

1986

## Structures of meaning in the novels of Bessie Head

Joyce Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Johnson, Joyce, Structures of meaning in the novels of Bessie Head, *Kunapipi*, 8(1), 1986.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol8/iss1/9>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Structures of meaning in the novels of Bessie Head

### Abstract

Recent discussions of Bessie Head's work have centred on *A Question of Power* and the general tendency has been to view this novel in terms of its reference to Head's experiences as a coloured South African and an exile in Botswana.' While Head's novels do reveal a deep concern with the social realities of Southern Africa, they also show a studied attempt to relate the local experiences of the characters depicted to mankind's social evolution. In linking these experimental and existential concerns, Head exploits the analogies between the conflict of forces within individuals and within a community and between the behaviour of human agencies and the operation of cosmic forces. Through the use of this analogical method she extends the reference of her novels and, at the same time, mirrors the thought-patterns of the society in which the novels are set. Moreover, she employs the conventions of traditional African narrative and praise poetry in which impressions of characters and events are frequently conveyed by indirect allusion rather than by explicit narration or description.

*The Collector of Treasures* (1977). A collection of short stories about women's experiences.

*Serowe Village of the Rain Wind* (1981). A social history of the Bamangwato people.

JOYCE JOHNSON

---

## Structures of Meaning in the Novels of Bessie Head

Recent discussions of Bessie Head's work have centred on *A Question of Power* and the general tendency has been to view this novel in terms of its reference to Head's experiences as a coloured South African and an exile in Botswana.<sup>1</sup> While Head's novels do reveal a deep concern with the social realities of Southern Africa, they also show a studied attempt to relate the local experiences of the characters depicted to mankind's social evolution. In linking these experimental and existential concerns, Head exploits the analogies between the conflict of forces within individuals and within a community and between the behaviour of human agencies and the operation of cosmic forces. Through the use of this analogical method she extends the reference of her novels and, at the same time, mirrors the thought-patterns of the society in which the novels are set. Moreover, she employs the conventions of traditional African narrative and praise poetry in which impressions of characters and events are frequently conveyed by indirect allusion rather than by explicit narration or description.<sup>2</sup>

The paradigm of the conflict between characters in Head's novels is the behaviour of the natural elements in the semi-desert area of Botswana where, in the drought months, the sun is an adversary antagonistic to life and survival and the people often long for 'soft steady rain'<sup>3</sup> without lightning or thunder. Bright cloudless skies hold no promise and dark lowering clouds foster hope which is often disappointed. The expectation of the land and the longing of the people are identical and the one may be spoken of in terms of the other. In Head's novels, sun and rain and solar

and lunar influences provide images of paradoxically opposite but similar powers which both challenge and modify each other. In successive novels, Head explores the symbolic potential of these images. Further discussion will show how Head uses images derived from the physical and social environment in Botswana to reflect broader existential concerns. An examination of Head's use of imagery will also involve reference to her use of local myth and folklore and, in the case of *A Question of Power*, to her attempt to integrate materials from African and Western literary traditions.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head introduces images which become central to the structure of her later novels. The title of the novel is significant. In Botswana, in September, 'the month when the rain clouds gathered',<sup>4</sup> there is never any certainty of rain and it is a time of both hope and anxiety. Although the villagers still look to the clouds for rain, in the period described in the novel, customs are also changing in the village with the introduction of Western technology and attempts to create alternative sources of water supply. The ability to tap new sources of water successfully, like the coming of the rain, promises relief from an almost constant state of drought. The gathering of the rain clouds alluded to in the title of the novel thus refers to the period of anxious waiting for promised relief and combines references to two different types of expectations — relief from the drought and an improvement in the quality of life.<sup>5</sup>

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, rain is, moreover, depicted as a benign force. Maria, one of the central characters, observes to Makhaya, for example: '...all good things and all good people are called rain' (p. 168). Water is associated with a past 'golden age' when the land was able to sustain the people. Dinorego, for example, retains 'a wistful memory of when the whole area had been clothed by waist-high grass and clear little streams had flowed all the year round' (p. 37). Drought and its ravages are associated with the present when the traditions, like the land, have been eroded. The underground rivers in the semi-desert environment provide the basis for a further extension of the analogy between the drought which is alleviated only intermittently by rain which, though benign, is capricious, and oppressive social conditions which can be relieved only by the intervention of paternalistic but whimsical leaders. The underground rivers which persist when the land appears arid and desolate are compared with the 'rivers inside' (p. 168), the inner reserves of strength to be found among the ordinary members of the community.

The period described in the novel is typical of the drought months in Botswana when the sun becomes an overwhelming force from which the

people recoil. Looking on at the landscape, Makhaya, the newcomer from South Africa, reflects:

The great stretches of arid land completely stunned the mind, and every little green shoot that you put down into the barren earth just stood there, single, frail, shuddering.... And people, mentally, fled before this desert ocean content to scrape off bits of living from its outskirts.... This fleeing away from the overwhelming expressed itself in all sorts of ways particularly in the narrow, cramped huts into which people crept at the end of each day.... (p. 115)

At its greatest intensity, the sun is depicted as a force which both threatens physical survival and hinders movement beyond certain narrow confines of existence. It thus becomes representative of influences which prove harmful when their force is not modified by the presence of others.

The sun, in its most oppressive aspect, is depicted as a cruel force, but its influence in its more moderate moods is benign; it also brightens and transforms the landscape. Different appearances or moods of the sun which Head emphasizes may be associated with stages which she points out in the life of the community. Three typical appearances of the sun are distinguished. There is the sun at dawn creeping 'along the ground in long shafts of gold light' (p. 16), the fully risen sun 'clear of all entanglements, a single white pulsating ball dashing out with one blow the last traces of the night' (p. 16) and the setting sun retreating 'quietly as though it were folding into itself the long brilliant fingers of light' (p. 77). In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, as in the later novels, the rising sun is associated with new ideas which can assist in reducing poverty and raising the living standards of the ordinary people in the society. The image of the sun's 'sudden and abrupt' (p. 16) appearance above the horizon suggests a comparison with new ideas which are precipitately introduced. Gilbert reflects, for example:

Three years of uphill battling had already made clear to him his own limitations in putting his ideas across to the people, and he had also learned that change, if it was to take place at all, would in some way have to follow the natural course of people's lives rather than impose itself in a sudden and dramatic way from on top. (p. 30)

There is clearly a correspondence between the image of the fully risen and overwhelming sun which makes the people retire gratefully to their 'narrow, cramped huts' and new ideas which are advanced in such a way that the people reject them and turn again to traditional practices and beliefs. The sunset to which Makhaya is constantly drawn shows the sun's intensity modified by the influence of the approaching darkness and

provides an image of the comforting reconciliation of the new with the old.

Darkness in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is associated primarily with tribal institutions and an unscientific approach to social and economic problems. Like sunshine and rain, sunlight and darkness represent antagonistic but complementary forces. Each combines both menacing and comforting aspects, and each by itself is undesirable. The sun blinds by an excess of light and the darkness by a total absence of light. One of the central concerns of the characters depicted in the novel is to reconcile their traditional institutions with modern scientific knowledge. The extremes of traditionalism and modernity are represented in the images of areas dominated either by darkness or sunlight. Makhaya's Zulu background is identified with the first and Gilbert's English background with the second.

The society from which Makhaya comes is depicted as an example of diehard traditionalism:

...he had been born into one of the most custom-bound and conservative tribes in the whole African continent, where half the men and the women still walked around in skins and beads, and even those who moved to the cities moved with their traditions too. There seemed to be ancient, ancestral lines drawn around the African man which defined his loyalties, responsibilities, and even the duration of his smile. (p. 124)

Gilbert, on the other hand, comes from a society which displays an enlightened scientific outlook, but which has become too technologically oriented and materialistic. Each finds his society restricting in a different way. When they meet in Golema Mmidi, there is a useful interchange of ideas between them which suggests possibilities for interaction between the two worlds which they represent. Like darkness and sunlight Gilbert and Makhaya are presences which modify each other, and their efforts together help to relieve the distressing conditions of existence in the community.

The tendency to convey the quality of one thing through reference to another may be observed also in the depiction of character in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Characters are compared with the natural elements and with appearances of the landscape. Many of these comparisons have no significance beyond their vivid descriptive quality, but others are very directly related to the theme of the novel. Both Gilbert and Makhaya, for example, are associated with the sun. Gilbert is directly compared with the sun as a symbol of regularity and predictability. The narrator observes, for example, that 'everything the unusual Gilbert did seemed

to be harmonious and acceptable like the sunrise and sunsets' (p. 94). As the bringer of new scientific knowledge, he is also compared with the sun as a symbol of omniscience:

Gilbert prided himself on being an unusually well-informed man. No doubt the sun did too. No doubt the sun knew why the clouds formed and why the wind blew and why the lizards basked in its warmth, and all this immense knowledge made the sun gay and bright, full of trust and affection for mankind. (p. 81)

It is significant that Gilbert's function in the village approximates to that of a rainmaker, for he has undertaken to provide the villagers with water. Thus he is also associated with rain, which represents a life-renewing force. This association of Gilbert with both sun and rain suggests a balance in his nature comparable to that which characterizes the landscape when the elements work in harmony.

While Gilbert is identified with the sun as a bringer of light, Makhaya is primarily a seeker of light. He is constantly aware of the changing appearance of the sun and wanders off frequently by himself to watch the setting sun. Within Makhaya there is, Head suggests, a corresponding muted glow which indicates a capacity to love. He is drawn to Paulina in her 'vivid sunset skirt of bright orange and yellow flowers' (p. 78) and eventually both the images of Paulina and the sun coalesce in his mind: 'Makhaya stood looking at Paulina for a brief moment, a faint smile on his face. She was entirely unaware that her skirt was the same flaming colour as the sun, which was about to go down on the horizon, and that both were beautiful to him' (p. 117). Significantly Makhaya accepts Paulina only after she has learnt to control her passionate nature. At the outset her warmth is too intense, like that of the sun at midday. This comparison is suggested by her reflections. Paulina yearns for a man who will arouse in her 'a blinding sun of devotion and loyalty', and such a loved one could 'magically become ten thousand blazing suns' (p. 77). As she becomes usefully involved in the agricultural project, she achieves the kind of control which the setting sun symbolises for Makhaya.

Characterization through association with aspects of nature is not confined to the major characters. Matenge, the sub-chief who opposes Gilbert's schemes, is associated with the menacing aspects of nature. His presence is a 'glowering thunderstorm' which his sunny-natured brother, the paramount chief, Sekoto, avoids. In Sekoto and Matenge, Head juxtaposes the 'courtesies' and the 'harmful or brutal aspects' of tribal existence.<sup>6</sup> In associating Sekoto with the sun and Matenge with thunderstorms and darkness, Head is both using a convention of traditional African praise poetry and relating their roles to the overall theme of the

novel. While the characters of Gilbert and Makhaya reveal elements working in harmony with each other, Sekoto and Matenge are powers in conflict with each other and neither shows a proper balance in his nature. In the social environment, the villagers of Golema Mmidi are the victims of the conflict between the brothers just as the land is the victim of a lack of equilibrium in the natural environment.

The symbolic significance of darkness and sunlight in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is enhanced by previous use in the literary tradition. While the imagery in the novel is very specifically related to local conditions in Botswana, the basic associations of many images are universal and, as a result, the reference of the novel is extended. Thus diehard traditionalists like Matenge may be seen as only another example of those who suppress new knowledge in order to dominate others who lack social and political power. Moreover, the changes taking place in the community described in the novel are related to a view of progress in which those imprisoned by old ideas and tyrannical institutions are constantly being liberated by those who introduce new ideas.

The inter-connection between different aspects of existence and the correspondences among personal, social, and wider societal concerns are even more forcefully demonstrated in *Maru*. In this novel the symbolic significance of images drawn from the behaviour of the natural elements is further extended by reference to the system of beliefs governing certain rituals and to local myth and folklore.

Motifs from several types of tales may be identified in *Maru*. At one level, the novel describes the rivalry between two close friends for a woman and the marriage of a man of noble birth to someone without status. At another level it recalls the myths about the separation of the powers of a divinity and the withdrawal of a god from his people.<sup>7</sup> It also recalls nature myths which account for the predominance of sunshine and the scarcity of rain in semi-desert regions like Botswana.<sup>8</sup> These motifs, which may be found in traditional African sources, are integrated with material related to recent history. This includes the decline of the political power of the chief in southern African states,<sup>9</sup> the rivalry for succession in royal households in Botswana<sup>10</sup> and instances of chiefs flouting tribal custom on the matter of inter-racial and inter-ethnic marriage.<sup>11</sup>

There are two central metaphors in *Maru*. The first is related to the rain cloud which fails to produce rain. In *Maru*, a comparison is implied between the cloud which fails to produce rain and the chief who fails to relieve the distress of his people. The name given to the hero, Maru, as Head has mentioned in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, occurs in the saying 'Maru a lwala', meaning 'The clouds are sick', which the old



people in the village say when the rain clouds gather in September.<sup>12</sup> Significantly Maru is a paramount chief elect. In traditional Tswana societies, the chief was looked to for relief in times of drought and was appealed to in his capacity as rainmaker. Even when traditional rain-making rites were discontinued, the connection between the chief and rain persisted.<sup>13</sup> The name of the hero of the novel thus supports a comparison between the rain cloud which promises rain but does not produce it and the chief elect who fails to fulfil the expectations of his people. Maru not only refuses to assume the paramountcy, but, like the rain in the drought months, becomes distant and inaccessible. The use of rain imagery to allude to the chief's failure to live up to the expectations of the people is not unusual in southern African literature.<sup>14</sup>

Other parallels may be drawn between the behaviour of Maru, the paramount chief elect, and the rain cloud. Maru's deliberations as he contemplates withdrawal from the community may be compared with the activity of the clouds threatening rain. The villagers' attempts to make Maru assume his hereditary office have a parallel in the attempts in former times to make the clouds produce rain by observing special rites. Maru is, however, inscrutable and his intentions are as unpredictable as the rain. His unfathomable nature suggests a further comparison with the rain which, in traditional Tswana societies, was believed to have a distinct personality. Moreover, in popular belief in those societies, wrongdoing in the community could 'spoil' the clouds and drive away the rain.<sup>15</sup> Correspondingly in the novel, Maru becomes disgusted with the behaviour of his people and withdraws from the community.

Maru's disappearance from the community indicates a change in the nature of the society, which is comparable to the effect which lack of rain has on the land. His disappearance marks a break in the custom, for it is clear that he expects Moleka and Dikeledi, prototypes of 'the future kings and queens of the African continent' to succeed him, and not his half-brother Morafi. It also refers to the change in political orientation which is observable in modern African societies where the chief, no longer the centre of tribal life, has lost his magico-religious function.<sup>18</sup> Reference to this kind of change is suggested by the qualities contrasted in Maru and Moleka. Maru is 'rich in speculation and mystery' (p. 105); Moleka cannot see beyond 'the real, the immediate, the practical' (p. 73). The imagery based on the seasonal cycle suggests, however, only the temporary ascendancy of the secular over the religious principle, for, although Maru has withdrawn his influence, he contemplates intervention if sufficiently provoked.

In the novel, as in the local tradition on which Head draws, it is the

anger and consequent withdrawal of the rain which allows the sun to dominate the land. The failure of the rain cloud to produce rain may thus be seen as a basic metaphor employed in the story and combining references to the fertility of the land, the economic prosperity of the community and the spiritual well-being of the people within it.

The other important metaphor in the novel is based on the alternation of sun and moon in the solar cycle.<sup>19</sup> Sun and moon are associated with two types of personalities and with two ways of exercising power. Comparisons of Moleka with the sun are explicit, as, for example: 'Moleka was a sun around which spun a billion satellites. All the sun had to do was radiate force, energy and light' (p. 58). The sun, which is here characterised by boundless and uncontrolled energy, may be contrasted with the fretful and abortive rain cloud.

Head further conveys the violence and forcefulness of Moleka's nature by associating him with the thundercloud.<sup>20</sup> This association appears, for example, in the first description of him: 'A young man sat alone.... There was a heavy thunder-cloud around his eyes. He looked grim and vehement and gruesomely ugly. When he spoke his voice had such projection and power that the room vibrated' (p. 27). The connection between the sun and thunder is familiar in myth where the synthesis of sun-god and storm-god is not unusual.<sup>21</sup> When the sun and the thundercloud are brought together in the image of 'a rainbow of dazzling light' appearing from behind 'a stormy sky' (p. 30), they suggest the two extremes of Moleka's personality and his mercurial temperament.

In contrast with Moleka, Maru is identified with the moon: 'Did the sun have compassion and good sense? It had only the ego of the brightest light in the heavens. Maru preferred to be the moon. Not in any way did he desire Moleka's kingdom or its dizzy, revolving energy' (p. 58). In the novel, as in traditional African oral poetry, the sun represents power which displays itself openly, and the moon power which is held in reserve or exercised in secret. As contrasted with the moon which has been popularly perceived as a subtle and enigmatic force,<sup>22</sup> the sun represents power which is ostentatious and forthright. Moleka and Maru, Head thus suggests by the opposition of sun and moon, display two polarities of leadership. Maru's identification with the moon also links him very directly with the force which, in local myth and folklore, was believed to control the rain and reinforces the symbolism related to rain.<sup>23</sup>

As 'kings of opposing kingdoms' (p. 34), neither Maru nor Moleka is wholly good or evil. Maru gives up temporal power to pursue a personal romantic ideal. In doing this he also initiates a desirable social change, for in taking a Masarwa woman as his wife and recognising her as an

equal he opens a door for other members of her oppressed tribe. Moleka, who is capable of generosity but is uncompromising and violent in his methods, is bound to a worldly ideal. Maru's enigmatic and brooding personality is attuned to the 'darker' side of life which, in this novel, is associated not with the forces of ignorance and reaction but with intuitive wisdom and mystery. The charismatic Moleka belongs to the public sphere in which personal longings are subordinated to considerations of social status. Thus Maru's withdrawal to his secret garden both symbolises the triumph of individuality over the demands of public office and reflects a more secular orientation in the society from which he has withdrawn.<sup>24</sup>

In the change from the period of semi-darkness (symbolised in the dominance of the moon) to the period of sunlight (symbolised in the dominance of the sun) Head suggests, by the contrast between Maru and Moleka, life may be denuded of its mystery. The compensations which the new enlightened age brings are more positively presented in *When Rain Clouds Gather* where she dwells on the technological innovations which can relieve harsh living conditions. In *Maru* Head is more concerned with the questions which a new and more secular orientation in the society raises about the most useful course of action for the individual.

In *Maru*, Head has not only broadened the reference of the events described but has also effectively employed conventions of traditional African poetry and narrative to illuminate contemporary problems. As in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, she relies on imagery derived from the natural setting to convey emotions and moods of characters; concrete images are used to express intensities of feeling which are usually described in abstract terms.<sup>25</sup> In using nature imagery in this way, Head relates the language of the novel to the folk tradition and emphasizes the interaction between her characters and their natural environment.

In *A Question of Power*, Head reinforces the symbolism derived from the natural setting and local oral tradition with references to Egyptian, Classical and Oriental mythologies. While the emphasis is still on the inner life of her main character, she also directs attention to the material concerns of the society. As in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head gives a detailed picture of agricultural activities in rural Botswana.

*A Question of Power* describes a woman's struggle to recover from mental breakdown. Elizabeth, the heroine of the novel, is haunted by two apparitions which she identifies with two men whom she has seen briefly in the village. These figures, Sello and Dan, dominate the fantasy world into which she is increasingly drawn as she loses contact with the society

around her. Eventually she achieves equilibrium and is able to participate meaningfully in the community, which, in its own way, has helped her to survive her ordeal. Sello, like Maru, is associated with the creative principle and the sombre side of life. He is also identified with the religious principle and with power exercised through love. Sello is 'opposed by personalities whose powers, when activated, rumbled across the heavens like thunder'.<sup>26</sup> Among these are Medusa and Dan; the latter, like Moleka, is associated with the sun and with thunder.

Elizabeth's story suggests analogies not only with that of a woman who is pursued by jealous rivals but also with the situation of an individual claimed by conflicting loyalties. It may be related both to the religious and to the political context. Sello is modeled on a passive god who allows evil to coexist with good, and Dan on an autocratic and whimsical god. Elizabeth may be compared with the medium who is possessed by the god.<sup>27</sup> Sello and Dan also recall two types of political leaders — one relying on moral persuasion and personal example, and the other popular appeal.<sup>28</sup>

In *A Question of Power*, the struggle for physical survival in 'barren territory' is still the paradigm of the conflicts between characters. The village of Motabeng, 'perched on the edge of the Kalahari desert' is very much like Golema Mmidi, and its name means 'the place of sand' (p. 19). Motabeng experiences 'desert rain which dried up before it reached the ground' (p. 20), but, like the villagers in Golema Mmidi, the inhabitants of Motabeng are aware of hidden reserves of water underground. Like Golema Mmidi, Motabeng gives the impression of a waste land but possesses the potential to renew itself. The land itself, in this novel, again supplies a concrete image of the 'arid terrain' in which the 'hard conflict of good and evil' (p. 61) takes place.

The daytime and nighttime appearances of the village provide images of the opposition of the powers which Sello and Dan represent. As in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head associates darkness with traditions and beliefs which supply an area of stability for individuals in the society but which also restrict them. These forces which create areas of security, she suggests, also create prejudice and irrational behaviour. Sunlight is associated with the conscious and the known and with the new ideas, products of the intellect, which give hope for progress. Again, it is the paradoxical nature of the agents of reaction and progress which preoccupy Head, for, like darkness, sunlight and what it symbolises are shown to have terrifying aspects. Through imagery related to the interaction of darkness and light, she demonstrates the consequences of the separation of spiritual and intellectual concerns.

As in the earlier novels, differences in the personalities and behaviour of opposed characters are suggested by their association with the constellations. Sello is associated with the moon. His power, which is spiritual, moves and works like 'a flame in the dark night' (p. 41). His association with the moon implies not only his ability to coexist with an antagonistic element but also the waxing and waning of the principles which he represents, over time. Dan is identified with the sun, which, as its zenith in the Botswana landscape, dissipates all other influences. Dan's association with the sun indicates his denial of the validity of any position but his own.

In responding to the influences exerted by Sello and Dan, Elizabeth is constantly attempting to reconcile the principles represented in the images of darkness and light. As a coloured person, she is a combination of both, for she is both African and European. As a South African she comes from a society in which the two have been separated racially, culturally and socially. Medusa, the embodiment of the reaction and divisiveness which hinder harmony at any level, observes with resentment: 'Too many people the world over were becoming mixed breeds and shading themselves down to browns, yellows and creams' (p. 63). The experiences of Elizabeth, the woman of mixed heritage who is pulled in two different directions by sharply polarised forces (represented in the images of darkness and light) may be related to the experiences of the societies in which Head has lived. Elizabeth's need to balance the two sides of her nature reflects the need in these societies to effect racial harmony and to reconcile radically different value systems.

In associating Sello with the moon, Head also identifies him with Buddha and with Osiris, the god of the Egyptian lunar cult. In Elizabeth's mind Sello's lunar influence temporarily gives way to Dan's radiating light. The correspondence which may be observed, for example, between the change in Elizabeth's outlook and the situation described in Egyptian mythology when the Osirian lunar cult yielded place to the solar cult of Ra<sup>29</sup> indicates Head's intention to link narrower social concerns with broader existential themes. Dan's ascendancy in Elizabeth's mind is described in imagery which suggests an initially exhilarating event, the advent of a 'transforming new vision ... alive to redress the balance of the old'.<sup>30</sup> While Sello's power waxes and wanes, Dan's rise is meteoric and his decline sudden. Like the sun he moves boldly from one end of the horizon to another. It is interesting to note how the image of the sun dissipating the darkness at the end of Part 1 (p. 100) which marks the point at which Dan's power supersedes Sello's and Medusa's combines references to several mythologies. In the first place,

the image conveys the resurgence of vitality in Elizabeth, associating sunrise with resurrection as in Khoisan myth.<sup>31</sup> In the second place, it incorporates a conventional metaphor in traditional praise poetry referring to the coming of the chief.<sup>32</sup> Finally, it integrates this metaphor with a reference to Perseus' slaying of the Gorgon which occurs on the previous page of the novel. In Classical mythology, Perseus' slaying of Medusa is also interpreted as a reference to light dissipating darkness.<sup>33</sup>

The allusion to the wider body of mythology suggests a further application for the events described in the novel. Thus the specific change taking place in Elizabeth's mind reflects not only a situation in her immediate society (the analogy between the human organism and the social organism being implicit throughout the novel) but more generally the change in the outlook of a society when a seemingly sombre and oppressive influence yields to a seemingly more attractive and benign one. In Elizabeth's situation, Dan's apparently enlightened outlook, his reassuring boldness and his ideological commitment provide no better hope for the future than Sello's.

Our examination of Head's novels thus reveals a continuity in thematic preoccupations already remarked on by Arthur Ravenscroft who observed in the novels 'a quite remarkable cohesion' that makes them 'a sort of trilogy'.<sup>34</sup> This continuity is, as we have shown, reinforced by Head's use of imagery and symbolism. In her three novels, the forces upon which the physical and material well-being of the society depends are compared with those which guide their spiritual and political life. The metaphors inherent in the images introduced in the novels create structures of meaning which are universally intelligible and which are, at the same time, specifically related to the physical conditions of living in Botswana.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Joanne Chase, 'Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*: Romance or Rhetoric', *ACLALS Bulletin*, Sixth Series, No 1, 67-75; Adetokunbo Pearse, 'Apartheid and Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*', *Kunapipi*, V, 2, 67-75; Charlotte Bruner, 'Bessie Head: Restless in a Distant Land', *When the Drumbeat Changes*, ed. Carolyn Parkes and Stephen Arnold (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1981), pp. 261-277.
2. See Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a Black South African Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 146.
3. I. Schapera, *Rainmaking Rites of Tswana Tribes* (Cambridge: African Studies Centre, 1971), p. 54.

4. Bessie Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1972), p. 146. Subsequent references to this book are given in the text.
5. In Tswana rainmaking rites, for example, the women sing the song, 'We come from Waterless Valley', said to be 'a figurative expression for poverty and distress'. Schapera, *Rainmaking Rites of Tswana Tribes*, p. 7.
6. Bessie Head, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p. 8.
7. See, for example, Alice Werner, *Myths and Legends of the Bantu* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), pp. 21, 41 and 50.
8. 'Friction' between chiefs could, it was also believed, cause scarcity of rain. Schapera, *Rainmaking Rites of Tswana Tribes*, p. 22.
9. See, for example, I. Schapera, *The Tswana*, New Ed. (London: International African Institute, 1976), pp. 51-52.
10. See Head, *Serowe*, Introduction, xvi.
11. See, for example, *The Cambridge History of Africa*, Vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 295.
12. Introduction, xix. Correspondingly Maru develops several indefinable ailments.
13. Schapera, *Rainmaking Rites of Tswana Tribes*, pp. 24 and 133.
14. See, for example, A.C. Jordan, *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (Cape Province: Lovedale Press, 1980), p. 176.
15. Schapera, *Rainmaking Rites of Tswana Tribes*, p. 106.
16. *Maru* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 70. Subsequent references are given in the text.
17. Schapera has pointed out that chiefship remains hereditary. *The Tswana*, p. 51. Morafi's name, however, associates him with tribe (*morafe*) and thus with the old order which Maru wants to change.
18. On the 'mystical powers of the chief', see W.D. Hammond-Tooke, 'World-view II, A System of Action' in *The Bantu-speaking Peoples of Southern Africa*, ed. W.D. Hammond-Tooke, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 350-351.
19. The growth of enmity between Maru and Moleka also reflects both Bantu and Khoisan myths of the origin and separation of powers which were formerly combined either in the divinity or in the chief. Khoisan myth, as Janet Hodgson has observed, revolves around the death of the chief of the first race of men which caused 'the separation of the two shadows or presences of the chief to which are related the dualistic concepts of light and darkness, night and day, sky and earth, male and female, good and evil and life and death'. *The God of the Xhosa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 36.
20. See pp. 74, 80 and 85 in addition to that cited in the text.
21. See, for example, Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 146.
22. See, for example, Gertrude Jobs, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* (New York: The Scarecrow Press, 1962), p. 1119.
23. Among Khoisan peoples, for example, the moon was addressed as raingiver. Schapera, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa*, pp. 175-176.
24. In obeying his 'inner voices' Maru recognises a new source of control coming from within the self rather than from tradition or 'the will of the ancestors'. Secularization is also symbolized both by the implied break with custom and by the character of Moleka to whom he yields place.

25. For example, both Margaret's happiness and her partial involvement with Moleka are suggested by the expression, 'half suns glowing on the horizons of her heart' (p. 92). Similarly Moleka attracted to Margaret is aware of a portion of his body 'like a living, pulsating sun' (p. 31).
26. *A Question of Power* (London: Heinemann, 1974), p. 43. Subsequent references are given in the text.
27. This idea is suggested by Elizabeth's name which, traced back to its origins, means 'worshiper of god'. *New Century Cyclopedia of Names*, Vol. 1, ed. C.L. Barnhart (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1954), p. 1425. In some African languages, the mysterious quality recognized in the novice is called 'receptive to becoming the seat of God', or the *wife of God*. *Macdonald's Encyclopedia of Africa*, 2nd ed., eds. J. Knappert & J.D. Pearson (London, 1978), p. 17.
28. See discussion of this in Joyce Johnson, 'Metaphor, Myth and Meaning in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*', *World Literature Written in English* (forthcoming).
29. See, for example, Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 348.
30. The phrase is Wilson Harris's. *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (London: New Beacon Publications, 1967), p. 24.
31. See, for example, Hodgson, *The God of the Xhosa*, p. 36.
32. See, for example, Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry*, p. 12.
33. Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols*, p. 1084. It may also, as Joseph Campbell has observed, refer to the dawn of a new era. *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 152.
34. 'The Novels of Bessie Head', *Aspects of a South African Literature*, ed. C. Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 175.