely self-conscious of her ideological accountability. More recently, Barbara Harlow has identified the self-awareness inherent in many definitions of resistance literature. This kind of writing, Harlow suggests, is one "which calls attention to itself ... as a political and politicized activity". The text of resistance, she continues, "sees itself furthermore as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production" (1987 29). Thus, texts which appear to be self-consciously engaged in the cultural struggle against a colonizing discourse are given the generic label "political". By this definition of textual self-consciousness and evidence of an explicit refusal of colonizing systems, the political has manifested itself most evidently--at least in a large body of African literature--in what has been named/labelled as the protest novel or the writings of commitment. Ezekiel Mphahlele articulates what he sees as the main concerns of protest literature when he says that, "The Black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs... he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends" (1973 65).

The early works of writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o illustrate the ways in which African writers have responded to the often overwhelming sense of responsibility they feel towards dismantling the *grands recits* of colonial myth and reclaiming Africa's history and subjects for its own narratives. Anthologies on African writing have consistently considered these

writers as political in that they are understood to be actively and explicitly engaged in counter-hegemonic discourse. Their work challenges the validity of European economic, cultural and ideological domination of African nations, who are only now beginning to speak against, what Spivak calls, the "planned epistemic violence of the imperialist project" (1985 131). Ngugi defends his staunchly political writing against those who ask that African artists somehow move beyond their experiences and memories of colonialism. He responds to these demands when he says, that "such an attitude to society is often the basis of some European writers' mania for man [sic] without history--solitary and free--with unexplainable despair and anguish as the ultimate truth about the human condition" (1981 76). Thus, he refuses to surrender the political in his work. It is precisely this notion of politics and specifically, what constitutes the space(s) of the political, which I intend to re-evaluate in *A Question Of Power*. My discussion centres upon my conviction that the label of "political" has been used to categorize and restrict Bessie Head's work.² The point of departure for this discussion is that political resistance at a textual level cannot simply be reduced to an uniform set of ideological criteria which enforces generic limitations upon individual works. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg suggests, there is now a need to re-define the boundaries of what constitutes political resistance as

the notion of resistance ... is in itself not unambiguous. It too can mean ... rather diverse things, translating into different practices

2. This theoretical restriction has not simply been confined to Bessie Head's work but has also been applied to to many African women who are writing what is almost always called "autobiographical" rather than political fiction. See Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys Of Motherhood* and Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*.

and strategies that must be assessed and developed in its concrete socio-historic situation (Feminist Studies Critical Studies 1986 37).

Bessie Head critics, such as Charles Larson, Cecil Abrahams and Lewis Nkosi, have often focussed on the apparent lack of vigorous political commitment in her fiction. Lewis Nkosi writes that Head is "not a political writer in any sense that we can recognize" (1981 102). He further notes that her work recoils from the expression of any "precise political commitment", concluding that she is evidently somewhat "hostile to politics" (1981 19). Nkosi's comments have been reiterated by other critics who have scrutinized Head's work for evidence of her political commitment. The pivotal phrase in Nkosi's comment regarding Head's lack of political engagement is "in any sense that we can recognize". It is precisely the question of what we recognize as the realm of the political that requires re-inscription in order to accommodate more heterogeneous and shifting definitions of the spaces of the political in *A Question of Power*.

A movement into the more heterogeneous spaces of the political is inevitably a movement away from an unyielding monolithic concept of the political domain. Jameson recognizes the impossibility of confining the political to the "simple great strategic idea" which becomes a unchallenged paradigm. He suggests that "We are, after all, fragmented beings, living in a host of separate reality compartments simultaneously", and that in each one of these spaces of experience "a certain kind of politics is possible". Jameson urges us to abandon the idea of any single paradigm of the political, because this "is worthwhile only when it leads to enumeration of all the possible options ...

(*Diacritics* 75). Jameson refers to the "mirage" of the political paradigm which claims to usefully divide experience into that which has political value--the public life of the civil self--and that which remains confined to the devalued private spheres of subjective self-consciousness and the individual body. This split between the public and the private has always, at best, been fragile, but the emergence and refinement of feminist theory has all but exploded such a false symmetry.

Bessie Head's apparent reluctance to align herself with the more typical public concerns of African politics such as Pan-Africanism or Negritude is often noticed by critics such as Nkosi who comments that:

... for the most time Bessie Head seems politically ignorant. She only has this moral fluency of an intelligent, intensely lonely individual, worrying about the problems of belonging, of close interpersonal relationships, of love, value, and humanity (1981 99).

The ignorance that Nkosi cites in Head's work seems to be centered around her concern with the "problems of belonging" and "close interpersonal relationships". Nkosi sees her preoccupation with these small spaces of the home and the self as a refusal to address the larger, public spheres of class, race and nation. He relegates the small spaces of the interpersonal and the particular to what he regards as the resolutely unpolitical domain of the private. The split between the private and the public--the home and the world--is constructed as the non-political and the political respectively. Consequently, any investigation of individual subjectivity and self-consciousness is not valued as a political activity in *A Question of Power*. The construction of identity as a shifting, often conflicting, mass of influences, has typically been confined to the

private, and by extension to the non-political. I am suggesting that this separation of the public and the private is an artificial division which enforces intolerably narrow constraints on readings of the novel.

Jameson argues that the separation of the public and the private is one of the fundamental determinants of capitalist culture as it insists upon:

... a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power (1986 69).

Similarly, in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* Terry Eagleton considers the organization of late capitalist societies, in which the "essentially private realms of family and economic production" have traditionally been relegated to a secondary (he calls it degraded) sphere of "civil society". The "deeply personal"--what Eagleton calls the "sensuous particularity of human needs and desires" (1990 10), is the space of the home and the individual psyche, both of which have typically been contrasted with the public spaces of the state, economic production, and organized political activity.

A Question of Power narrates the smaller, subjective spaces of the self and the home; those places that Bessie Head has described as "quiet backwater[s]" where the individual treads "a small, careful pathway through life" (*A Woman Alone* 77). For Elizabeth, these small areas of experience are the interstitial spaces in which she is compelled, as a

Coloured woman, to live.³ She is positioned in the chiaroscuro spaces between a series of oppositional pairings: public/private; white/black; male/female.

Homi Bhabha points out that the home has traditionally been the "unhallowed place" of the private individual, as it has been regarded as somehow outside of the forces of any political and cultural agency. But the marginalized subject of the non-white in South Africa has no public space from which to speak. Thus, the home, and the attempts to reclaim "homely" spaces, is one of the few sites where narrative may be created. Elizabeth is positioned at the interstices of race and culture. From these small spaces of the body and the home, she endeavors to speak her own narrative of resistance against racial and sexual erasure. In these ambivalently shaded interstices, the public/private split is rendered invalid because it does not speak to the experiences of those whose visibility and voice is denied in the public, civil spheres. I am suggesting, then, that in *A Question Of Power*, the small spaces of the home and the body become sites of history and locales of a certain political agency.

In this novel, as in her other works, *Maru*, and *The Collector of Treasures*, Bessie Head is concerned with narrating the experiences of "the universe itself seen through the eyes of small, individual life dramas" (*A Woman Alone* 77). The text situates its narrative in the "personal"--the territories of sexuality, subjectivity and the individual psyche. Such experiences have typically been labelled as the private, intimate spaces of the personal and seen as existing outside of the larger

3. The use of capitalization here follows the nomenclature of South African racial laws where the term Coloured is employed. These judicial distinctions have only recently been abolished.

agencies of nationalist and state politics. It is important to note here that I am arguing that the public/civil spaces of traditional political agency cannot be either divorced from, or replaced by, the personal or the private. *A Question Of Power* is not concerned with inverting the public/private split. Rather the novel conflates the two spheres in order to interrogate the validity of the division itself. Teresa de Lauretis cautions against the over-simplification of such an inversion, when she recommends that as critics we need to search for a "recasting of the notion that the personal is political which does not simply equate and collapse the two". De Lauretis recommends that there should be a re-inscription of the political which "maintains the tension" between the two spaces "precisely through the understanding of identity as multiple and even self-contradictory" (1986 9). My thesis proposes that there is a space, or a number of spaces, between the two locales--the interstices--from where *A Question of Power* can be positioned as a political novel of resistance.

Previous readings of Head's work have emptied the text of any significant voice of resistance by the insistence on traditional notions of the political where public/civil space is privileged as the sites of agency. *A Question of Power* renders invalid such a separation of these two realms of experience in its construction of a narrative which denies the "false symmetry" (Bhabha UBC 1992) of both the public/private and the personal/political split.

Chapter One

No Longer at Ease-The Dissolution of The Public/Private Split

My consideration of *A Question of Power* is predominantly based on a challenge to the binary opposition that (in Western metaphysical traditions) has been constructed between public and private spheres of human experience and activity. My challenge accepts the notion of a literary text as a site of political and ideological activity. Such a position is consonant with Jameson's claim that

the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of an aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions (1981 8).

Benita Parry reinforces this position in identifying a strategy of reading which "seeks to expose the making, operation and effects of ideology by stirring up and dispersing the sedimented meanings dormant in the text" (1991 32). Bakhtin's comments on the relationship between the text and its specific historical and cultural context bear some relevance on my reading of Head's novel:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular moment in a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue (1981 276).

Bakhtin's assertion that language is inextricably caught into the socio-ideological realm whereby "Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (293) provides an invaluable theoretical direction to my discussion. *A Question of Power* resonates with the experiences of the particular contexts out of which it is written. In order to address this specificity of the writing context, I intend to demonstrate that Head's novel demands a highly contextualized reading of its social, cultural and ideological dimensions which allows for tensions, even incongruities, within the text's own discursive spaces. Such a reading will illustrate how *A Question of Power* upsets the equilibrium of the public/private bifurcation by the narrative's representation of the traumatized "small" individual self-consciousness in relation to the larger spaces of the public and the national. Neil Lazarus's comments sums up many critical voices on Bessie Head when he notes that her work has typically "focussed more on the shifting tensions between gender and culture systems" than it has "on the politics of postcolonialism" (1990 211). Lazarus thus reinforces the segregation of the publicly political from the apparently private experiences of gender and race.

My approach to the novel acknowledges language as one of the primary cultural mechanisms which constructs and perpetuates reality and 'truth' in any given discourse. When an individual's language (and voice) is denied and silenced through systematized oppression, it seeks to be heard in places other than in the official public discourses from where it has been rejected. *A Question of Power*, then, constructs alternative locales from where the Other may speak herself out of elision.

For marginalized and muted Others in South Africa, there is often no place for their voice(s) in the public discourses as their language is continually de-valued by those who control the "disabling master discourse" (Bhabha 1989

78) of racial politics. The Other is prohibited from entering into the public sector by all forms of judicial and material interdiction and must therefore find alternative spaces in which it may construct its own subjectivity and voice which can speak its way out of what Frantz Fanon has called the "social and historical mutilation" of colonization.

Head acknowledges that she writes out of the intimate spaces of the "personal". In *A Woman Alone*, she says that "every story or book starts with something for myself. Then from that small me it becomes a panorama--the big view that has something for everyone" (1991). The "small me" of Head's fiction has undoubtedly been a major factor in her exclusion from any African canons of resistance or protest literature, as it apparently prevents her from constructing a counter-hegemonic voice against white supremacist South Africa. Susan Gardner's comment clearly illustrates the ideological and theoretical prejudices that such paradigms have placed on Head's writing when she says that, "In her historical writing as in her fiction, she is more interested in character and personality than in socio-historical forces" (1985 234). Such comments would seem to suggest that critics consider Head's political vision to be a rather parochial one, limited to the boundaries of the village and the town, since her narratives often refuse to privilege public discourses--the "socio-historical forces"--over the search for a voice in the silent/silenced gaps within these discourses.

Christopher Heywood notes that we cannot consider Bessie Head to be a political writer in "any ordinary sense of the word" as she appears to be preoccupied with the "strangely ambiguous" and the "deeply personal" (1976 175). I am arguing that it is precisely this concern with these typically devalued territories of the strange, ambiguous and the personal that allows *A Question of Power* to interrogate the conditions which construct the self as a

subject constructed from conflicting racial, sexual and gendered discourses of oppression. The novel is not, as Heywood claims, a movement into deeper alienation from "matters of politics and power" (174); rather, it is a movement into other scenes of political agency which allow a questioning of the traditional readings of the political.

My consideration of *A Question of Power* as a novel of political significance examines the ways in which there is a conflation between the experiences of both the private and the public spheres. This conflation involves a progressive shift in narrative focus from the outside world of the nation state and the village, into the smaller spaces of Elizabeth's home, and finally into her own damaged psyche. This focal movement should not, however, be regarded as an inverted replacement of the outside world by the purely subjective spaces of the self; rather, there is a continuous interchange between these two spaces--the inside and the outside-- which takes place in the creation of a third locus of activity, that of Elizabeth's madness. The experience of insanity provides a relatively unbounded space for Elizabeth to examine the ways in which she has been named by those forces which have fixed her as Other. Therefore, the movements of the text and the self in and out of the spaces of insanity--beyond the categories and ordering of the external spheres of influences--allow Elizabeth to question the validity of separating the public and private realms of experience.

Elizabeth's breakdown cannot be regarded as a wholly destructive process as it can be read as a space outside of the normative centre which has allowed her to exist only on the margins of her society. Her insanity allows her to construct a small space of her own from where she may explore the various discursive worlds in which she is compelled to walk. By sporadically absenting herself from the ostensible "sanity" of the external, Elizabeth rejects

the divisions which have set the private spaces of the individual against the public spheres of the social.

A Question of Power presents two realms of experience of the public and the private, but they are not distinct or separate forces. Rather one continually permeates the other. Fanon characterized such a movement between the internal and the external as a process of "internalization", whereby the "external, socio-historical reality is assimilated into 'internal' and subjective reality" (Bulhan 1985 196). The radical split that Jameson identifies between "the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, the economic, and of secular political power" is disturbed by Elizabeth's madness. Thus, the oppositional paradigms of the psyche versus the socioeconomic material realms are unsettled by Elizabeth's insanity.

The novel resonates with the continuous movements between the internal (private) and the external (public). For instance, we learn of the external world of Southern Africa not through the mimetic description of the minutiae of people and landscape but through the nightly "show" which takes place in Elizabeth's room. The show becomes the lens on the world. Thus it is through the experiences of the internal--literally from within the room--that we may gradually construct images of the world outside the room. There is a progressive uncovering of what constitutes the public spaces of Elizabeth's world, of Motabeng and of Southern Africa, which are voiced through the "... small scale, decentered, heterogeneous..." spaces of the self (Lazarus 1990 211).

The de-centering drama of Elizabeth's psychosis is directed by the two figures of Sello and Dan. As characters in the novel they are barely delineated or located within the external world of the village of Motabeng. However, they are meticulously constructed within the narrative of Elizabeth's psychic drama. Thus, their importance outside of the show remains almost

insignificant as it is only within the small spaces of Elizabeth's experience that they become invested with meaning. The two men perform as contrasting characters--almost allegorical figures--in the "show". The show itself becomes for Elizabeth "far more absorbing than any drama she could encounter in Motabeng village" (29), undoubtedly because she can exert some agency over the events of the scenes. She not only plays her own part of the audience in this "slowly unfolding internal drama" (29), but she is also responsible for its existence. Positioned thus, Elizabeth is permitted to observe the ways in which power is constructed and dispersed. In Foucauldian terms, she is scrutinizing the small points of human experience where a "multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts" constitute the systems of power (1980 97).

Dan and Sello are presented to Elizabeth as figures who are actors following scripts which are drawn from the dominant discourses of Apartheid. The two men bear little resemblance to their 'real' counterparts in the village; rather their position in the narrative is defined almost exclusively in relation to Elizabeth's shows. The novel frequently characterizes Apartheid as a show, or a performance, in which the quotidian realities of a profoundly racist society are played out in grotesquely distorted racial and sexual spectacles. Linda Peckham describes Apartheid's "closed system as a spectacle rather than an institution ..." (1991 371). This spectacle is presented to Elizabeth as a series of tableaux in which images of her own ethnicity and sexuality are distorted and disparaged. In *Home and Exile*, Lewis Nkosi also speaks of Apartheid as a perverse performance, "a daily exercise in the absurd", where one is compelled to wear "enormous masks of pretence and subterfuge guilefully hiding goals that were seething with discontent, anger and hatred" (28). The nightly shows

in Elizabeth's room become the place in which the "masks of pretence" are removed to reveal the faces beneath.

The show connects the viewer, Elizabeth, to the world outside of the room and the home as it articulates her lived experiences of the discourses of race, gender and sexuality which have always informed her environment but which she has never been allowed to examine for herself. The spectacle is clearly a manifestation of Elizabeth's derangement, but it also functions as a site of partial empowerment for her. Within the "internal drama", the spurious order of South Africa is thrown into disorder and made uneasy by Elizabeth's own hallucinations. Throughout her aberration she continues to be damaged by her own sense of both racial and sexual subalternity. However, at the same time Elizabeth is partially able to desist the oppressive discourses of her world. Despite the pain of her psychosis, Elizabeth sees that shedding the false wholeness of sanity--a tentative, exclusive sanity in South Africa--permits her to ask "questions and more questions", and to accommodate "tentative propositions" (53) which throw order into chaotic dis-ease. Her madness therefore, is neither fully empowering nor entirely destructive. Rather, it is a space in which she may position herself as something other than silent difference. In her insanity, she may play another part in her world as she learns to interrogate the discourses and ideologies which have injured people into silence:

People cried out so often in agony against racial hatreds and oppressions of all kinds. All their tears seemed to be piling up on her, and the source or roots from which they had sprung were being exposed with a vehement violence. (53)

Through Elizabeth's hallucinations, the impossibly massive drama of Apartheid and of South Africa on a national scale is reduced to the

microcosmic scale of the show. Thus, the world is brought into the home or, as Homi Bhabha puts it, "The world is the home" (UBC 1992). The subject of the deracinated Colored female is allowed a space in this "unhomely" representation of racial and sexual struggles of South Africa.

In leaving Cape Town and South Africa, Elizabeth attempts to silence the influences of the public domain--those of race, nation and party politics which she professes to be incapable of either understanding or liking:

She lived such an absent minded life and had such a blind spot in matters of public or social awareness that it took time to piece the fragments of information together, in some coherent form (*A Question of Power* 19).

The coherence, ironically, is constructed from the experience of madness--an ostensibly disintegrative process. Frequently, the incidence of madness manifests itself as a radical break with the rules of society. For Elizabeth, madness also allows her, as the subaltern subject, some access to the construction of those rules; through the relocation of the self in relation to the discourses of race, gender and sexuality.

In an attempt to escape the pernicious influences of the Apartheid laws, Elizabeth goes to live quietly at first "on the edge of South Africa's life" (18) with other ex-centrics who are rejected by the centre. She then flees to Motabeng in Botswana. After some time in Motabeng however, the influences of the "public" discourses that she has tried to escape from become increasingly articulated in the frenzied shows in the small confines of her room. The two apparently distinct discourses of the outside and "public" and the internal and "private", become conflated in her mental disorder. The territory of her madness constructs another space, outside of the binarity of the

public/private split, that permits Elizabeth to investigate the authority of an exclusive and divisive ideology.

Elizabeth says that up until this point "She was not given to 'seeing' things. The world had always been two-dimensional, flat and straight with things she could see and feel" (22). This new three-dimensionality of perception and consciousness of self is contiguous with the belief that her "inner life" is being invaded by forces which have the power to disturb everything that they encounter. The space of the home is not the easy, domestic refuge from the outside; the home becomes invaded by "demons" who "rampaged within, turning everything upside down" (49). The domestic sphere becomes disturbed and unsettled by Elizabeth's cast of demons and white robed monks as it is transformed into the stage for the nightly shows.

As the boundaries between public and private experiences of self and place are eroded by these "demons" (49), the voices of the real faces behind the public masks begin to be articulated through a cast of characters in the fantastic nightly show. It is from within this space--one which is neither wholly public nor fully private--that the disempowered (subaltern) subject of the Coloured woman may initiate an investigation of power through the partial dismantling of the various discourses which have demanded her non-being.

Elizabeth leaves South Africa on an "exit permit, which ... held the never to return clause" (19). She flees to Botswana in an effort to escape the "vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks" (19), and is willing to make her home in that country, despite the fact that she must live there as "a stateless person" (18). She has ostensibly cleansed herself of Apartheid's influence in the literal flight from its reaches, but she discovers that the discourses of oppression are profoundly inscribed within her and

therefore cannot be so readily eradicated. Jameson describes this situation as a condition whereby, a "psychic structure" which is determined by political and economic relations cannot "be dealt with by means of purely objective transformations of the economic and political situation itself, since the habits remain and exercise a baleful crippling residual effect" (1986 76). Elizabeth removes herself from the public arena of South Africa's legislated racism, but she is unable to peel away the layers of language which have systematically covered her and named her as intransigent Otherness. Having been officially named as difference in the caste driven systems of her homeland, Elizabeth attempts to escape the tyranny of the name in moving to Botswana.

Motabeng is situated on the outermost edges of the Kalahari desert-- "remotely inland" (19)--it is a place of "harsh outlines" and "stark black trees" (20). Most of the villagers are filially related to one another, a fact acknowledged in their language through their protracted mutual greetings (20). Elizabeth is a stranger--made strange by her skin and her body-- amongst an established network of filiation and kinship: "... as far as Batswana society was concerned, she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be *in* on *their* things" (26). She is the ex-centric in the "village of relatives" (20), who themselves reside on the edge of the desert, of the country and on the furthest perimeters of South Africa's influence. To them she is indelibly Coloured--classified and circumscribed by the official discourse of Apartheid in the undefined spaces somewhere between the Self and Other. She is Other to the Other--the inhabitant of the interstices who has been dis-located into the unvalidated spaces of the subaltern subject.

The public label of *Coloured* has been inscribed upon her sense of self far more profoundly than Elizabeth will initially acknowledge. She has undergone, what Frantz Fanon calls a process of "epidermalization", which has

effectively drawn inwards the external oppression and negation of the public discourses. Even living quietly on the most remote fringes of her society, Elizabeth cannot find refuge from the psychic damage of the public nightmare of systematic racism. Once again she begins to conceive of herself as the figure of miscegenation--the mongrel alien who is imprisoned within her visible hybridity. Consequently, she begins to shun this outside world of Motabeng, and to turn increasingly inwards to the smaller spaces of the home and the self. However, this movement into the spaces of the self does not constitute Head's rejection of the political. Lewis Nkosi suggests in *Tasks and Masks*, that Head demonstrates some "confusion whenever she enters the realm of political ideas" (1981 102). It would be more accurate to say that this "realm of political ideas" is observed from the inside out; that is, from Elizabeth's room out into the vastness of the worlds outside. In turning to the sites of the home and the self, Elizabeth seeks to escape from the oppression of the outside. But at the same time, that movement inwards offers her an arena for an investigation of how she has been constructed as intransigent Otherness and to question the validity of that construction. The text discloses a search for identity that the Other is denied through systems of colonization. Frantz Fanon sees this question of identity as central to the experiences of the colonized "native":

Because it is a systematic negation of the other [Other] person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: "In reality who am I?" (*The Wretched Of The Earth* 203).

In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin comment that all South African writing "must explicitly engage in resistance to the

oppressive regime in order fully to avoid acquiescence" (84). For the most part, *A Question of Power* has not been regarded as an explicit text of resistance. However, Head's concern with the psychic distortion in the small spaces of the individual subject and the home does indeed constitute a challenge to hegemonic discourse through a disturbance of its carefully constructed symmetries. The tensions between the individual and the community are scrutinized in a text which Head describes as "scaled down" to a "personality need" (1991 77).

There is an exchange in narrative focus between the two locales of the room and the village in *A Question of Power*. However, Elizabeth's visits to the world outside of her house and her room become increasingly infrequent, as it becomes apparent to her that she can no longer successfully conceal the "insistent hissing" (51) that is speaking from within her. The "hiss of horror" has festered inside of Elizabeth until it can no longer be contained or silenced. Before long, this hissing and the "ugliness of the inner torment" are "abruptly ripped open and exposed to public view" (50). The voices begin by speaking to her in the form of a recording:

'You see', it said. 'You don't really like Africans. You see his face? It's vacant and stupid. He's slow moving ... You never really liked Africans. You only pretended to. You have no place here. Why don't you go away ... ' (*A Question Of Power* 51).

The internal voice unleashes a virulent racist attack on the black Botswanan and is finally successful in invading of Elizabeth's own voice so that she cries out, "Oh you bloody bastard Batswana!!" (51). Elizabeth has thus been successfully colonized by the voices of the white racist discourse. The language of Apartheid has been profoundly inscribed within her, so that she finds no voice other than that of its divisive ideology which can only

perceive individuals as signifiers of race. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon states that, "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (141); Elizabeth has been framed by the Self's culture of division and exclusion and discovers that she cannot simply escape from its discourses by fleeing from its literal site of production. In screaming her hatred of the Batswana, Elizabeth reveals the extent to which she has internalized the racist discourses of South Africa. Her tirade against the postal clerk characterizes the Batswana in the same terms that she herself has been framed. They are both non-white subjects who are denied their complexities and particularity by a reduction to racial signifiers.

In a letter to Christopher Heywood, Head describes South Africa as a place where, "the whites have imposed a whole range of jargon to define their humanity as opposed to the non-humanity of black people" (1978). As controllers of the signifying system, the white minority are able to manipulate reality through language. Michel Pecheux agrees that the control of naming systems within a discourse and the possession of political power are inextricably linked when he says that "linguistic meaning has a material character produced by the position of language as a signifier in a social, political, and cultural struggle for meaning" (1982 111). White hegemony in South Africa is maintained and enforced partly by establishing rigid systems of naming which petrify subjects into a series knowable racial stereotypes. Thus, a discourse is established in which those who possess political and economic power are able to perpetuate their hegemony through control of the signifier.

Elizabeth has attempted to escape the damage of such destructive naming systems, but she finds little refuge in Motabeng: "So many people ran away from South Africa to forget it or throw it off. It seemed impossible then,

the recurring, monotonous song in her head; 'Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death....'" (*A Question Of Power* 47). The voices of institutionalized racism "broke whole races of people" by their power to determine the truth about the Other: "They just said that the Black man was naturally dull, stupid, inferior ..." (57). Head writes that "... their power [white people] of assertion was so tremendous the whole flow and interchange of life stopped before it" (47). The language of Apartheid is that of negation and of death; it is a discourse based on selective erasure which prohibits the possibility of multiplicity and difference by containment within language. Apartheid is the apogee of the homogenizing urge to reduce the subjectivity of the Other into fossilized patterns of repetition. Hence, we read in *A Question of Power*:

It was like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you ... They were just born that way ... and a black man or woman was just born to be hated. There wasn't any kind of social evolution beyond that ... just this vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks ... (19)

Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan points out that Apartheid is almost unique in its, "violent compartmentalization of people into races and the calculated fortifications of a Manichean psychology" (1985 166). Language is petrified by the white minority who possess what Head calls, "the power of assertion" (57).

Elizabeth has been thoroughly colonized by a language which is not her own, one which manifests itself through her own voice. Her body becomes a vessel of linguistic mimicry; in attempting to speak the pain of the Other she discovers that she has no voice other than that of Apartheid's perverse logic. The anguished cry of hatred that Elizabeth unleashes on the unsuspecting Botswanan postal clerk has its origins not simply in the "hiss of horror" of

Medusa, Dan and Sello, but also in the chorus of voices which have constructed the world outside of her room in Motabeng and in Botswana. Elizabeth becomes transfixed by the clerk's black face because he represents the racial purity that she can never achieve.

As I suggested earlier, there is an exchange between the public and private spheres in *A Question of Power*. The official public discourses of Apartheid are spoken by the voices of Elizabeth's private show in her room. Correspondingly, throughout the novel there is a complex interaction between outer and inner madness. The insanity of Apartheid is played out in Dan, Medusa and Sello's exaggerated performances. In the latter part of the novel, there is an increased narrative focalization on the sequestered events of Elizabeth's nightly shows. These private performances reveal to Elizabeth the unspoken insanity of the public discourses:

... one would go stark, raving mad if a deep and endless endurance of suffering, such as one would encounter in Southern Africa, were really brought to the surface. Subterraneously it was a powerful willing of the total extinction of the white man (83).

A Question of Power is concerned with the processes of "surfacing" the voices and forms of these "subterranean" spaces. In the small, yet disruptive, confines of the domestic--literally, behind closed doors--the novel interrogates the authority of the discourses which have constructed truth in Elizabeth's world. It is the incidence of madness, which is in many regards the most private condition of personal experience, that permits the Colored female subject to pose her own "questions of power". Elizabeth's insanity releases her to test the surfaces of the public world and to rupture the false assumptions which have shaped Apartheid's spurious logic.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari contend that the spaces which constitute madness are made up of a complex range of cultural discourses: "... every delirium is first of all the investment of a field that is social, economic, political, cultural, racial, and racist, pedagogical and religious ..." (1983 102). *A Question of Power* suggests the possibility of allowing the Other to consider this field of influences. Elizabeth gains some albeit limited access to what Foucault describes as the "manifold relations of power" which "characterize and constitute the social body" (1980 93).

Elizabeth's psychological breakdown dismantles the illusion of wholeness and sanity which has retained a frail grasp on the uneasily disparate threads of the fabric of South Africa. She ruptures the facade of public unity, but in doing so, she undergoes a traumatic process of psychological splintering. Wlad Godzich describes such a process of fragmentation of individual subjectivity as one in which "the individual no longer feels his or herself to be a whole, but rather a series of diverse zones, subject to differing constraints, frequently of an irreconcilable sort" (*Heterologies* 1986 ix). The dissolution of the fragile whole, he continues, may result in the individual subject experiencing a "sense of powerlessness with respect to one's ability to direct or control larger historical processes ..." (ix). The paradoxical nature of her madness is that while Elizabeth inflicts upon herself a period of prolonged self-mutilation, the same movements of disintegration allow her to confront the "smallness" of the sources of power. Foucault describe such a process in *Power/Knowledge* as "an ascending analysis of power", which starts from "its infinitesimal mechanisms" in order to "see how these mechanisms of power have been ... invested, colonized, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended ..." (99). In her autobiographical writings Head explains the ways in which this analysis of

power operates in her fiction: "It was against this background of an individual who could have possibly lived a million other lives, in a million different circumstances, that I began to view my relationship to Africa" (*A Woman Alone* 77).

Power is examined in the novel as a series of sites and variously dispersed points which can be confronted and understood only in their local, specific points of emergence. The incidence of Elizabeth's aberration gives her leave to confront the parts of public mechanisms of power through the private sites of the "small me". As a partially empowering process, the experience of madness allows Elizabeth to challenge the authority of the racial and gendered discourse which have constructed her as the unproblematic Other.

The next section of my discussion of *A Question Of Power* examines the ways in which the ideology and aesthetics of Manichean dialectics have formed the discourses of Apartheid. I consider how the fundamental Manichean opposition between Self and Other is constructed and perpetuated as normalizing truth. The unchanging absolutes of Self/Other maintain Apartheid's myth of order which is made uneasy by Elizabeth's madness.

Chapter Two

A Question of Race: Manicheism and The Other

"People there [in South Africa] are not people but complexions and hair textures--Whites, Coloureds, Indians and Africans" (*A Woman Alone* 1990 101).

The growing collection of non-Western literary texts has elicited expansive critical commentary, much of which is concerned with issues of race, nation and ethnicity. In the case of *A Question of Power*, critical discussion has almost exclusively focussed on Head's treatment of race. In partial contrast to previous critical work on the novel I am suggesting that, while racial issues are an extremely important aspect of *A Question of Power*, the text cannot be examined *solely* in terms of race. The text seems to resist such a singular thematic reading in its representation of the unsettling spaces of Elizabeth's psychological dis-ease which poses a challenge to the divisive boundaries between discourses.

In her psychotic drama, the separations and divisions of Elizabeth's world are thrown into confusion by the frenzied disorder that Dan, Sello and Medusa create in her room. Through her depiction of madness as a place which disturbs a series of binarities, Head suggests that the experiences and discourse of race in Southern Africa are frequently inseparable from those of gender and sexuality. The system of racial segregation and classification which constitutes Apartheid's regime is employed as the master discourse--the controlling paradigm--which derives its logic from Manichean aesthetics. In this chapter, I will argue that in leaving South Africa Elizabeth does not erase

the influence of Manicheism from within herself. The "monsters of race" (*Maru* 11) surface in the shows through the figures of Dan and Medusa. I will demonstrate how the shows allow Elizabeth a space in which she may disrupt the Self/Other binary of Manichean epistemology.

Head writes in *A Woman Alone* of the inescapability of one's race as a South African subject: "Anything black or tainted with black has been abhorred, detested, reviled, abused and exploited" (97). Clearly a novel written out of the condition of a profoundly racially stratified society must somehow contain traces of this condition within the text. Many critics who have considered these questions of race, nation and ethnicity in Head's work have stressed the importance of the Manichean structures of the Self/Other and black/white binaries. The Manichean dichotomy--which colonialist and Apartheid discourses employ as an ideological and structural touchstones--asserts a "fundamental ontological opposition between self and other" (JanMohamed 1983 264). Manicheism, a term Frantz Fanon used to theorize the findings of his analyses of the sociological and psychological effects of colonialism (Fanon 1959, 1961, 1967) clearly derives its metaphysics from Western philosophy, wherein the first term is axiomatically privileged over the second. The second term in these paired hierarchies has typically been reduced to a subordinate and unprivileged position. The Other therefore becomes the irrevocable subject of difference, created out of the archive of the Self and therefore intimately inscribed within the Self. It is out of this condition of the systematic hierarchical division of Apartheid that Bessie Head writes in *Maru*:

... wherever mankind had gathered itself together in a social order, the same things were happening. There was a mass of people with no humanity to whom another mass referred: Why,

they are naturally like that. They like to live in such filth. They have been doing it for centuries (68).

The logic of Apartheid's model is easily appropriated by those who understand the means by which people can be divided into "we" and "they". Edward Said, for example, points to the strategic simplicity of Apartheid's Manichean organization as a "system of discourse by which the `world' is divided, administered, plundered and by which humanity is thrust into pigeonholes, by which "we" are human and "they" are not ..." (*Diacritics* 1976). The Manichean model, in South Africa and elsewhere, is the point of ideological departure for an endemic system of "Othering" which has become more complex than a simple opposition of absolutes. While it is essential to investigate the ontological underpinnings of Apartheid's discourse, we must be vigilant against the seduction of theoretical oversimplification which allows us to posit such uncontested absolutes such as colonizer/colonized and Self/Other.

In *A Question of Power*, Head is working out of a condition of what Fanon calls a Manichean delirium. However, she is also challenging the authority of a discourse which posits such monolithic absolutes. The spaces she investigates are those which Arthur Ravenscroft calls the, "strangely ambiguous" and the "deeply personal"--the "small me". She explores the "smallness" of racism, nationality and the ethnicity of the self rather than confronting the overwhelmingly leviathan mechanisms of Apartheid and South African political systems. Head is thus more concerned with the tracing the residues of racial politics in the spaces of the domestic, sexual, emotional and the interpersonal.

As I have pointed out in the previous chapter, the "smallness" of Head's vision does not prevent her from offering a valid investigation of racial and

ethnic issues. However, these issues are not, as Jameson contends, to be simply consumed as a "national allegory" (1986 69) as such a reading misses the specificities and paradoxes of what Aijaz calls "intersecting conflicts based upon class, gender, race, region" (1987 9). It would be more accurate to say that Head is writing from a position which surveys many political stances. My contention is that the text is both a resistance to the Manichaeism of Apartheid (and to the innumerable models of oppression that it has spawned) and an examination of how Manichean psychology is variously inscribed in the individual in the most private sites of the individual body and the psyche.

In an African context, critics have generally defined literatures of protest as an exploration of the forces of racial injustice. These protest texts are responses to the violence--both material and epistemological--of Manichean racial politics. Abdul JanMohamed describes the Manichean binary as "... an economic, social, political, racial, and moral elaboration and distortion of a fundamental opposition between Self and Other" (1983 264). He goes on to suggest that Manichean psychology "has a powerful lasting effect" on literature written out of its condition (265). This condition of acute racial segregation is evident in much of Head's work. In her earlier novel, *Maru*, she addresses the situation wherein individuals identify primarily with their racial classification in a society that is unremittingly informed by racial politics:

And if the white man thought that the Asians were a low, filthy nation, the Asians could still smile with relief- at least, they were not Africans. And if the white man thought that Africans were a low, filthy nation, Africans in Southern African could still smile- at least they were not Bushmen (11).

The processes of Othering begin with the original model of the white/black dichotomy and from there reproduces their systems of divisions and subdivisions. However, Head does not narrate the experience of Manicheism as a simple opposition between inferior and superior. Rather, she attempts to scrutinize the process in its complexities and paradoxes in order to demonstrate how it has spawned almost identical processes of Othering.

The Self/Other binary is the organizing paradigm for a racist society in which the white/self is always privileged over the black/other. The construction of the Other involves an ambivalent relationship with the Self, in which the bond between the two is simultaneously desirable and yet destructive. This connection seems almost inescapable because each term is ineluctably inscribed in its opposite. As Tiffin et Al. explain, "the Other can only be constructed out of the archive of 'the Self'" which in turn must name (or represent) the Other as "inescapably different" to itself (1989 103). Hence, the reciprocal relationship between the Self and the Other is based upon a fundamental paradox which renders it inherently unstable despite its endurance. It is precisely this precarious nature of the Self/Other structure that allows for the possibility of disruption from within. Elizabeth finds herself eternally trapped between being authentically black and purely white; she exists somewhere on the line between Self and Other. In many ways, Elizabeth is situated both inside and outside of the Self and the Other with her gaze turned in two different directions at the same time. She is the double visioned inhabitant of the interstices.

As a Coloured under South African law, Elizabeth does not have to endure the ignobility of the passbook, yet she is still greatly restricted within a racially stratified society. She is the product of an illicit sexual liaison between a black man and a white woman, and is visibly marked by this transgression

as she carries upon her skin the evidence of sexual and racial immorality.⁴ As a marker of visible creolization, Elizabeth is drawn to the "edge of South Africa's life" (18), where she lives with other outsiders who, like herself, have been allowed no home within the centre. Despite travelling to the even more remote edges of the peripheries of Motabeng, Elizabeth continues to describe herself as, "essentially a product of the slums and hovels of South Africa" (26). Her exit permit lets her leave, what Cherry Clayton calls, the "literal, imprisoning space of South Africa" (1988, 56), but she has not 'exited' the psychological mutilation of that nation's legacy. *A Question of Power* speaks to those experiences of race and nation that Elizabeth tries to discard as the text attempts to penetrate through the silence that has been imposed upon Elizabeth.

Living as a Coloured woman in predominantly Black African Botswana, Elizabeth finds herself once again doubly dislocated. As an outsider, she exists on the fringes of Motabeng's network of kinship and close affiliation and she is once again denied any sense of communal experience. This dislocation of the self from the community, is comparable to the larger alienating forces of Apartheid which refuse non-whites any certainty of either communal or national history. Albert Memmi characterizes such fractured experiences as typical of colonization, where the "colonized almost never experiences nationality and citizenship, except privately. Nationally and civically", Memmi continues, "he is only what the colonizer is not" (1969 96). Thus, the colonized subject realizes herself only as negation; the obscure reflection of the fully present self.

4: Inter-racial sexual relations are prohibited by law in South Africa which continues to enforce The Immorality Act.

Elizabeth recognizes the virtual impossibility of escaping from classification by race. The dominant ideological discourse of Apartheid permeates every stratum of life in South Africa so that "There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being a personality. There wasn't any escape like that for any one in South Africa. They were races not people" (44). As a hybrid subject, Elizabeth cannot fully identify with white or black. Her inability to articulate her ambivalent feelings towards both blacks and whites is mercilessly preyed upon by both Medusa and Dan. These two figures disturb the surfaces of normality and quietness that Elizabeth has tried to construct in an effort to escape her experiences of South Africa's slums.

The figures of Dan and Medusa are at once terrifying and seductive to Elizabeth, who is deluged with increasing intensity each night by their displays of racial power and potent sexuality. Together they articulate the inferiority and subalternity that Elizabeth has been given as her sense of identity: "The wild-eyed Medusa was expressing the surface reality of African society. It was shut in and exclusive. It had a strong theme of power worship running through it" (38). Medusa, and then later Dan, fling torrents of scorn and derision at Elizabeth for being a Coloured, and taunt her into listening to the record that they play incessantly in her head: "Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death" (45). These insults underline for Elizabeth the inescapability of the name which the master discourse of Apartheid has imposed upon her, trapping her as eternal difference. Elizabeth is a shadow; she is not quite Self and yet not fully Other. Medusa repeatedly insists upon this indistinct tint that the Colored embodies as a figure compelled to waver between two experiences, two discourses, and two worlds. Medusa also reiterates her repugnance at the dilution of pure racial subjects when she says, "Too many people the world over were becoming mixed breeds and shading themselves

down to browns yellows and creams" (63). As a Coloured, Elizabeth can be excluded from the discourse of the Black African. She is thus denied even the opportunity to share experiences of their collective racial oppression.

In *A Question of Power*, Dan is admired for his involvement in African Nationalist politics, a rarity in Botswana which is described as a "country where people were only concerned about tribal affairs" (104). Yet it is Dan who inflicts the most terror upon Elizabeth in his ruthless orchestration of her nightly shows. Together with the taunts of Medusa, Dan assaults Elizabeth with grotesquely exaggerated images of her own racial and sexual inadequacies:

The loud pounding rhythm of his drama drummed in her ears day and night. It was like large, grasping hands gathering every thread of her life to themselves for a total command; a total encroachment on her mind and soul... A persistent theme was that she was not genuinely African; he had to give her real African insight... In almost every way she had to be aware of Africans as a special holy entity and deep mystery that he alone understood (159).

Elizabeth is being punished by Dan for her racial lack--for not being "genuinely African". In her hybrid miscegenation, she is not permitted to wholly embrace the discourses either of oppression or of liberation. She is always outside of that "deep mystery" of African politics which Dan holds up as a chastising mirror to her racial impurity. Elizabeth is the "Coloured dog" (129), scorned by black and white alike; she must therefore exist only as a figure of racial distortion.

The relentless racial contempt which Elizabeth has sought to escape is articulated in the figure of Medusa who screams out those names which

Elizabeth has heard all of her life: "Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death" (45). Medusa's voice is a "hissing insistent undertone" of scorn and is "mean" "stifling" and "vicious" in its verbal assaults on Elizabeth. Medusa is vocalizing the violent hatred which constitutes the language of a racially segregated world. She heaps word after word of contempt upon Elizabeth, until she feels that she is carrying the weight of all of society's venom within her own body:

People cried out so often in agony against racial hatreds and oppressions of all kinds. All their tears seemed to be piling up on her, and the source or roots from which they had sprung were being exposed with a vehement violence. (53)

In the small, almost invisible figure of Elizabeth the "roots" of racial oppression can be examined. Head speaks of the "story" of racism being "shaded down to a very personal level" (40) where Elizabeth becomes the site where the narrative is located.

Medusa is a ghoulish figure who feeds on the drive towards death and annihilation that characterizes Apartheid's discourse. The equivalent of Medusa in the "external" narrative in the novel is Camilla, the Danish development worker who is living in Motabeng as part of a agricultural project. Like Medusa, Camilla insists upon framing Elizabeth in purely racial terms. She even has a voice which physically resembles that of Medusa's piercing diatribes. Camilla raps out orders to the Botswanan working on the farm project all the while claiming, "I don't understand these people. They don't know anything at all, and they're so lazy..." (79). Her characterization of Africans as lazy and stupid is typical of colonial discourse which constructs the colonized as an inherently "degenerate type(s) on the basis of racial origin", while assisting them by setting up aid projects in order to "conquer

and establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha 1988 75). Although she is working under the auspices of a development agency, Camilla seems to have little genuine interest in questioning her own theories on race and culture. She imperiously remarks to Elizabeth that "In our country culture has become so complex, this complexity is reflected in our literature. It takes a certain level of education to understand our literature" (79).

Camilla can only frame the Africans who work for her as absolute difference, subjects far removed from her perception of civilization. Yet these people who, by that same difference, reinforce her belief in her own civility as part of the "First World". For Camilla, to "represent the colonial subject is to conceive of the subject of difference, of an-other history and an-other culture" (Bhabha 1984 98). Thus, she bolsters the hierarchical theories of Manicheism which compel the Other to exist only for the Self. She re-affirms the Self's innate superiority over the Other. The discourse of racism depends upon a carefully maintained symmetry in which the axiomatically privileged first term finds its presence through the reflected absence of the Other. Thus, Camilla may justify the ascendancy of European culture and history in her insistence on the Botswanan's lack of civilization.

Elizabeth is repulsed by Camilla's views on Africans, not simply because she perceives Camilla to be racist (a fact which is hardly out of the ordinary for a white woman in Southern Africa), but also because Camilla is in Motabeng as a representative of the Danish government. The project is a result of First World liberalism that offers "aid" to the so-called Third World, while refusing to question its own cultural position as paternalistic benefactor. Elizabeth notes that there are "so many like her [Camilla]. They don't see the shades and shadows of life on black people's faces" (82). Camilla is driven by her homogenizing impulses to reduce the

complexities of race to an easily comprehensible paradigm of Self/Other. "Human relationships with her", Elizabeth says, "were starkly black and white" (77).

Camilla's understanding of "blackness" is constructed from a tired set of racial stereotypes which Elizabeth recognizes as "false assumptions about life" (82). Camilla excludes the possibility of diversity in non-whites by her unquestioning acceptance of Manicheism. Elizabeth concludes that she is:

... stone deaf and blind. She takes the inferiority of the black man so much for granted that she thinks nothing of telling us straight to our faces that we are stupid and don't know anything ... She's never stopped a minute, paused, stood back and watched the serious, concentrated expressions of the farm students (82).

Camilla's inability to conceive of an individual beyond his or her race prevents her from distinguishing the particular and the individual from the universal. She finds it possible, however, to confide in Elizabeth because she is not "really" black and, as such, is more likely to sympathize with Camilla's racial intolerance. But this same act of confidence actually denies Elizabeth's own particularity as an individual, as it once again reduces her to the unproblematic Other whom Camilla, as Self, can effortlessly comprehend.

The farm project that Elizabeth works on with Camilla is part of an international program to aid "developing" countries. Despite the philanthropic goals of this project, Elizabeth notices that there still exists a very "specific stress on the blackness of those people" (82) who are working on the project. Further, we read that "Elizabeth's nativeness formed the background to all her [Camilla's] comments" (77). Thus, the epistemology which informs Apartheid continues to exert its pernicious influence. Albert Memmi believes that for such a colonizing disposition as Apartheid to exist, it is imperative that the

colonizers create an image of the colonized which allows him to justify their domination (1969 79). Accordingly, Camilla creates an image of black Africans as a people who are lacking in the cultural and civil refinement of the West which renders them "naturally dull, stupid", and "the objects of permanent idiocy" (76) to the white subject (57).

For Elizabeth, there is finally little difference between Camilla's conception of Africans as a people in need of a Western civilizing mission, and that of the South African government's regime of institutionalized racism. Elizabeth realizes that, "she had spent all her life running away from the type of white person like Camilla" (77). Like Medusa, Camilla aspires to be "manager of the African continent" (64). Both women wish to confirm in their subjects the infantile "knee-bending" and "unconscious humility" (72) which the colonizer long ago recognized as the ideal psychological disposition for conquest and domination.

In contrast to Camilla's condescension and cultural conservatism is Elizabeth's friend Tom, the young Peace Corps volunteer, who spends many hours talking with her about the state of African politics. He claims that the sole hope for the future is to affiliate oneself with the Black Power movement. In the midst of a political debate, "Suddenly he sprang to his feet, thrust one fist high into the air and said: 'Black Power!'" (132). Elizabeth is appalled by the fist raising gesture which means little to her other than "exclusive brotherhoods for black people only" (132). She sees such a political gesture as devoid of any real significance because it simply reprises the patterns of segregation of Apartheid. She responds to Tom by saying, "Any heaven, like a Black Power heaven, that existed for a few individuals alone was pointless and useless. It was an urge to throttle everyone else to death. Didn't she know about it in Southern Africa" (133). Elizabeth's antipathy towards organized

political resistance is not to be understood, as some critics have asserted, as *ipso facto* political ignorance or as a rejection of commitment. Rather, Head is suggesting that Tom's acceptance of the Black Power movement is not a wholly emancipatory politics for those who have never been allowed any identity. Emancipatory political movements in Africa have often neglected female voices. Neil Lazarus suggest that African women have always been on the margins of political organizations:

With so many women excluded from the arena of political power--not only before independence but equally since--we must wonder whether the specter of independence could ever have held for women the symbolic potency that it seemed to hold for men (135).

As a visible aberration in the black/white polarity, Elizabeth cannot be readily assimilated into the narrative that Tom presents to her as a liberatory politics. Her wariness is borne out of her long experiences of erasure, from which she has learnt that power can only be negotiated by a resistance to an ideology which offers autonomy to only a segment of the population. In an impassioned plea for a more complex approach to political power, one which admits the possibilities of diversity and difference, Elizabeth attempts to map out for herself what she sees as black power:

What about the arrogance of the soul, its wild flaring power, its overwhelming lust for dominance and prestige? Don't you know all that, the spring, then the river, then the ocean of horror ? ... Africa isn't rising. It's up already. It depends on where one places the stress. I place it on the soul. If it's basically right there, then other things fall into place. That's my struggle, and that's black power... (135).

Curiously, Lewis Nkosi is intent upon diminishing the importance of the racial aspects of *A Question of Power* when he comments that the novel is generally free of "the direct and obsessive atmosphere of black and white confrontation"; primarily because Botswana is outside of the immediate experience of South Africa's influence (1981 100). However, he goes on to attribute Head's insistence on African society as "exclusive" and "power hungry" to Elizabeth's own "insecurity as a mulatto" (101). I suggest that this "insecurity" is a direct result of a highly racist discourse in which the "monsters" (*Maru* 11) of race continue to whisper to Elizabeth. Elizabeth is living in a state of Manichean delirium which she describes as "permanent nervous tension" (19). In her anthology *Women and Writing in South Africa*, Cherry Clayton perceives this psychological state as typical of the experience of the alienated Other, particularly of the female subject. She calls it the "threat to self-realization", which is characterized by "internalized racial contempt" and "a self-hatred which intensifies a female tendency towards low self-esteem, generated by a society which favours the male in terms of prestige and social potency" (5). Clayton suggests that the experiences of gender and race may not be so easily separated for non-white women in Southern Africa who have typically found themselves at the lowest point on the hierarchical exchanges of oppression.

The following chapter considers how the discourses of gender and sexuality are conflated in the disordering chaos of Elizabeth's madness. The dis-eased spaces of her madness permit a further dissolution of theoretical oppositions which have, according to Juliet MacCannell, "restricted political practice and activity to marketplace, state and institutions" (*The Other Perspective In Gender and Culture* 60). The spectacles of the "nice-time girls"

demonstrate to Elizabeth the ways in which non-white women have traditionally been objectified by patriarchal discourse.

Chapter Three

Seventy One Nice Time Girls

Many critics of *A Question of Power* have remarked that Head seems to distance herself deliberately and adamantly from any real consideration of gender and sexuality. Lewis Nkosi cursorily dismisses the significance of Head's representation of gender in the novel when he comments that, for Elizabeth, sexuality is "merely acknowledged as an unpleasant necessity" (1981 101). Indeed, we read in *A Question of Power* that "sex had never counted in the strenuous turmoil of destiny behind Elizabeth" (63). However, a significant component in Elizabeth's breakdown is Dan's constant assault on her sense of sexual inferiority and her perception of herself as a figure of sexual lack. Both Dan's assumption of phallic authority and Tom's belief in the potency of Black Nationalism, reinforce the subordinate position of women in the sexual and racial power structures. Through the experiences of the nightly shows, Elizabeth is able to interrogate the processes by which women are represented as figures of sexual and racial passivity by the same ontological dichotomies which construct the discourse of Apartheid.

Most commentators on Head's novel have either dismissed any questions of gender and sexuality as insignificant "personal" issues in the text, or they have focussed on racial concerns as the more *publicly* meaningful of the two discourses. The spaces of the self, of individual sexuality and the construction of the gendered subject in *A Question of Power*, have often been critically neglected as they are regarded as entering into the ambivalently shaded territories of the private body and the sequestered domestic spheres of the home.

Nancy Topping Bazin takes issue with many critics (notably Cecil Abrahams and Charles Larson) who clearly have not questioned the dialectic which divorces the experiences of the home and the body from those of the nation and the state. Both Larsons' and Abrahams' apparent blindness, or unwillingness, to acknowledge the "politics of sexism" in *A Question Of Power* is symptomatic of such a narrow paradigm of the political. Topping Bazin comments that these critics have failed to recognize that Head's "main focus is upon sexism and the connections to be made between racist and sexist attitudes" (1985 36). Clearly, their theoretical approach to the novel entails a neatly bifurcated definition of what constitutes the political. This reluctance to consider the various representations of sexuality and gender in the text, is an insistence upon the divisions which have been constructed between public and private discourses of the political to create a false order of symmetry.

Since its beginnings, feminism has clearly rejected these distinctions between public and private discourses by offering a "radical critique of the dichotomy between public and private which is inherent in bourgeois liberalism" (Felski *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 1989 67). Current feminist theory is in the process of challenging the "single, great strategic idea" that Jameson speaks against earlier, in order to facilitate the study of the politicized sites of the "personal". Feminist theory has validated the experiences of the personal, and has insisted that the sites of Head's "small me", "involve[s] fundamental questions of power, underpinning the most deeply rooted aspects of social organization" (Felski 1989 73). Consequently, there are now gestures being made towards re-inscribing the spaces of the political. As Victor Burgin points out in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*, "the perception and definition of the field of the "political" has undergone a radical expansion beyond the traditional ghetto of party politics...

to now include considerations of sexuality". Hence, Elizabeth's perception of her self and her body as a gendered subject and the ways in which that reality is represented in the dominant white discourse is an act of small political agency, as a silenced individual attempts to speak through her racial and sexual erasure. Elizabeth struggles to influence the ways in which she is described and given value as a part of a colonized group. bell hooks comments on the importance of self-representation as, "crucial for colonized groups globally in the struggle for self-determination" (1990 72). These groups, hooks says, have been systematically stripped of their identity and have found their culture, language and appearance devalued (*Talking Back* 1989 109).

In the incidence of Elizabeth's madness, the cacophony of voices of race and sexuality become chaotically conflated in the nightly "shows". Nancy Topping Bazin notes that Head "chooses to focus on sexism rather [not instead of] than racism", in order to demonstrate, "the similarities between the two and their common root in the philosophy of domination" (1985 36). *A Question of Power* is concerned not with privileging one oppression over another; rather the text speaks of the impossibility of separating the two oppressive discourses. Race and sex, as bell hooks points out, are "overlapping discourses" (1990 57) which operate together in "interlocking systems of domination" (62). As a subject based political movement, feminism allows the spaces of Head's "small me" to speak its own experiences of race, sexuality, and gender.

Sadly, the extremities of such a fractured society as South Africa often produce in a high number of psychological disturbances. ⁵ In *A Question of*

5. In his work *Frantz Fanon and The Psychology of Oppression* Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan discusses at length the psycho-social incidences of mental disorder amongst non-white subjects in South Africa and inner cities in the United States.

Power, Eugene, the director of the Danish farm project, believes that all "South Africans usually suffered from some form of mental aberration" (58). Frantz Fanon drew similar conclusions from his work in Algerian psychiatric wards when he finds that, "Delirium hysteria, and neurotic behaviour...must be considered as the reactional behaviour of a self ruptured from intersocial relations" (*L'Information Psychiatrique* 73). Elizabeth's racial classification allows her little continuity with her environment as she is systematically ghettoized into the racial, sexual and gendered margins. This ghettoization has effectively decimated any sense of identity, and has inhibited her ability to speak. For Elizabeth, to speak--to release her language into the world--is fraught with the danger of betrayal that her words will recoil upon her and reveal her as threatening difference.

Elizabeth's white mother bore a child from a sexual liaison with the "stable boy, who was a native" (127). This relationship is an explicit transgression of both racial and sexual boundaries and therefore, must be decried as behavioural abnormality--a deviation from racial and sexual normalcy. It is imperative that the discourses of the state, which can operate only by division and segregation, record this violation of racial and sexual taboos as a crime against public morality. A white woman who has intercourse with a black man (always named a "boy" as if he is in a perpetual state of sexual immaturity) must be declared insane, as "normal" libidinal desires have been distorted by the intermingling of races. Those who willfully break these taboos must therefore be named as insane and sequestered from the rest of the population in an effort to contain the potential dissemination of transgression. As the progeny of such insanity, Elizabeth has inscribed within her the inevitability of her own sexual deviation and insanity. She is warned by the authorities; "We have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. You

mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother (16). Elizabeth's "docket" carries what Cecil Abrahams calls the "twin stigmas" of the name of an inferior race (a Coloured) and the mental instability that is regarded as inherent in racial hybridity. As a racially and sexually classified individual, Elizabeth is represented and recorded as a figure who is an easily knowable quantity--the unified object of the master discourse's knowledge (Parry 29). The master discourse of Apartheid has the power to name itself as the complex centre and its Others as predictably simple deviations from that centre.

In Southern African society, Elizabeth cannot hope to escape the visible marker of her own difference. She carries with her (on her) the evidence of her own origins of miscegenation because her light skin publicly names her as the figure of transgression. She is the totem of the greatest taboo of Apartheid as she is the product of a highly illicit sexual relationship between white and black. Just as Elizabeth's mother was judged as insane because she trespassed on the boundaries of racial and sexual legitimacy, Elizabeth--as the product of this misdemeanor--enters into a community where the Coloured subject sees her own ambivalence and hybridity reflected everywhere.

Coloured subjects move, or are forced out, to the edges of their society where their racial and sexual ambivalence cannot be seen by the centre and can therefore be tolerated. A marginalized space of racial and sexual ambivalence is created by this community of ex-centrics and outcasts:

She had lived for a time in a part of South Africa where nearly all the Coloured men were homosexuals and openly paraded down the street dressed in woman's clothes. They tied turbans round their heads, wore lipstick, fluttered their eyes and hands and

talked in high, falsetto voices ... They and people in general accepted it as a disease one had to live with. No one commented at these strange men dressed in women's clothes (45).

This community of widespread trans-sexuality, suggests the ambivalence that mixed race subjects experience as a result of their perceived miscegenation. They straddle the boundary between races, cultures, and sexualities as they vacillate between Manichean absolutes, in what Homi Bhabha calls the "unheimlich terror" of the Other (1990 2). Theirs is a space which is determined by its non-identity--a negative territory of interstitial existence.

Those officially classified as Coloured in South Africa are made aware that their sexual and racial identity is considered contaminated and impure. As the product of sexual and racial felony, they are expected to fall into the pre-determined scripts of promiscuity and insanity. It is hardly surprising therefore, that Elizabeth attempts to deny her own sexual identity. This denial is a gesture of refusal, both of her mother's inheritance and of Apartheid's power to name her into its mythical portrait of Coloured female sexuality. Elizabeth's aversion to sexual matters is clear by her characterization of sexual activity as a "deep hole" (44), an "abyss of utter darkness" and a "cess pool" (173); all images of libidinous self-obliteration. For Elizabeth, to "pitch over into the hole" (97) is, to "fall" into the "crater" that is "so deep, so endless"--a space where the sexualities of blacks and Coloureds are defined by images of their own depravity and self-destructiveness. If Elizabeth were to admit that she is a part of the over-sexualized discourse of the "hole", she would enter into a set of patterns which iterate her lack of identity. Her denial of her own sexuality is an act, albeit a negative one, which allows her some measure of control over how she is represented in Dan's shows. Dan responds to her defiance by spinning his record:

"You are supposed to feel jealous.

You are inferior as a Coloured.

You haven't got what that girl has got" (127).

Elizabeth's racial self-contempt--she is constantly reminded that she is not "genuinely African" (159)--is inextricably bound up with her perception of herself as a woman who lacks genuine femininity. Both racism and sexism produce feelings of profound subalternity in Elizabeth as Dan overlaps both discourses in his relentless tormenting of Elizabeth. He tells her: "I like girls like this with that kind of hair. Your hair is not properly African" (127). His jibes become increasingly targeted at her sense of racial and sexual inadequacy--"I go with all these women because you are inferior. You cannot make it up to my level because we are not made the same way"(147).

In many ways, Dan takes on the voices of the white male colonizing discourse, where the object of that discourse is to subdue the Other into the stasis of intransigent and degenerate difference. Elizabeth recognizes that as he controls language, Dan has the power to name himself "the King of the Underworld" (117), and the Father. He names himself into a position of supreme male control, while attempting to name Elizabeth into complete submission as he does with his "nice-time girls".

In his grotesque mimicry of white, patriarchal discourse, Dan assumes the speaking position of the dominant, patriarchal master over the submissive slave-like female subjects of the "nice-time girls". He claims to be the "Father" (117)--the sovereign authority over his kingdom of passive, voiceless women. He parades the silent/silenced women before Elizabeth in various tableaux depicting male control of female sexuality. She observes the gaze on Dan's face: "The African grin said so much. It was hatred. It was control of a situation" (128). The male gaze, identified by Laura Mulvey in her germinal

article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", is one which reduces women to a purely objectified exhibitionist role where they are, "simultaneously looked at and displayed" (11). Dan is literally the "director" of the show in which the "nice-time girls" act out the endless permutations of male fantasies. Elizabeth's mind becomes a "movie screen"--a passive blank surface which receives Dan's images of sexual perversion.

Dan's control over the processes of naming is closely bound up with his self-proclaimed role as director of (the gaze of) the show. He names each woman for her function as a sexual receptacle for his own desires, so that each "girl" is determined by her sexual relation to the King and the Father. Mulvey describes this act of determination as one whereby the phallic gaze imposes upon the woman a system of coding, so that each "appearance is coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (11). Dan's gaze establishes his mastery over the gendered and eroticized objects he observes: he is the "King of Women". He names each of the "nice-time girls" according to the sexual function they perform in his show. There is "Miss Sewing Machine ... She can go all night" (127), Miss Wiggly Bottom, Miss Body Beautiful and The Womb who walks "with her pelvis thrust forward" (127). In his ability to name each of the "girls", Dan has assumed the natural authority of the Self, in which each girl is effortlessly quantifiable as Other.

The display of the women is a mute spectacle--a silent movie--of female desire as none of the women in the "show" have speaking parts. They exist only as highly eroticized surfaces of Dan's desire "their one common bond being their blind adoration of Dan" (163). The "girls" are icons of tireless sexual activity, who are used to torment Elizabeth's sense of sexual and racial inadequacy: "to Elizabeth they all invariably turned with that mocking smile

she had first seen on the face of Medusa"(164). The figure of Medusa is equally instrumental in instilling feelings of sexual inadequacy in Elizabeth:

Medusa was smiling. She had some top secret information to impart to Elizabeth. It was about her vagina. Without any bother for decencies she sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation travelled out of her towards Elizabeth... Then she looked at Elizabeth and smiled, a mocking superior smile: 'You haven't got anything near that, have you?' (44).

Elizabeth has positioned herself as "the queen of passive observation of hell" (148). As a passive female spectator, she is cut off from the construction and manipulation of female sexuality in the performances. She is compelled to watch, both horrified and fascinated by the spectacle which reiterates her own inferiority as a Coloured woman: "He, the king of women, had condescended to associate with low trash--and how subtly he always conveyed her inferiority to her in ways like this" (*A Question Of Power* 149). Even through his embraces, Dan demonstrates his power to remind Elizabeth of her own subalternity:

He made a woman feel like an ancient and knowledgeable queen of love. It ill-fitted her pattern. It was the property of lanky, slinky, smouldering females. She did not immediately recognize the disadvantage, the effect it had on her, heightening her gawkiness and commonplaceness and thrusting her down to the position of one who is being given a supreme gift by one in a station or situation far removed from her (106).

In Dan's display of male sexual power, the phallus becomes the signifier of his absolute command over both Elizabeth and the "girls": "He thrust black hands in front of her, black legs, and a huge towering black penis. The penis was

always erected" (128). The intersection of racial and gendered discourses of power and domination is clearly evident in this representation of Dan as the marker of exclusive black, phallic power.

In *Yearning*, bell hooks suggests that there is a strong connection between the "discourse of black resistance" and the presence of black phallic authority. She argues that the language of black resistance has, "always equated freedom with manhood, the economic and material domination of black men with castration" (1990 58). It follows, then, that Dan is effectively mimicking the structures of power that he has learnt from Manicheism. Hooks further elaborates upon this connection she is positing between black males and their white male oppressors, when she argues that

sexual metaphors [those whereby freedom is equated with manhood and domination with castration] forged a bond between oppressed black men and their white male oppressors. They [black men] shared the patriarchal belief that revolutionary struggle was really about the erect phallus, the ability of men to establish political dominance that could correspond to sexual dominance (1990 58).

Bell hooks points to the connection that patriarchal political systems have established between the "erect phallus" and the quest for black political and sexual power. In her recognition of this patriarchal politics Elizabeth recoils, not only from Dan's phallic display of power, but also from Tom's claim that Black Power is the only revolutionary movement that will liberate Black Africans. She instinctively shuns his fist-thrusting gesture (132), as it reinforces the phallogocentric exclusivity that, for Elizabeth, characterizes much of organized African political activity:

Any heaven, like a Black Power heaven, that existed for a few individuals alone was pointless and useless. It was an urge to throttle everyone else to death. Didn't she know about it in Southern Africa? Wasn't she a part of it in feeling when there was so much despair and so little hope? (133-4)

To Elizabeth, Tom's raised fist and Dan's erect phallus both mark out exclusive and aggressive male power. They are instruments used to establish political and sexual power for the black male--learnt from the discourses that the white male has constructed. Both the phallus and the fist have effectively silenced the voice of the non-white female.

Elizabeth's silencing is a psychologically brutalizing process. Virginia Ola examines Dan's violation of Elizabeth's mind as a correspondence of his violence to the "nice time girls'" bodies. Ola says that his efforts to control both the female body and mind, "are to him the surest way of demonstrating his prowess as a man" (45). Dan is relentless in his assaults on Elizabeth: "he attacked her head the way he had attacked the vaginas of the nice-time girls ... He had a way of conveying hideous, silent concealed laughter through monstrous images of women being raped" (*A Question Of Power* 180).

The spectacle played out nightly in Elizabeth's room is a variety of what Homi Bhabha calls the "grotesque psychodrama of everyday life in colonial societies" (1990 71). The room becomes the stage where Dan stages his performances in which he mimics the techniques of conquest and domination. In his assumption of the role of the Father, the master and the King, Dan constructs a knowable and homogeneous image of black female sexuality as a series of unproblematic types, in the same way as Apartheid names its own Others.

Dan alone has the power of activity in the permutations of copulation--his women are endlessly malleable and disposable as constructs of his violent desire. He often allows his "girls" to experience sexual pleasure at his hands, but only insofar as it heightens his own desire. If any of the girls appears to be deriving her own arousal from the sexual act then he simply destroys them: "Another girl who was a bit too much for him was Madam Squelch Squelch... He so despised her that he made short work of her" (165). He demonstrates to Elizabeth that he can destroy any woman who threatens his sovereignty and re-shape them into more docile objects of male desire: "Their sex must not be a little more than he could manage. Also women more sexually potent than he were incredibly `dirty'" (164). Dan fears any articulation of female desire or sexual pleasure: "The next thing he could not stand was the orgasm of Body Beautiful". This "nice-time" girl's excitement is "feverish and hysterical and apparently affected him in a painful way" (164). The violence with which he destroys the women--he crushes them, tears them apart and extinguishes the life in their sexual organs--is driven by his fear of losing control of the objects that he has "specially created for [his] desires" (168). Thus, the greater the perceived threat, the more violent is the silencing of the woman:

Pelican-Beak was too pushy for the new world. He began fixing her up. He broke her legs, ... he decorated her with tiny, pretty, pink roses for a new image of tender love ... He'd re-design her pelvis along the lines of Elizabeth's, which was extraordinarily passive and caused no trouble in the world (167-8).

However, even in his apparent disgust of female desire, Dan can continue to copulate furiously. He is able cleanse the women of their sexual dirt and at the same time convince Elizabeth of her own filth; "The main thing was that, in

the process of going with her, he had cleaned her up, he had made her impotent. She kindly exposed a spotless vagina right in Elizabeth's face (165).

Elizabeth recognizes the power of Dan's ability to create and manipulate reality through his assumed control of the signifying processes which can name the world. She almost succumbs to his invitation to enter the cess pool of power and sex which ferments with all the viciousness and corruption of South Africa:

The prolonged staring into the depths made a wave of dizziness overcome her. She began to pitch over into the hole. As she slipped over the edge, she clung to its periphery with both hands, her legs dangling down into the pit. (97)

But Elizabeth does not fall into the cess pool. She resists Dan's suggestion that she take her own life in a final act of self-erasure. He cannot destroy her as he has done with the other woman; instead Dan counts on Elizabeth's apparent drive to self-mutilation to destroy herself. Charlotte Bruner comments on Elizabeth's escape from Dan's grasp when she observes that "The conditions of conforming to accepted social patterns in what is basically still a conservative man's world in a Black African society almost defeats her [Elizabeth]" (269). To be drawn into the hole that Dan has defined would signify Elizabeth's acceptance of the authority of his phallic discourse, in which she can always be reduced to the powerless object of the Self's knowledge. Finally, Elizabeth cannot allow herself to be captured within Dan's narrative because it restates the destructive patterns of her South African experience. Thus, she refuses to be named into his narrative, thereby maintaining the possibilities of somehow creating her own identity beyond Dan's names. Kimberley Benston points out the importance of refusing the name as an act of political defiance:

... the refusal to be named invokes the impulse to undo all categories, all metonymies, and reifications, and thrust the self beyond the received patterns and relationships into a stance of unchallenged authority ... the act of unnamng is a means of passing from one mode of representation to another, of breaking the rhetoric and `plot' of influence, of distinguishing the self from all else... (1981 153).

Elizabeth resists Dan and Medusa's invitation to self-annihilation by breaking their "plot of influence". She recognizes the possibility of creating meaning outside of the "cess pool". By avoiding falling into the chasm Dan and Medusa offer to her, Elizabeth continues to struggle against the scripts that they present to her.

A Gesture Of Resistance

In *A Question Of Power* Head avoids a simple reversal of the personal/political opposition which equates the two without developing any critical strategy to examine how the self is actually constructed as a subject. To simply name one's experience is often liberating for the Other. But to be considered as an act of political agency this textual naming, bell hooks argues, must be accompanied by "a critical understanding of the concrete material reality that lays the ground work for personal experience" (*Talking Back* 108). In her later work, in particular a collection of short stories *The Collector Of Treasures*, Head goes further in exploring the various structures the colonizing discourses which have subdued the voices of women in South Africa. The stories map the changing shapes of emerging South African feminisms which are beginning to narrate women's political struggle for voice and history in post-independence Africa.

It is crucial for Elizabeth's resistance to the "plots of influence"--of Manicheism and Apartheid--that she create her own meaning in a space outside of Dan's "cess pool". She does this through her re-entry into the quotidian concerns of the "outside" world. She leaves her room and returns to join the communal labour of Motabeng and the pragmatic demands of motherhood. With Kenosi, a co-worker on the agricultural project in the village, Elizabeth finds a space that non-white women can share in their labour; "They were a perfect working team together, silently, intent, and yet always dependant on each other for a hand to lift a weight here and ease a load there" (111).

The creation of a vegetable garden in the inhospitable, semi-desert of Motabeng is a form of necessary praxis for Elizabeth--what Bessie Head

describes as "making new worlds out of nothing" (1990 28). As the *unheimlich* figure of the Other, Elizabeth has always been dislocated from community as Apartheid has withheld from her any sense of continuity with either people or place. The vegetable garden is a performative action of connection towards collective activity and continuity; it is a "gesture of belonging" (*A Question Of Power* 206). The garden represents Elizabeth's movement away from self-mutilative introspection and premature psychological death that have been offered to her by Dan and Medusa.

Hussein Bulhan describes such a return to action as a motion which refuses the impulse for self-annihilation that the Other typically internalizes as her only "plot". Elizabeth's work with Kenosi and the farm project is a crucial transformative gesture which "reconnects [Elizabeth] through organized actions towards common goals" and partially "restores [her] lost attributes as subject". The garden project is Elizabeth's small step towards "socialized praxis" whereby she resists the "internalized script for failure and disaster" (Bulhan 275) that South Africa has offered to her.

Rita Felski believes that the rejection of old scripts and narratives is a crucial act of self-determination in feminist transformative politics:

Insofar as narrative constitutes one of the most important ways in which ideologies are concretized in relation to life experience, the emergence of new plots for women which emphasize autonomy rather than dependance is to be welcomed as an indication of the influence of feminism in the ideological and cultural domain (1990 152).

It can be argued that the narrative of madness is a kind of disempowering politics where the subject effectively surrenders any sense of autonomy. It is certainly significant that the Colored woman's act of resistance

involves a tortuous and self-destructive madness. But as I have argued, Elizabeth's madness is neither a fully destructive nor a wholly empowering experience. The spaces of insanity in the text are states of chaotic possibility which may embrace both pain and empowerment. Fanon writes that "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" (*The Wretched Of The Earth* 29) and as such, will frequently involve a degree of self injury in the struggle for some autonomy which can break the old stories and plots. It is through the incidence of her insanity that Elizabeth discovers the possibility of creating an alternative narrative to that of Manicheism which has invalidated her identity and voice. Elizabeth's struggle in *A Question Of Power* is " ... the struggle to create an identity, to name one's reality", which in itself is, as bell hooks says "an act of resistance ..." (*Talking Back* 109).

A Question Of Power is an explicit, yet ambivalent, counter-hegemonic text in which the Other creates alternative sites for speech and agency which challenge the illusory coherence and sanity of the discursive environment which have put her in her place which is no place. As the "public" spaces/places of power and independence politics have not always spoken to women's experiences of silencing and erasure in South Africa, women have been compelled to create alternative spaces from where their voices and texts may be heard. The novel therefore looks to the sites of the home, the body, and madness as politicized sites of activity and resistance to dominant narratives.

If the narratives of madness are often the only recourse of the subaltern subject then we should, as critics of colonizing systems of domination, be concerned with examining the ways in which the spaces of madness may embody all aspects of the political.

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