

# **'No World as Yet for What She has Done': Re-memory and Revisioning in Bessie Head and South African Women's Autobiographical Writings**

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## **Introduction**

Bessie Head's perceptive analysis of the social alienation which first her mother, and then she herself experienced (Vigne 1991:65) locates the difficulties of self-recognition and expression faced by many South African women under apartheid. This difficulty could easily lead to silence but, for the women considered here, it has led instead to exploration and expression of the individual's experiences as both individual and part of the community.

Bessie Head's letter (above) locates her sense of identity in the context of her mother's tragedy—incarceration in a mental home because of her relationship with a Black African servant—Bessie's father. There was, then, no space, no world for Toby Birch (her mother), and very little more for biracial, creative women. Bessie Head's own exploration and location of her creative and cultural identity is developed in relation to her own position, in South Africa, before and during the apartheid era. Hers is a testimony and an imaginatively engaged exploration of alternatives to racist oppression, both informing and enabling us to contextualise the autobiographical and fictional works of other South African women who also explore and establish identity in a historical, cultural and geographical location of which there is—or was – 'no world' and no word for much of what they have to do and say:

Telling our stories, using the 'self as subject', shows the intersection between the individual and the larger forces of our history. In telling our stories we attempt to understand both intellectually and emotionally. We each have a story to tell, in its uniqueness and commonality, but also in its constructedness. In remembering in the present, we begin to realise that parts of our past are waiting to be reclaimed, re-visioned and told as we

view the past through the lens of the present, weaving an inter-textual narrative (Govinden 1995:170-183).

The project for post-apartheid South Africa is not dissimilar from that of the autobiographical writer. South Africa must come to terms with and shape its distant and immediate past, recognise a version or many versions of itself and move on to build a new future. Inevitably the story a country tells itself, particularly a country with a history of such strife, denial and division, will itself involve a struggle to face up to painful and contradictory memories, and shape them. But the act of self-recognition and shaping of self is crucial for post-apartheid South Africa as it is for the writers of autobiography, who must first reflect and shape versions of themselves and their history in order to project and deal with it. And if autobiography seems to offer a particularly self-absorbed, subjective, shaped account, it is salutary to think of how the recording and representation of history itself is history as a shaped, selected and interpreted version. History is not fact but text. Autobiography has much in common with it, being a shaping of experience also. Meanwhile, post-modernism is criticised for its awareness of the constructedness of 'reality', its own fictional and metafictional awareness—it is too artificial, too controlled and then too conservative (Brink 1998:18).

There are several versions of autobiographical writing, as Govinden's quotation (above) suggests. The self, used as subject in the personal story, is also a construction. The semi-fictionalised account differs from factual record, using the self as subject to investigate, explore and illustrate specific incidents and elements of a life. South African women's autobiographical writing ranges along the full continuum, from highly factual, documentary autobiographical record, through the semi-fictionalised autobiography, to fiction informed by personal experience. Trying to pinpoint exact nuances would be difficult and dangerous. That writing by a variety of South African women does exist along this continuum (and different modes exist sometimes in the same work) leads us into the debate about the differing value of testimony and imaginative fictions. To avoid disputes I will normally use the term 'semi-fictionalised autobiography' to indicate a range of autobiographical record (necessarily partly a shaped construction), and the transformation into an imaginative fictional form. This, I hope, leaves space to debate some of the issues of the potential of autobiographical record and of fictional writing without prioritising.

Representation, and re-memory, as explored in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and re-visioning through the autobiographical account are powerful choices for South African women writers enabling, as they do, a creation, a seizing and embodying of subjectivity and identity. Autobiography is a form of reclamation of voice, of empowerment. Through engaging in re-memory, through re-investigating and imaginatively re-envisioning the past by way of the lens of the present, individual

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and community stories can be told, constructed, and interpreted. For silenced Black South African women the semi-fictionalised autobiographical form has been crucial. This is particularly so both under apartheid and in the post-apartheid era when understanding self, community, culture and history are important steps in creating a new nation. Exploring and shaping individual experiences in semi-fictionalised autobiography helps the recognition of the value of individual selfhood, and places this selfhood as part of a developing, culturally contextualised version of community history and community present.

In the apartheid period, Black women's fiction was only rarely produced, and often banned. In exile, Bessie Head (1969; 1974) led the way in semi-fictionalised autobiography, while Noni Jabavu (1960; 1963) and Ellen Kuzwayo (1985) produced more directly documentary autobiographical works. Zoe Wicomb also brought out her fictionalised, autobiographical short story sequence/ novel; *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), whilst Jayapraga Reddy produced *On the Fringe of Dream-Time and Other Stories* (1987), and has been working towards a novel. Miriam Tlali published *Muriel at the Metropolitan* in 1975, *Amandla, a Novel* in 1980, and *Soweto Stories* in 1989 (her works were produced within South Africa). Lauretta Ngcobo's *Cross of Gold* (1981) was banned in South Africa, Farida Karodia wrote *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) and *Coming Home and Other Stories* (1988), and Agnes Sam produced *Jesus is Indian and Other Stories* (1989). We are not looking at a vast body of literature, but at a marginalised, silenced group whose power is only now beginning to be felt as their work becomes more readily available both within and outside South Africa.

Cultural contexts affect, condition, encourage and prevent forms of reading as they do forms of writing. South Africa is in the exciting, challenging, often contradictory process of reinventing itself. Voyeurs, viewers, readers, audiences, critics, we are looking for new work which gives voice to the new processes and experiences, and seek to find new ways to re-read and re-interpret writing, particularly resistance writing from the apartheid era. Many of us in the UK adopted very clear, political stances (minimal, confusingly felt to be useful) against the dehumanising racism of South Africa. We refused to buy South African oranges, boycotted businesses with interests in South Africa, supported the renaming of student bars after both Nelson and Winnie Mandela, and celebrated Mandela's release and then inauguration in 1994 as long distance-fans viewing the dawning of a new era. In the new democratic dispensation, critical opportunities appear open to us now to revisit both the published and the suppressed and to investigate anew the narratives of resistance which sought, under apartheid, to express the ironies and ambiguities of those years of imaginative and cultural silencing and exile.

A particularly appropriate place in which to seek the narratives of imaginative, creative expression and resistance against the oppressive contradictions

of the apartheid era is that of fictional autobiography, a space chosen by women to construct, explore and express their own versions of their lives. In our reading of South African women's fictionalised autobiographies written under the shadow of apartheid, our own post apartheid critical lens looks now in their work for continuities and discontinuities between that turbulent past and, for South Africa, the differently turbulent present. There are ways in which, in negotiating the expression of versions of their own identities and feelings, women's autobiographies are dialogues between an oppressive and silencing present and a resisting, culturally generated, self-creating individual voice. They are a very good place to begin to look again at South African writing, and to look also at our (for me, my own, very limited, no doubt partial and skewed) critical and personal responses to the changes gradually emerging in the New South Africa.

The semi-fictionalised and more documentary autobiographical works of Bessie Head, Zoe Wicomb, Lauretta Ngcobo, Ellen Kuzwayo and women of the COSAW (Congress of South African Writers) collective (whose work is collected in *Like a House on Fire* 1994) represent varied, differently successful versions from different South African contexts of the wish to reconstruct, and represent the self in the face of social, political and textual master narratives which would seek to silence such representations.

As Betty Govinden points out, absolutely essential for those (South Africans, women among them) who wish and need to establish a sense of history and continuity in which to place and define their developing identity, is the reading of those whose work provides a literary and personal heritage. Such reading was denied, not available, in South Africa to students and ordinary readers alike. Instead, the imperially constructed 'Great Tradition' with its particular totalising discourses dominated the curriculum and insidiously enabled the construction of versions of the self which silenced or deferred, labelling as irrelevant so many culturally affected personal responses, both critical and creative:

There was a curious collusion between apartheid and colonialism and that this came to bear especially in the literature that we studied at school .... Literature was confined to English Literature, to that which was written 'a long time ago'. Oral and popular literatures as well as local and contemporary writing of black South African peoples were not even considered as being marginal or secondary. It simply did not exist (Govinden 1995:173).

On the one hand, apartheid conditions and curricula prevented people from sharing ideas and experiences with other races, people from other origins, preventing the recognition of similarities and uniquenesses. On the other hand, in its imposition

and valorisation of a particular version of what literature 'was', it denied, devalued and actively removed from access any writing about the variety of lives of Black and 'coloured' South Africans in particular, but also of white European and Afrikaner originated South Africans. 'The crude personal and private was only to be lived and endured' (Govinden 1995:175), never inscribed, read, reflected and built upon, used as a lens to see oneself in perspective. Well organised, controlling, formal education was denied them—how then to envision and imagine a past and a self? This led to an 'insidious stranglehold on the creative imagination' (Gilroy 1987:175).

What validates the experience of an artist is knowing that somewhere out there someone will acknowledge and share your deepest thoughts, your joys, your pain, your muses. Yet in South Africa we have lived for a very long time in the stifling isolation of our separate worlds both as individuals and as groups. Only now do we, as South African writers and artists, self-consciously grope and reach out to find fellow South African kindred spirits (Ngcobo 1994:1).

Creative isolation has been damaging to generations of South African readers and writers. Now their work is being written and read, and many women are recuperating versions of their past lives through the explorations and expressions of the various forms of autobiography.

## **Autobiography**

Autobiographical writing has always been viewed with a mixture of voyeuristic fascination, as Barbara Burford, quoting Grace Nichols might put it 'a little black pain undressed' (Burford 1987:37), and with critical scepticism. Indeed, it used to be termed a critical fallacy to read autobiographical inferences in the work of any writers, and autobiography itself was considered a very poor relation of 'real writing'. The relationship between versions of autobiographical writing and fiction, the role the transmuting imagination plays, are key issues here. As Lauretta Ngcobo (1994:2) points out:

For what is art but life purified? As writers we need to be carefully discerning and vigilant in seeking to find our expression through art. For somehow we must strive to keep fact, truth, fiction and art separate. The function of the writer is not to record truth verbatim like a reporter. Neither is it to present total fantasy, unrelated to reality and lived experience. It is not the raw truth, the raw events of our embittered days of violence. Essentially writing is about the truth contemplated through the crucible of the imagination, and therefore truth becomes art.

Autobiography is an increasingly contested genre. It is both critically suspect and yet richly enabling, depending on your critical stance. Its assertion of the uniqueness and wholeness of the individual subject, it could be argued, is itself a conditioned product of a westernised, masculinist ideological position. For Aboriginal women writers, South African women writers and other Black women writers autobiography, by prioritising the experience of the individual's uniqueness over that of the community, of other women and by writing out of a westernised, romantic legacy of the importance of the dominant experiencing self, it *seems* to deny the shared similar experiences of women under racism and patriarchy. However, this exclusivity is neither an intended nor an achieved project. In the hands of African American, Aboriginal and South African women writers, autobiography has been reshaped and reclaimed. Not only does it enable the expression of the subject position, but it enables an expression of each woman, as subject and also as a living, breathing product of a specific set of cultural contexts. Black women authors write autobiography in assertion of individual identity and of the value of the identities and experiences of other Black women. Ruby Langford (Aboriginal) and Ellen Kuzwayo (South African) both write as the individual 'I' and as a member of the collective community 'we', their identities constructed by and a projection of the experience and identities of the communities from which they grow. The autobiography of Ellen Kuzwayo 'puts aside the rhinoceros hide, to reveal a people with a delicate nervous balance like everyone else' (Head 1990:89). The documentation of human suffering is terrible she notes, but at its end:

one feels as if a shadow history of South Africa has been written; there is a sense of triumph, of hope in this achievement and that one has read the true history of the land, a history that vibrates with human compassion and goodness (Kuzwayo in Head 1990:89).

Born into a family with land tenure, Ellen Kuzwayo was taught to be a Christian and to serve others. Her move from a rural background, as a child, to the slums of Johannesburg, is one familiar to many South African women, and charted elsewhere in Miriam Tlali's *Soweto Stories* (1989). The men move to the city for work to pay the poll taxes, and starving women follow, working in domestic service. Ellen Kuzwayo, looking most particularly at the difficulties faced by women in these dreadful conditions writes:

it is not easy to live and bring up children in a community robbed of its traditional moral code and values; a community lost between its old heritage and culture and that of its colonists (Kuzwayo in Head 1990:90).

She charts the violence and injustices of the 1976 Soweto unrest, including her own and her son's detention.

Gail Reagon (1994:34f), in 'Ellen Kuzwayo and Ways of Speaking Otherwise', positions Kuzwayo's texts as 'both oppositional and testimonial':

The testimonial dimension in Kuzwayo's autobiography is not an unproblematic assumption of her typicality, that she is representative enough to stand in for the black South African community or for all black women. Rather, it points to the trenchantly political or interventionist nature of the narration. For Kuzwayo, the personal 'I' is inescapably bound to the collective 'we'; her identity is constituted as an extension of the community.

Motherhood in relation to motherlands empowers Kuzwayo in her autobiography. *Homelessness* and a sense of place paradoxically coexist, as does individual identity and the individual as community member. Through all of this the position of the Black South African mother is one of empowerment, which turns the conventionally disempowering and silencing around. Like Wicomb, Head and African American women writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker in particular, hers is a dialogic work: she speaks from these dual, previously oppositional or dichotomous positions, and this is in the face of the kinds of dominant discourses which would render black women and autobiography absent, silenced and devalued. Of course, under patriarchy, racism and sexism, it is difficult to escape entirely the discourse which these have shared, and also to escape accusations at least of falling into the other various traps women have discovered in writing of their lives and the lives of others, such as essentialism, and suggestions of homogeneity. Tensions remain in the work, as they do in that of Wicomb and Head. How could the truly radical alternative autobiographical work refuse dominant discourses and constraints entirely, since the self and the representations of the self are themselves constructed from such dominant pressures and discourses? Gail Reagon finds Kuzwayo's project in revaluing motherhood and identity as ultimately unsuccessful, accusing her of homogenising Black womanhood into a universal earth mother figure. She says:

In her commendable attempt to write and speak the specific and valid experience of the South African black woman she reproduces or replicates the very paradigm she sets out to undermine and replace. Her monolithic sisterhood becomes as naturalised (and therefore suspect) as the dominant white minority or black patriarchy that she wishes to problematise (Reagon 1994:38).

But this is only one rather predictable way of evaluating a work which

speaks of the individual as a member and a representative of the community. All forms of autobiography have been treated most recently as suspect, a critical perspective which necessarily results in the kind of imperialist response of which many Black writers have rightly complained. In the 1980s the 'subject' and subject positions were, in particular, viewed with suspicion and even hostility, their ontological security severally questioned, their right to any statement, constructed as they were by context and a plethora of forces, most questionable. Thus a critical abhorrence of the subject and subject position posed particular problems for both women and colonised peoples, for whom there was and is a very specific need to break silence and assert identity, write about the self and the history of the self in order to achieve a sense of being, identity and security in the world. For marginalised and silenced women in particular this was and is no time to bow to the critical effacement of the subject, but a time instead to write the self, work out and reclaim identity through this writing process, aware of its constructedness. There are many different versions and choices, made along the axis of fiction and autobiography. Maya Angelou chooses to use 'I' when retelling her stories, and infuses her narrative with philosophising about life and its values (Angelou 1970; 1974; 1976; 1981; 1986; 1990). Sally Morgan, the Aboriginal author of *My Place* (1987), also uses 'I' but, like other Aboriginal women writers, including Ruby Langford (1989), her stories are not merely her own, but also of others in her family. Versions of events spiral and circle around, forming a sense of a shared community autobiography.

Bessie Head and Zoe Wicomb each create a fictionalised character based on themselves and write of her pains and pleasures. In Head's *A Question of Power* (1974) there is a liberation of expression in the intermixing of everyday realism and surreal night-time horrors, felt as equally real by the protagonist. Forms of autobiography provide particularly authentic first person testimony of history and experiences otherwise rendered second hand through other written versions including journalism. As with the early slave narratives, testifying to one's experience has always had strength and authenticity for Black communities. When allied with the need to frame, control and make sense of experience rather than merely record it, and to construct an 'I' figure, a fictionalised version of the self, an awareness of the problematic, a constructed status of this authentic voice emerges. Bessie Head and Zoe Wicomb develop semi-fictionalised autobiographies whose protagonists closely resemble, but also differ from themselves. There is no polarisation of critical choices. They are both authentic *and* constructed, interpreted; they represent the self and the community.

Gillian Whitlock's *Autographs* (1996) in collecting examples of autobiographical forms both avoids the stereotyping often associated with autobiography, and celebrates the diversity of these 'disobedient subjects':



There has been an ongoing assumption that autobiography will prove a quarry for confirming familiar national myths, that the 'quest for personal identity' must involve asking fundamental questions about national identity. This approach has resulted in some self-fulfilling tendencies, so that retrieved materials for critical attention have come from salted mines, depressing the variety of the genre (Whitlock 1996:xix).

Bessie Head and Zoe Wicomb are impressively creative in the genre. As Black or 'coloured' (i.e. mixed race) women writing under apartheid, both Head and Wicomb seek to explore their own histories, their identities, and also to represent marginalised and silenced subjects. In so doing, they and other South African women writers who choose semi-fictionalised autobiography and a more documentary autobiography as their form—Lauretta Ngcobo, the Congress of South African Writers women's collective, Ellen Kuzwayo and others—both creatively utilise and subvert the master narratives which would seek to subjugate their experience and prevent its expression.

## Bessie Head

If all my living experience could be summarised I would call it knowledge of evil, knowledge of its sources, of its true face and the misery and suffering it inflicts on human life .... What has driven me is a feeling that human destiny ought not to proceed along tragic lines, with every effort and every new-born civilisation throttling itself in destruction with wrong ideas and wrong ways of living (Head 1990:63).

From a position of self-imposed, creatively necessary exile, Bessie Head's semi-fictionalised autobiographical work realistically and metaphorically explores the recognition of self, defiance of silence, and refusal of imposed identities. In *A Question of Power* (1974) Bessie Head/ Elizabeth her protagonist/ fictionalised autobiographical self is a product of a hidden, silenced and denied mixed race union. She is, herself, a space and a silence because there not only is 'no world as yet' for what her mother has done, but also no language to express what she is or can be. Into this space emptied of meaning enter the power struggles of oppressive racist and sexist discourses.

Blinkered totalitarianism cannot bear very much debate: all forms of racial and cultural intermixing are anathema to it. Silence and denial are frequently the only responses available to those who themselves embody cultural intermixture. Of Nyasha, the British educated Southern African girl in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous*

*Conditions*, (1988), Anthony Chenells (1996:69) comments, referring to the destructive, silencing results of her version of cultural intermixing: 'it is produced from a space within two cultures which, lacking language, cannot name with any precision its own contingencies'.

This silencing and space is the place from which Bessie Head begins to write and, like Dangarembga and Wicomb, her work itself negotiates a dialectic of culture, difference, and expression. As Desiree Lewis argues: 'Head's restless struggles both against and with available narratives, forms and discourses were rarely univocal, linear or intentional ones' (Lewis 1996:77).

Crucially, Bessie Head deals with the destructive constraints and repercussions of the Immorality Act (1927, amended 1957: the official embodiment of the taboo against interracial sexual relations in South Africa), as they affect her own life and identity by a subversive, creative and imaginative response. The versions of her own origins, which she writes and re-writes in her fictions and her letters, represent a deliberate and determined effort to bring to life and voice her silenced mother and the culturally unacceptable child which Bessie was under apartheid. Finding and voicing hidden roots and origins, recalling history, is a powerful first step towards establishing a full sense of one's own identity, especially for those whose marginalisation and silencing deprives them of a sense of history from which to begin. Imperialism and patriarchy have ensured the dominance of certain master narratives which effectively relegate women, Black people and Black women in particular, to positions of absence and silence. African American women writers have constructed a maternal lineage tracking back to Zora Neale Hurston, and African women preceding her, seeking, as Alice Walker puts it, in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), a way of expressing the hidden creativities of their silenced mothers. History is very important to writers and readers. Jayapraga Reddy comments: 'Our writing tradition and culture can only be strongly built if we have a sense of the foundations on which we are building' (Reddy 1994:74).

As a response to the oppressions and the negations of self offered by the master narratives, Bessie Head literally recreates for herself in her letters a version of her mother and, while not actually giving her mother a voice, speaks for her in telling her story. She begins to create an identity for herself out of this version of her mother in letters and narratives. Her white, wealthy mother's relationship with a black stable hand led to her designation as insane and her incarceration in a mental home where she gave birth to Bessie, who was removed from her. She died six years later.

'She sought some warmth and love from a black man' and:

when the family found out they succeeded in classifying mother as insane, sped her down away from the family home in Johannesburg to a small town, Pietermaritzburg and locked her up in the Pietermaritzburg Mental hospital

where she gave birth to me .... I was then removed from her .... She was never let out of the mental hospital and committed suicide when I was six years old (Head 27:119).

Of her mother, whose defiance of the race laws stands for a rejection of the policing of her own thoughts and selfhood, Bessie Head says, stressing the tragedy of her time and context 'I still say she belongs to me in a special way and that there is no world as yet for what she has done. She left me to figure it out' (Vigne 1991:65).

As a first generation bi-racial, 'coloured' South African, Bessie Head was subjected to the full dehumanising force of apartheid. After choosing exile in Botswana, she was only able to gain a full sense of her own citizenship when her literary reputation finally persuaded authorities to let her have a passport (1979). She could then travel to conferences and sign books abroad, a Botswanan passport helping establish her always rather beleaguered sense of identity. Bessie Head's early work appeared in *The New African*, alongside that of Lewis Nkosi and Es'kia Mphahlele. Unlike the political, worldly often sensationalist, journalistic work of her colleagues in *Drum*, Bessie Head's writing was more personal and 'apolitical'. She refused political activism and was sceptical about religion, although equating the idea of 'unholy places' with those clearly intolerant and oppressive—notably the South Africa of her youth:

I have continually lived with a chattering sense of anxiety—that human beings are unfortunately set down in unholy places, and Southern Africa may be the unholiest place on earth (Head 1990:27).

When she moved she chose Botswana wisely, as the editor of her autobiographical writings, Craig Mackenzie comments:

The sense of Botswana's almost uninterrupted African history had an immediate and profound influence on her, a victim of almost total deracination in the land of her birth (Head 1990:xvii).

In Botswana her writing developed and then flourished, but first she had to work through expressing and exploring her own breakdown, which took place in 1969.

Of *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head (1990:69) says:

I had such an intensely personal and private dialogue that I can hardly place it in the context of the more social and outward-looking work I had done. It was a private philosophical journey to the source of evil, I argue that people and nations do not realise the point at which they become evil; but once

trapped in its net, evil has a powerful propelling motion into a terrible abyss of destruction. I argue that its form, design and plan could be clearly outlined and that it was little understood as a force in the affairs of mankind.

*A Question of Power* expresses the protagonist Elizabeth's restless struggle to find a sense of her own identity and a sense of belonging. Her daytime productive and creative work with crops in the experimental Utopian community of Motabeng contrasts horrifically with the increasing intrusion and engulfment of her night-time, nightmare world peopled and invaded with mythical, allegorical figures of power who attempt to impose upon her destructive and limiting identities. Sello and Dan resemble medieval mystery play or Chinese myth figures. Familiar, they turn terrifyingly into seductive, sexually perverse and patriarchal figures, products of her imaginative revolt against her own internalised sense of social and political contradiction. Increasingly invading and disabling her days, their struggle for power almost destroys her.

Bessie Head transmutes the painful material of her alienation, isolation and mental breakdown in Botswana into Elizabeth's story. The realistic/ surrealistic tale is both particular in its detail—one woman's breakdown—and representative in its nightmarish dramatisations of the divisive, destructive effects of internalising the oppressions of race and gender under apartheid. Like her namesake (Bessie is often a shortened form of Elizabeth), Elizabeth settles with her son in a community to whom she was initially a stranger. Amidst his mother's breakdown, 'Shorty's' normality and everyday demands bring moments of everyday demand and joy—eventually helping her to throw off the terrible constraints of this destructive power play. Like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, (1893), Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before Dark*, (1972) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Head's novel charts a woman's breakdown, (and breakthrough) in the face of absurd power politics.

Startling events in the fictionalised autobiography are exact parallels of reality, even the pasting of notices outside the post office in Serowe, accusing Sir Seretse Khama (Sello, in the book) of obscenity and cannibalism. This latter act helped confirm Bessie's breakdown. She was confined in hospital for a while, returned and confined again several times over a period of two years, finally emerging with a greater sense of ontological security, and the creative energy to write it through. The fictionalised autobiography *A Question of Power*, the novel *Maru* (1971) and, to a lesser extent, the works also featuring Serowe—*When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969) and *Serowe, Village of the Rain Winds* (1981)—are about her life, and also a testimony to the harshness of life in South Africa and the potential for Utopian change. Of the loathing for South Africa which has denied and silenced her, she says of Elizabeth:

She hated the country. In spite of her inability to like or to understand political ideologies, she had lived the back-breaking life of all black peoples in South Africa. 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 or to loathe you. They were just born that way, hating people, and a black man or woman was just born to be hated. There wasn't any kind of social evolution beyond that, there wasn't any life to the heart, just this vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks (Head 1974:19).

and:

I perceived the ease with which one could become evil and I associated evil in my mind with the acquisition of power (Head 1974:77).

This is the connection which lies behind the drama of *A Question of Power*. Breaking down and identifying evil with everyday people she saw around her in Serowe, as part of a larger evil, Bessie hallucinated and moved into a world where she engaged in a war with evil. 'She felt herself to be part of a soul drama, a new act of the eternal conflict between good and evil. She believed her strange birth and destiny to be part of a large pattern of things' (Stead Eilerson 1995:129). She thought of herself as involved in reincarnation, aligned herself with the biblical King David, and became embroiled in a tripartite relationship of Biblical, historical and then local proportions. This translates into an internal drama involving 'the grandeur of her destiny, the inexplicable cruelty of and evil of her torturer and her distaste for sexual corruption' (Stead Eilerson 1995:130). Although at this period in her life she was involved mentally with such dramas, she could also distinguish between this and her daily life. She was filled with fears of her own death, and with racially inspired disgust at her difference. Bessie Head wrote through some of these feelings in *Maru* where Margaret the Masarwa or Bushman is ostracised in the village, considered the lowest of the low because of her racial origins. In 1969 this internalisation of racism was torturously real to Bessie. *Maru* was published in 1971. These years were written through thoroughly and identified with more directly in the fictionalised autobiographical form, *A Question of Power*. Bessie had a breakdown at Christmas 1970. Howard, her son, went to live in the care of the Moores, where he flourished, and she was hospitalised. Tom, the young aid worker/ draft dodger who had become her friend visited, and care, gardening and letter-writing gradually returned her to a hold on life.

In *A Question of Power* what rescues Elizabeth from the violence of the play of evil upon her, is similarly her involvement in the agricultural scheme, the local

garden, and her young son. The characters who appear in Elizabeth's mental drama are important in the scheme of Bessie's life and development, one, a bolt-hurling-Medusa, reminds her of her alienation, her status as not quite pure African, her inability to truly relate to her people. Medusa tells Elizabeth 'Africa is troubled waters .... You'll only drown there' (Head 1974:44), emphasising Elizabeth's failed sexual prowess and active attempts at goodness. Elizabeth identifies with the suffering poor, expecting rejection by Dan whom she initially loves, but then comes to recognise as an attacking bully whose sexual perversions are nightly paraded before her with a succession of mistresses. Her daily life is filled with gardening work. Tom, the Peace Corps worker, her son Shorty and friend Kenosi consistently sort her out and re-involve her in the gardening. The rhythms and structure of the novel echo a descent into mental hell. From daily normality in the garden and some gradual intrusions by Sello and Dan, Elizabeth is plunged into a total depression, the dramatised evils dominating her nights and then days. She works through a drama of evil and sexual perversion, before gradually coming to terms more with her own life and position and returning to sanity.

It is internalised racism which produces this alienation, pain, and then breakdown. Dealing with it creatively, through writing her life out in fictionalised autobiographical form, is a cathartic experience which exorcises the demons. The narrative provides a controlling shape to what is initially perceived and experienced as pure evil:

Her first drafts of *A Question of Power*, when she still called it *Summer Flowers* were hardly to be distinguished from some of the descriptions of her own life she had given friends. She saw herself singled out for an incomprehensible assault of evil. She had come to the conclusion that it was necessary for the clearing of a lot of junk out of the soul (Stead Eilerson 1995:149).

In a letter from South Africa to a friend (to DB 1963), Bessie Head (1990:14) comments on the obvious hatred and provocation of even white liberals to Black people, and her own disempowerment in the face of this:

You can't think straight about anything if you're hating all the time. You even get scared to write because everything has turned cock-eyed and sour (Head 1990:14).

Lewis notes of the posthumously published *The Cardinals* (1993), which explores the story of Head's father, in the fictionalised figure of a fisherman Johnny, who fathers Ruby from an interracial relationship. Negotiating sensitive and personal

subject matter, interrogating and critiquing the damage done by racism, Bessie Head is well aware of necessarily breaking new ground formally in her work. This novella:

Illuminates her alertness to the ways master narratives shape the public domain of writing and the fictions available to marginal subjects. It also reveals the way she both subverts and reproduces dominant meanings and codes, struggling with a vision which available codes are not able to sustain (Lewis 1996:77).

Bessie Head exposes and critiques the dangers of internalising a version of racism, exploring how the ways in which its naturalising discourses ensure an unquestioning uptake and application. She exposes through replicating the naturalising discourses and yet represents the absurdity of discrimination on the basis of appearance. Seemingly unpolitical, it is highly politicised and aware.

*A Question of Power* is formally an ambitious book. The long periods of assault on Elizabeth's senses have been found dull by some readers. However, their intensity and tone are appropriate to the extent and relentless inescapability of racism and sexism and can be usefully compared with James Joyce's fictionalised autobiographical protagonist, Stephen's, religious experiences in the retreat in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1902).

When, in 1984 Heinemann wrote to Bessie suggesting she write her autobiography, she said she wished to call it: 'Living on a Horizon' because it describes someone who 'Lives outside all possible social contexts, free, independent, unshaped by any particular environment, but shaped by internal growth and living experience' (Head 1993:277). She intended to set up a workshop to research her papers and put more of her Botswana life (20 years as against 27 in South Africa) in the book and she sent an outline. The publisher they sought to take it, Hamish Hamilton, rejected the proposal, comparing it with Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) and wanting more about her childhood. Two collections of stories appeared, then *A Bewitched Cross-Roads* (1984), a historical novel about Serowe. Its sales were hurt by sanctions against anything South African but sold well in the village. She then agreed to hand the autobiography over by the end of 1986 but never finished it, and died in April that year.

It was almost as though the books wrote themselves, propelled into existence by the need to create a reverence for human life in an environment and historical circumstances that seemed to me a howling inferno (Head 1990:77).

Gradually there is coming into shape a world for what Bessie's mother and Bessie herself did, and it begins to appear in the creative imaginative challenge offered by her written world. Bessie Head's fictionalised autobiographies are cathartic. They exorcise the horrors of her own and others' experiences of power based on oppression and racism. But they do more than this. In their emphasis on breakthrough, realisation of identity and self-worth, and in their formal challenge to the 'master-narratives', they suggest and embody new hope for a future based on relationships of equality and creativity.

## Zoe Wicomb

The centrality of memory in authorship is crucial in Zoe Wicomb's story sequence *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) which figures the growing up, education, and return from the UK of Frieda Shenton, Wicomb's protagonist/ representative of herself in the novel/ fictionalised autobiography. In terms of a continuum from documentary autobiography to fiction, Wicomb's work would appear some way along the 'fictional' side of the continuum.

Dorothy Driver points out that Zoe Wicomb's work refuses stable categories of 'black' and 'woman' to represent the diversity and difference of South African 'non-white' life. She was more able to speak out about South Africa rather than the exile country of her choice (Head's Botswana, Wicomb the UK) because of the intersection of Black consciousness and feminism from which she writes, the very variety and difference of life in South Africa where the coloured or Black African, and certainly in relation to being female, attracted Wicomb's creative exploration. The intermingling over the years between Griqua and South African Dutch settler Afrikaners did not lead to equality but to the designation of the mixed race people as 'non white' or 'coloured', which led to the denial of the right to vote, economic and educational deprivation, and censorship of sexual relations with whites. Several of Zoe Wicomb's stories mourn the forced deporting of people to new, probably well serviced, lands away from their old homes and behaviours. Wicomb's short stories represent the interweaving of different perspectives and experiences, different points of view which circle around the controlling point of view of Freida Shenton, as a child, student, then returned from the UK.

In this way there is a dialogic relation between the different versions of life in South Africa. So in 'Behind the Bougainvillaea', a story Dorothy Driver (1996) examines at length, Freida waits at the white doctor's, in the yard because of her colour, which relegates her to a secondary position but is still able to be treated. Her privileged and successful education at a white school, then as a student in the UK, highlights the strangeness and yet familiarity of the kind of rejection and colour prejudice which is an everyday way of life back home. Rescued by Henry Hendrikse,



the Black South African freedom fighter, and walked off from the hot yard, her interlude offers her some escape and some minimal relationship with the more engaged political aspects of what it means to be Black and politically aware of the hierarchies of colour in apartheid South Africa. A brief sexual encounter with Henry evens some kind of score, smoothes out differences (her previous elevation because of colour—he is not ‘coloured’ but an African ANC member). The experience is the opposite of sexually sensitive, merely begun by recognition and tacit agreement. This is part of Freida’s placing of herself back in her own complex society, but the consciousness does not analyse the event in this way, merely recording it. As Driver (1996:49) points out:

*If You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* destabilizes and decentres the subject as part of its political engagement with various discourses at work, their effect is not one of annihilation, for the social cross currents or webbing of identity are recognised rather than repressed within the text and often comprise the characters’ self representations.

The text has, she argues, a celebratory resistance to the ‘unified self’ stereotype. Certainly in this, it is clear to see the interweaving of selves offered to Frieda upon her return, and the range of family and other voices in debate around her and in her consciousness. Freida is a ‘coloured’ woman who recognises the politicisation of Black consciousness, yet her education has been in a white system. Hers is a pivotal position, stirred to extra effect by her awareness of her own gender politics. However equal she might feel herself to be, on return, her gender renders her subordinated, and in South Africa, her particular hue also labels her. Like African American women writers Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker in particular, Zoe Wicomb refuses to dichotomise gender and ethnicity. In her case, the positions of being both woman and South African are crucial and equal. (Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) met with criticism from Black male critics in particular, because of its portrayal of abusive Black men. She should, they suggested, fight the cause of African Americans before she worried about gender differences.) Like Walker, Morrison and Angelou, Wicomb writes from a position of being a woman and a South African. Driver (1996:51) says of her work:

It is a writing ... fully worthy of the story of black women’s resistance to racist and capitalist exploitation and suppression, and to the ongoing battle to bring gender into current political negotiations ... Wicomb’s particular combination of Black consciousness and feminism, where each mode of thinking contradicts and informs the other, permits her to trace in a South African context the ways subjectivities might be differently constructed

through a recognition of the dynamic between specific experiences and desires, on the one hand, and political demands, decisions and discourses on the other.

Wicomb's is a contribution to a rich subject position which revalues women's roles, and reclaims the language she speaks from the coloniser who would sanitise it of local references. She writes about the mixture of words from different language contexts.

Wicomb's work does not express such a sense of disillusionment and potential for disorientated self destruction as some of Head's autobiographical work. She is of another generation, and read Head's work only while living in England in the 1970s. Wicomb has a different sense of exile and identity, and although her stories negotiate fissures between identities and the imposed racial tensions and differences in South Africa, nonetheless the cohesion of her central protagonist, Freida Shenton, unifies the whole of her work, which does not dissolve into the record of breakdown as does Head's. Her responses are those of a younger generation more able to find identity and voice, although still remaining troubled by the tensions of South Africa:

Her writing bears witness to a history of deprivation, yet it also suggest ways which subvert this history: not through political or economic change but through a psychological change whose major route is in re-writing representation (Driver 1996:45).

We find in Wicomb's writing a creative response to the stimulus of reading Bessie Head and reflecting on her own very different life experiences. Wicomb's difference from Head is not merely one of generation, however. As a highly educated woman, she has had full access to an international literary canon in the context of which to situate her own work. Her position as acclaimed critic and teacher, alongside her creative work, enables a complex dialogic relationship between life and art, both of which are engaged with living in apartheid and, more recently, post-apartheid South Africa. Additionally, while Head lacked identity and context in terms of a language community, Wicomb writes from an established language community position. The kinds of silencing and absences which Wicomb, Head and other South African women writers have suffered have made it difficult for them to do what was more possible for African American women stories, read back through their mothers and grandmothers, although we must not forget that, for Alice Walker, the re-discovery of Zora Neale Hurston, whose work she then brought to light and new fame, was crucial in helping establish this link and history. It is early days even now for South African women to speak and work together towards a recognition and

expression of their criticism of sexism as well as their criticism of racism, as forms of oppression. Lauretta Ngcobo (1994:1) talks of the circumstances which silenced and separated and the image that is being repaired:

... in the past, South African women have found it difficult to acknowledge a common sisterhood. This has militated against our alliance in the fight on gender issues within a very sexist society.

## Like a House on Fire

How do you internalise an intellectual memory in a way that allows you to act on it? (Braude 1994:266).

*Like a House on Fire* contains many examples of creative and autobiographical work by South African women writers of the different racial groups, testifying to their experiences. The full autobiography/ fiction continuum is referred to as 'stories' in the context of the book, indicating the creative and imaginative intermixing with the factual, and the range of work. Carol Lett's 'Transitions' intermixes memories of her grandfather and great-grandfather, whose violent death remained a rumour to her, with dates and events in her own life, each of which marks a response to the condition of living under apartheid. Born 'in December 1959, a few months before the horror of Sharpeville, when a number of people, including children, were shot dead by police' (Lett 1994:3). She moves from this period of protest at the Pass Laws to the birth of her daughter 'in June 1990, a few months after the long-awaited release of Nelson Mandela' (1994:3). Selected, significant memories parallel South Africa's development to the post-apartheid era. Like several other pieces in the collection, this is selective documentary biography which interprets factual events in a symbolic manner. Dynana Kukana's 'The Bush Call' (1994) records an event in her childhood in Makeleng, Botswana when, skipping school with some friends, she spent a day in the bush picking fruit, nuts and berries and spotting wild animals: 'I also had opportunity to see a kudu disappearing fast round a corner. I wondered what it was running away from' (Kukana 1994:17). The wonder of the day is dissipated by recalling how angry her father could get should he find out her truancy. Dynana passes out when she hears a lion has been terrorising the neighbourhood, and the bush where she has been. The tale is lively and dramatic. It is also a rite of passage, a tale of growth and change, with a moral. Conflating terror at the lion with actual food poisoning from the berries provides a moment of both factual and symbolic shock, leading to her decision to avoid the potential and real terrors of the bush.

The full continuum of documentary includes an interview with Gillian Slovo who wrote *Ties of Blood* (1990) after the assassination of her anti-apartheid political activist mother, Ruth First. *Ties of Blood* is semi-autobiographical, featuring Jewish families through the history of South African political struggles and deals particularly with her parents' generation:

I used to deny totally that it was autobiographical, which is rubbish. It obviously has huge autobiographical elements. The people trace the historical development that my family is part of ... it is a kind of catalogue of the anti-apartheid movement in the twentieth century, and because my parents were so active in it, obviously they participated in its development. (Braude 1994:264 [interview with Gillian Slovo])

A departure from her earlier detective fiction novels, this fictionalised autobiography enabled Gillian Slovo to deal with her Jewish history, that of her parents and of the anti-apartheid movement, shaping it through fictionalising elements and her autobiographical take on events. Transferring family memory of European Jewish persecution to the context of South Africa is central to *Ties of Blood*. Slovo's interview and novel relate imaginative shaping and coming to terms with experiences to fuel and recognise her parents' and her own political activism. One fictional incident exemplifies the ways in which memory plays tricks, related to Slovo's (1994:266) question 'How do you internalise an intellectual memory in a way that allows you to act on it?'. When Jacob and Rosa go canvassing in a white Afrikaner area, Rosa suddenly remembers that Jacob was the kid she met in 1936 at the school gates. Initially memory of an incident of her own prejudice failed her: she could not connect that vivid part of the past to him in the present:

Rosa blushed. How could she have forgotten: how could she not have recognised him? the smile on the face of that scrawny boy with a *yarmulke* on his head was embedded in her memory. She saw it all as if it were happening in front of her: herself and Sarah, arm in arm, insulting the stranger in their midst (Slovo 1990:230).

Memory can be highly selective. Semi-fictionalised or fictionalised autobiography opens up emblematic as well as actual moments for the memory, and for the imaginative, creative work. It is important to recognise and shape the past in order to live on beyond it, dealing with personal, historical and political pains and needs around oneself. Slovo notes of her semi-fictionalised ways of exploring, expressing and managing her own and her parents' past as Jewish inhabitants of South Africa:

I'm using these constructions of Jewish identity as an example of the need to confront the past in order that the underlying vulnerabilities are acknowledged and put to rest, so as not to re-emerge in unaccountable ways (Braude 1994:274 [interview with Slovo]).

Autobiography, then, can dramatise, shape and deal with intellectual as well as emotional experience.

## Conclusion

Autobiographical writing in the full range from the highly documentary to the variously fictionalised autobiography is crucial in the establishment of a sense of identity. It is of particular importance in the emerging voices which express the culturally and historically developing individual and national identity of South African women whose identity constructs, expressed in colonial and apartheid discourses, were constrained and silenced. South African women's autobiography springs from several sources, fulfils several crucial roles, negotiates and refuses the dichotomies of nation/ self, post-modern/ subject, gender/ race, fiction/ documentary autobiography. Women's autobiographical writing helps to negotiate re-memory and the reclamation of a silenced past, to construct and represent versions of identity of the self in the context of community. This is crucial in the development of a national identity which does not wish to merely establish its many selves then remain marginalised, but to recognise itself as part of the community of the world. A role of women writers in this project is to seek to engage issues of race, ethnicity, colour—in many instances of Black consciousness and its effects—and of gender. Speaking out from the 'triple burden' of race class and gender, and speaking for themselves creatively and imaginatively, Bessie Head, Zoe Wicomb, Lauretta Ngcobo, Ellen Kuzwayo and, among others, the women of the Congress of South African Writers, express in their work resistance, representation, creative visioning and re-visioning:

The oppressed without hope are mysteriously quiet. When the conception of change is beyond the limits of the possible, there are no words to articulate discontent so it is sometimes held not to exist. The mistaken belief arises because we can only grasp silence in the moment in which it is breaking. The sound of silence breaking makes us understand what we could not hear before. But the fact that we could not hear does not prove that no pain existed. The revolutionary must listen very carefully to the language of silence. This is particularly important for women because we come from such a long silence (Rowbotham 1983:29).

Autobiographical writing provides a liberating form for such imaginative, reflective, remembering and shaping expression.

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