

# 'The Rediscovery of the Extraordinary': *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head

MICHELA BORZAGA

*University of Vienna, Austria*

Universität Wien, Institut für Anglistik  
Spitalgasse 2-4/Hof 8.3.  
A-1090 Wien

michela.borzaga@univie.ac.at

**Abstract.** Through a re-reading of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, this article aims at criticising the way trauma has been conceptualised in the West and recently appropriated by postcolonial literary studies. It argues that to be traumatised means not so much to be haunted by a traumatic event as to inhabit a whole world with its own forces and rules. Elizabeth, the main character in the novel, is not mad as has been argued by many critics: she is deeply traumatised. The apartheid system has attacked her identity in an existential way, disrupting her relation to the polis and to herself. She is doubly colonised: from the apartheid institutions outside and by the perpetrators she has internalised inside. Trauma is thus conceived as a sort of implosion, as a painful, dialectical struggle between different temporalities, multiple contradictory worlds that translate into extraordinary, spectacular phenomena both at the level of the psyche as well as of the body.

**Keywords:** Bessie Head; trauma; power; ordinary; extraordinary; ghostly realm; disorder of imagination; violence; phenomenology; temporality

## 1. Trauma as Life-World

Our planet is inhabited by entire populations whose mode of being in the world is paradoxically characterised by "living and risking *death*" [emphasis mine – M.B.] (Mbembe 2003:1), so that it does not make sense to speak of life-worlds any longer – their extreme forms of living contiguous to war and terror belonging to

*death-worlds* [emphasis in the original text] (Mbembe 2003: 1). Achille Mbembe's article "Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola" bears on the dilemma of not having at one's own disposal an adequate philosophical and theoretical framework that would enable him to articulate and disclose the lives of those he calls the "living dead (ghosts)" (Mbembe 2003: 1).

Implicit in the following re-reading of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* is a critique of how the concept of trauma has been recently theorised in the West and then uncritically appropriated by psychologists as well as by literary critics in South Africa. In the same above-mentioned article Mbembe argues that Western tradition "more than any other – accords a critical role to the notions of self, truth, and time" (Mbembe 2003: 1). Current theories of trauma can be said to be grounded on the aforementioned triad inherent to which are the dualisms that lie at the basis of Western philosophical thought: "[T]he opposition between the affective and the cognitive, the subject and the object, appearance and essence, reason and passion, the corporeal and the ideal, the human and the animal, reality and representation, the one and the multiple" (Mbembe 2003: 2).

Since its official entrance into *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association* in 1980, trauma has been conceived as a violent, overwhelming event (mostly singular) that interrupts the linear temporality of the self. It is this homogenous conception of time that has allowed psychoanalysts to speak of trauma as a phenomenon defined by its deferred action or *Nachträglichkeit* – as originally postulated by Sigmund Freud.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, the traumatic event is so overpowering that it eludes a possible verbalisation or representation. In comparison to other more neutral events, it cannot be recounted, integrated into the biography of the subject, the event revealing itself only symptomatically and belatedly through flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, hyperarousal or stark avoidance. Between the lines transpires a self that – in accordance with modern Western tradition – is a priori one and rational, a self that faces the difficulty of mastering this event and realises how his favourite and superior tool, Reason, is of no help when faced with death. The third concern of truth follows almost as a corollary; the question posed by psychoanalysts and literary critics alike is: if trauma escapes language and is an event defined by its belatedness, which means that it is an event always – almost by definition – deferred, how can we represent it? Is it representable at all?<sup>2</sup>

This reflection on trauma in combination with the obsession of Western thought with self, truth and time has contributed to the development of a poor

<sup>1</sup> See Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism* (1953-1974).

<sup>2</sup> See the writings of Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996). For a critique of Caruth's work and approach, see Ruth Leys (2000).

and monolithic theory of trauma. Trauma is magically turned into an autonomous substance, as if it had a material existence, as if it could be placed and replaced, measured and weighed, swallowed and spitted out. The other less problematic consequence is that critics have become more concerned with issues of representability and textuality than with the actual pain experienced and lived by traumatised subjects, trauma and violence being reduced to "the marker of the limits of narrativity and historicity" (Varadharajan 2008: 124). Yet, as Mbembe points out: "[. . .] By now, the all-too-familiar and clichéd rhetoric of nonsubstantiality, instability, and indetermination is just one more inadequate way to come to grips with African imaginations of the self and the world" (Mbembe 2002: 272).

This paper contends that trauma does not exist autonomously, outside of consciousness. The greatest challenge for philosophers and psychoanalysts is the creation of a language that enables us to explore and shed light on the life-world of trauma, that skin one finds oneself suddenly wrapped up in, that wound in time which can shatter temporality or give rise to multiple and competing temporalities, that intimate, secret encounter with death and our torturers.

## 2. The Metaphor of the Mirror

Although psychoanalysis and Nietzsche's philosophy have tried to dismantle Western dualistic systems of thought, "they do not always allow for an explanation of the radical processes that bring reality into being" (Mbembe 2003: 3). Mbembe finds a theoretical solution in the application of Lacan's metaphor of the mirror which enables one and the same being to have several different origins, to exist simultaneously in different places and under different signs (cf. Mbembe 2003: 3). More explicitly, Mbembe points out that "the metaphor of the mirror, [. . .], allows us to envisage ghostly power and sovereignty<sup>3</sup> as aspects of the real integral to a world of life and terror rather than tied to a world of appearances" (Mbembe 2003:1). The mirror is the site where the self witnesses its own division and becomes its own spectator; it has the power of the shadow which escapes what is touchable, engendering the spectralisation of reality (cf. Mbembe 2003: 4). In the mirror, writes Mbembe, "being and identity are fugitive, intangible, but visible; they constitute that negative space which is the gap between the *I* and its shadow" (Mbembe 2003: 4). More importantly, the mirror brings into being the power of terror, for the image and the self reflected in it are suddenly situated in

<sup>3</sup> According to Achille Mbembe, "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the development and manifestation of power" (Mbembe 2003: 1).

a “place that is *not* a place for it does not rest upon any terrain” (Mbembe 2003: 5). At this point, Mbembe brings forward his crucial argument:

Now strictly speaking, the crossing-over of appearances can be associated with a penetration into the heart of the “*psyché*.” Crossing through appearances is not only to go beyond the split between what one can see, what one can touch, and what is hidden, invisible. It also means running the risk of autonomy of the *psyché* with respect to corporeality, expropriation of the body going hand-in-hand with the unsettling possibility of an emancipation of the fictive double. The latter acquires, in such a setting, a life of its own, a life given over to the dark work of the shadow – magic, dream, and delirium inherent to any confrontation between self and self (Mbembe: 2003: 5).

*A Question of Power* is a unique document within South African literature as the writer attempts the depiction of a phenomenology of trauma from within.<sup>4</sup> But as the following passages suggest, it is not with reason and logical argumentation that we can grasp the effects of violence. When Elizabeth tries to explain her ‘state of siege,’ her battles with Dan and Sello, the multiple forms of their apparitions, words fail her; Dan is indescribable and when she tries to verbalise what happened to her, it looks like “the typical record of a lunatic” (Head 1974: 179) and concludes: “She could no go beyond that. Logically, a story had a beginning. She was being killed by Dan, but Sello had started it. The story had begun with Sello and Medusa. [Tom] sat a little while, taking down some notes. She had not clear idea of what she was saying. She was struggling to recapture the image of the Medusa and what Medusa and Sello had done to her, and she couldn’t get it straight” (Head 1974: 180).

It is difficult if not impossible to make quantitative, geometric statements about the nature and the effects of violence. Yet, what can be argued, is that there are degrees of trauma, manifold shapes of the damages inflicted upon a subject that has been the victim of emotional, psychological and physical violence.

Besides ‘the living dead,’ there are millions of people caught between the world of life, which in this article I will call the ordinary, and the spectacular/extraordinary or the ghostly realm – that world of death where violence and terror reign. Elizabeth, the central character of Bessie Head’s novel, is a case in point. This article contends that to be traumatised is to simultaneously inhabit

<sup>4</sup> *A Question of Power* tells the story of Elizabeth, a young South African woman who goes to Botswana in exile with her little son. One could argue that there are almost two plots: an external, literal one in which Elizabeth gets involved in various projects and takes part of the rural life of the village of Metabeng and, on another level, an internal, mental and emotional one, which records her mental breakdown, the effects of psychic trauma.

these two worlds and to be torn between them, each with its different and contradictory temporalities. The traumatised subject always struggles to defeat the extraordinary in the attempt to return to a relatively safe and ordinary life.

### 3. The Rediscovery of the Extraordinary

In 1991 Njabulo Ndebele published his famous essay "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa"<sup>5</sup> in which he argues that the history of black South African writing "has largely been the representation of spectacle" (Ndebele 1991: 37) by which he means a "highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation" (Ndebele 1991: 37). He makes the important point that this literary trend is directly related to the nature of the apartheid system itself, its sheer brutality, exhibitionist and spectacular absurdity: "[T]he brutality of the Boer, the terrible farm conditions, the phenomenal hypocrisy of the English speaking liberal, the disillusionment of educated Africans, the poverty of African life, crime, and a host of other things" (Ndebele 1991: 40).

Ndebele describes the spectacle as the opposite of the ordinary; its key traits are: sheer display of exteriority, grotesque figures, lack of specificity of place, characters which are mere abstractions, instant meaning, lack of causality of events, the absence of development and change in time, obliteration of subjective reality: "The whole plain of aesthetics here involves the transformation of objective reality into conventional tropes which become the predominant means by which that objective reality is artistically ritualised" (Ndebele 1991: 44). In the course of this essay Ndebele writes that there is a new kind of literature emerging in South Africa which is evidently breaking with this tradition of the spectacular: "Clearly, the culture of the spectacular, in not permitting itself the growth of complexity, has run its course" (Ndebele 1991: 47).

Curiously enough, Ndebele quotes passages from various black writers, but Bessie Head remains unmentioned. However, while reading *A Question of Power* with Ndebele's essay in the back of one's mind, one cannot possibly miss how the struggle of Elizabeth, the main female character of the book, is exactly between two worlds, two world visions, which in their nature correspond to what Ndebele describes as the ordinary and the spectacular. In this prophetic novel, Bessie Head makes the crucial point that the brutal, spectacular, exhibitionist display of power that was typical of the apartheid system is still deeply rooted in the recesses of Elizabeth's mind and it keeps re-surfacing regularly in its full force. The

<sup>5</sup> Ndebele presented this paper already in November 1984 at the Commonwealth Literature Institute in London.

spectacular, therefore, or what I also call the extraordinary, has not run its course. Dan and his women, Sello in the brown suit, Medusa are all replications of that grotesque deployment of power so intrinsic to the apartheid system.

At the beginning of his essay Ndebele refers to a book by Roland Barthes (1972) and writes: "It is the manifest display of violence and brutality that captures the imaginations of the spectator" (Ndebele 1991: 37). I would like to carry this argument further by making the point that whenever one experiences the traumatic violence of the spectacular – and Elizabeth is an enigmatic example of it – another symptom that manifests itself is also what we could call a 'disorder of the imagination,' an imagination that keeps engaging only in the spectacular, in the excess, by constantly reproducing and re-enacting it. In the novel it is Dan that symbolises the force of the extraordinary, who is described by the narrator as a "wild display of wreckage and destruction" (Head 1974: 13). This is the way he erupts into Elizabeth's life: "Before her gaze, Dan's head exploded into a ball of that red fire. The loud, pounding rhythm of his drama drummed in her ears day and night. It was like large, grasping hands gathering every thread of her life to themselves for a total command; a total encroachment on her mind and soul" (Head 1974: 159).

The spectacular as it is conceived by Ndebele is also the ultimate quality of what Achille Mbembe calls "the ghostly realm": "More than a geographical space, the ghostly realm is foremost a field of visions: fantasies, strange spaces, masks, surprises, and astonishment; in short, permanent commerce with families of signs that intersect, contradict, and nullify one another, set themselves back in motion, and go astray with their own boundaries. Perhaps that is the reason the ghostly realm escapes synthesis and geometry" (Mbembe 2003: 5). For the sake of argumentation, in this essay the extraordinary, the spectacular are coterminous with Mbembe's ghostly paradigm. Whereas Ndebele only identifies this phenomenon, Mbembe explores it further, showing its secret economy, its mechanics and how it operates.

What is the ordinary then? It is that whole world that has been suppressed by the brutality of the apartheid system: "[T]he deepest dreams for love, hope, compassion, newness, and justice," all aspects that have been "sacrificed to the spectacle of group survival" (Ndebele 1991: 47). In the following analysis of how the spectacular operates in Elizabeth's life, I intend to show how the extraordinary needs to be rediscovered and re-acknowledged, since it is still very much part of the lives of many South Africans. Elizabeth's arduous path toward healing is nothing else than her attempt to accommodate the ordinary, a new world of compassion, knowledge, attention for details, the possibility of consciousness to grow again, to be eventually filled with content as well as a new order of imagination.

#### 4. Elizabeth's Expulsion from the Earth

"One does not enter into the ghostly realm out of curiosity or because one wants to. Ultimately, a tragedy, indeed a loss, is at the origin of everything" (Mbembe 2003: 7). The tragedy of Elizabeth as an illegitimate child of miscegenation (her mother was white and her father an unknown black man) is her very birth which gets conveyed to her not as a gift but as a mistake, as an outrageous scandal, the product of pure insanity:

They had kept the story of her real mother shrouded in secrecy until she was thirteen. She had loved another woman as her mother, who was also part African, part English, like Elizabeth. She had been paid to care for Elizabeth, but on the death of her husband she resorted to selling beer as a means of livelihood. It was during the war, and the beer-house mainly catered for soldiers off duty. They came along with their prostitutes and there was an awful roar and commotion going on all day. Though Elizabeth loved the woman, she was secretly relieved to be taken away from the beer-house and sent to a mission school, as hours and hours of her childhood had been spent sitting under a lamp-post near her house, crying because everyone was drunk and there was no food, no one to think about children. [. . .]. As soon as Elizabeth arrived at the mission school, she was called to one side by the principal and given the most astounding information. She said: 'We have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native.' [. . .]. A day later you were returned because you did not look white. They sent you to a Boer family. A week later you were returned. The women on the committee said: 'What can we do with this child? Its mother is white.' [. . .] When you were six years old we heard that your mother had suddenly killed herself in the mental home. The grandmother brought all her toys and dolls to you.' (Head 1974: 15-17)

Elizabeth's tragedy is linked to the madness of colonial violence, to the sovereignty of the coloniser who decides whose life is illegitimate and whose is legitimate, which life is a gift and which is a curse. Elizabeth listens to the principal's words and slowly feels how her self begins to split, to crack, how slowly earth starts vanishing from under her feet and she begins drifting away like a wave, turning into a cloud, into a hollow, into nothingness. Here the subject is not only faced with the fact of being non-White, different, or Other, but she also experiences the hypothesis of her own abortion, she is faced with her annihilation,

with her *Nichtung* and *Vernichtung*. Expelled from the earth, Elizabeth remains in the world of the ordinary as a walking body, but her invisible *I* gets confined at the edge of life and is suddenly “placeless” (cf. Gagiano 2000: 125). Mentally she is dislodged to another realm where she is both I and Non-I: the extraordinary – that realm in which trauma keeps coming back and revealing itself under different shapes and guises.

## 5. The Extraordinary or the Realm of Ghostly Violence

Ghostly power operates through various strategies and its ultimate goal is always to murder the subject by way of encircling it, torturing it, wearing it out (cf. Mbembe 2003: 9-10). First, it deploys capture which consists in “binding the subject hand and foot and gagging him like a convict, beyond the bearable, to the point where he is reduced to immobility” (Mbembe 2003: 11). Similarly, without being warned, Elizabeth feels suddenly attacked and then dragged into a hole where she feels imprisoned. The ghostly realm is literally a state of captivity:

She had a clear sensation of living right inside a stinking toilet; she was so broken, so shattered, she hadn’t even the energy to raise one hand. How had she fallen in there? How had she fallen so low? It was a state below animal, below living and so dark and forlorn no loneliness and misery could be its equivalent (Head 1974: 14). [. . .] But Medus’s next assault pulled the ground right from under Elizabeth’s feet. She fell into a deep hole of such excruciating torture, that briefly, she went stark, raving mad (Head 1974: 44). “The radius of hell seemed endless... she was immersed in the filth from head to toe. It was like swimming in it whole, and the ordinary pleasures of life, like eating food, became an excruciating misery. It was as if excreta where everywhere” (Head 1974: 64).

Dan tries to exhaust Elizabeth by interrupting her sleep for days and nights, forcing her to become the spectator of his depravity and perverse sexual activities, forcing her to listen to his noises and groans:

But [Dan] thrust black hands in front of her, black legs and a huge, towering black penis. The penis was always erected. From that night he kept his pants down; after all, the women of his harem totalled seventy-one. [. . .] Miss Sewing-Machine belonged to the goddess class. [. . .] He told her to go and wash in Elizabeth’s bath-tub. [. . .] They washed and washed in her bathroom; they put on Elizabeth’s dresses and underwear and made use of her perfumes. [. . .] They stole with reckless speed, anything they could lay their hands on (Head 1974: 128). [. . .] The next thing he could not



stand was the orgasm of Body Beautiful. It was feverish and hysterical and apparently affected him in a painful way. [. . .] Like a small child wetting her pants, she had an orgasm right on top of Elizabeth. The following day Elizabeth tried to rise out of bed and collapsed again with a high, delirious fever (Head 1974: 164). [. . .] He had been standing in front of her, his pants down, as usual, flaying his powerful penis in the air and saying: 'Look, I'm going to show you how I sleep with B... She has womb I can't forget. When I go with a woman I go for an hour. You can't do that. You haven't got a vagina.' (Head 1974: 13)

Traumatic memories of humiliation, abasement, and belittlement are here depicted as "actual recurrences or reincarnations" (Gagiano 2008: 182).

Mbembe writes that "ghostly violence is of a capricious nature" (Mbembe 2003: 14) which can again involve various possibilities, one is that of "laughing at the subjects' misfortune" (Mbembe 2003: 14): "Only on thinking back did she realise that it was the clamour of a man laughing his pissing head off. He had everything arranged in advance. He knew exactly what he was doing. He knew exactly what he wanted. He knew exactly who was going to die and how he was going to pick up the thirty pieces of silver at the end of the job" (Head: 1974: 103). "There was Dan. He was laughing, not a nice carefree laugh, but like the spider who has caught the fly" (Head 1974: 146).

"When he does not kill his prey, the ghostly power seeks to dismember him" (Mbembe 2003: 15): "[Dan] raised his hand and struck her a blinding blow on the head. Her head exploded into a thousand fragments of fiery darkness. For two days she lay, barely conscious, in bed" (Head 1974: 141).

She hadn't seen Dan's form just then, but shortly before she awoke she had seen two large, familiar black hands move towards her head. They had opened her skull. He's bent his mouth towards the cavity and talked right into the exposed area. His harsh, grating voice was unintelligible. It just said: 'Rrrrrrrraaaaaaaa.' It had shot through her body with the pain of knife wounds. She'd pulled and pulled, struggling to free herself of the hands holding her head. She's awoken gasping for breath. (Head 1974: 177)

Another extremely destabilising and excruciating method used by Dan is his menacing prophecies of death. He whispers into Elizabeth's ear: "You are going to commit suicide at a quarter to one tomorrow" (Head 1974: 13) and, at other times, she hears a "wild, insistent chant in her ears" (Head 1974: 45) saying: "'Die, die, die'" (Head 1974: 45).

All of these examples from Bessie Head's text, vividly reveal the degree of pain and distress Elizabeth has to bear when the past re-surfaces and re-presents

itself. The deep sense of entrapment together with the feeling of being recklessly pillaged, repeatedly humiliated, magnify her sense of powerlessness. These are mini-suicides that Elizabeth keeps re-enacting.

Through the spiral effect of ghostly violence Elizabeth loses contact with reality, the sense of space and time. In the reality into which she is projected, events do not reflect an origin or causality, they are arbitrary and unexpected. The body is perceived as fluid, evanescent, a stage where the spectacle unfolds. This is in accordance with Mbembe's description of the ghostly realm which "constantly spills out over its assigned time and space. It is a scene where events continually take place that never seem to congeal to the point of consolidating into history. Life unfolds in the manner of a spectacle where past and future are reversed. Everything takes place in an indefinite present. Before and after are abolished, memory is destabilised, and multiplication reigns" (Mbembe 2003: 6).

## 6. The Ordinary against the Extraordinary

Contrasts of light and darkness, symbols of life and death form the narrative structure of the book, and it is Elizabeth herself that reflects and consciously realises the struggle going on between her inside and outside worlds.

Elizabeth seems to associate with the ordinary a sense of relative temporal continuity and a possible sense of belonging. Inversely, when the extraordinary world unfolds in her mind, Elizabeth has the feeling of her house being suddenly besieged, invaded, turned upside down: "She was like a person driven out of her own house while demons rampaged within, turning everything upside down" (Head 1974: 49). Once she reflects on a short break from Medusa's intrusions and compares it to a sense of homecoming: "Oh, there had been a release from it for a week or so after Medusa's ending. She had felt back in her own form again, back in her house. She turned to run. Hell was there in full force again" (Head 1974: 116).

Bessie Head precisely depicts the banning and censoring effect that the extraordinary tries to keep on the ordinary. Enigmatic is the day when Elizabeth is lovingly watching her son playing football from the window and suddenly Dan intrudes interrupting the scene:

She nearly [committed suicide], except that her small boy had asked her to buy him a football and he came down the road with a gang of eager friends. They set up a football pitch outside the house. Her son was so eager to impress everyone that he kept on kicking the football too high in the air and falling flat on his back. She spent the whole afternoon

at the window watching him, he was so comical. So Dan tried another prophecy: He said: 'I have the power to take the life of your son. He will be dead in two days.'" (Head 1974: 14)

Throughout the novel there are other similar examples. This is a crucial aspect since in the aforementioned passage we see how, on the one hand, it is her son that prevents her from committing suicide; without being aware of it he brings her back to life and she can thus reconnect with the outside world, whereas, on the other hand, Dan breaks this connection and destroys it. The implication is that often the subject is paralysed, torn apart between life and death. This is extremely painful and strenuous.

The extraordinary has not only a banning function on the subject's relation to the outside world; these interruptions are part of Dan's larger plan of complicating and contaminating her relationships with the community of which she is a part. Often, Elizabeth feels so forlorn that pain becomes unbearable and she starts projecting Dan's actions on innocent citizens of Serowe. As Gagiano explains: "[. . .] so desperate is the victim of humiliation to escape its agonies that she allows the furies of a vengeance-lust to boil up in her soul, hence re-enacting her torturers' roles" (Gagiano 2008: 180). Enigmatic is the following scene when Elizabeth walks into the village with her little son to buy a small radio:

She turned into a shop and stood abstractedly at a counter, not having any idea of what she wanted to buy. In front of her were some transistor radios. The shop assistant said: 'Can I help you, madam?' She said it three times before Elizabeth looked up at her and nodded dumbly. She blindly picked up a small radio and handed it to the girl for wrapping it up. The girl said: 'You must first go into that office over there and record the purchase. The clerk has to inform the post office of every radio we sell, as you have to pay for the radio licence. She entered the office. From that moment her eyes remained riveted to his face and she began pitching and heaving mentally in a crescendo of torture. The insistent hiss, hiss of horror swamped her mind. 'You see,' it said. 'You don't really like Africans. You see his face? It's vacant and stupid. He's slow-moving. It takes him ages to figure out the brand name of the radio. You never really liked Africans. You only pretended to. You have no place here. Why don't you go away...' [. . .]. The insistent hissing was mean, stifling, vicious. Whom could she accuse, to end it? She sprang to her feet, slamming the chair back against the wall, and shouted: 'Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana!! Oh, you bloody bastard. Batswana!!' Then she simply opened her mouth in one long, high piercing scream. (Head 1974: 50-51)

This is one of the most significant moments in the novel. Bessie Head shows the workings of trauma and power in the human psyche which becomes a strongly social and political issue related to the whole community, not only to the traumatised subject.

However, it is only the community that can drag Elizabeth out of hell. Work and loyal friendship seem to be the antidotes against Dan's destructive forces. Throughout the narrative gradually the image of the soil works as the counter metaphor of the mirror:

[. . .] a great wonder about the soil and the food it produced had been aroused. The slowly drifting closeness to the soil was increased by living in a mud hut. It was like living with the trees and insects right indoors, because there was no sharp distinction between the circling mud walls of a hut and the earth outside. And the roof always smelt of mouldy grass, and all kinds of insects made their homes in the grass roof and calmly deposited their droppings on the bed, chair, table and floor. So she spent most of the holidays of the rainy season taking long walks across Motabeng village with the small boy, absorbed by the sky which had turned into a huge back-drop for the swaying, swirling movements of the desert rain. [. . .]. It seemed to heighten and deepen the rambling labyrinth of her inner life, which, like the sky of Motabeng in the summer time, swayed and swirled with subterranean upheavals. In moments of vast, expansive peace like that evening, she liked to imagine that she was gathering all the threads of life together and holding them in her hands. (Head 1974: 60-61)

After resigning as a teacher, Elizabeth decides to participate in a gardening project. Due to her physical and mental exhaustion it is only with huge breaks and interruptions that she can work in the small garden she has started outside her cottage. The turning point in her life arrives accidentally a few days before Christmas, on a day when she is lying in pain, exhausted. She hears someone knocking at her door: it is Kenosi, a young woman of the village who has decided to leave the wool-work project and to join her in her gardening work. The narrator tells us: "As far as Elizabeth was concerned she was to look back on this strange week and the Kenosi woman's sudden appearance as one of the miracles or accidents that saved her life" (Head 1974: 89). In another enigmatic scene we are told that Elizabeth has been too shaky and weak to join in the garden but after Kenosi has kept her company, Elizabeth feels slowly relieved: "The distraction had brought her back to life; Elizabeth laughed and put on a kettle for tea, washed and dressed" (Head 1974: 88). Kenosi is thus literally pulling Elizabeth towards life, towards the soil. The expression, "one of the miracles or accidents that saved her life" is to be taken literally. Very influential is also Kenosi's body

language, something Elizabeth contemplates very thirstily. With her calmness, her slow movements (Elizabeth always compares her to a cat), Kenosi becomes a silent balm for Elizabeth's spirit: "Her movements were extraordinarily quiet, soft, intensely controlled. Out of the corner of one eye Elizabeth watched, utterly fascinated, as she ate her food. She broke it up into small pieces and put it daintily into her mouth with the fork. Then she made distinct, sucking noises as she chewed, the way cats do. She kept herself severely wrapped up in herself, her eyes bent down towards her plate" (Head 1964: 89).

It is also Kenosi that will bring Tom, an American peace-corps volunteer, into Elizabeth's life, a positive integrative figure who will regularly help them in setting up the garden. The garden in the novel is more than mere setting, it becomes a symbol of a slow return to earth and to life. As Tom starts putting fences and poles around the garden, an echo is created with Elizabeth's 'inner deranged garden.' The scene where Kenosi runs to Elizabeth's house and tells her that water has come into the garden and washed away a bed of tomatoes is moving: it strongly reminds one of Dan's effect on Elizabeth's life, the image of being overwhelmed, flooded over, is here captured with the metaphor of the water. It also suggests complexity and implicitly depicts life as a continual work and effort, a positioning and re-positioning, a shaping and re-shaping from which there is no escape. In other words, the ordinary outside is also not safe, it is full of risks and contingencies. The method of transplantation that Elizabeth learns throughout the narrative is symbolic of man's necessity to excogitate always new expedients to keep his/her garden going, to preserve 'the seeds of life' alive: "She next brought a box filled with earth to the centre and, like a magician, picked up a huge cabbage seedling growing in an plastic bag filled with soil. She said: 'We grow all our tomato and cabbage seedlings in plastic bags. Is the easiest method of transplanting. Our seedlings do not wilt or die because they are so strong'" (Head 1974: 151).

## 7. A Gesture of Belonging

Elizabeth can hardly combat Dan's ghostly power alone. To be defeated, the extraordinary requires serious help, loyalty and constancy from Elizabeth's friends, a plan on a long-time scale. The singular incident of friendliness is not enough to break Elizabeth destructive and self-destructive force.

Tom's significance in rescuing Elizabeth's life is described as follows: "Her soul-death was really over in that instant, though she did not realise it. He seemed to have, in an intangible way, seen her sitting inside that coffin, reached down

and pulled her out. The rest she did herself. She was poised from that moment to make the great leap out of hell" (Head 1974: 188).

To be traumatised, to regularly fall back into death is like being buried alive. The ordinary, which consists of meaningful work, friends and loyalty, in its small gestures can literally pull someone out of the coffin, out of the vicious circle of the past and slowly prepare the path for a new temporality projected into the future.

The famous ending of the book in which Elizabeth gently puts one soft hand over her land, "as a gesture of belonging" (Head 1974: 206), symbolises the interruption of "the incessant operation of the negative" (Mbembe 2002: 259). As Annie Gagliano poignantly stresses: "The word 'belonging' is crucial. It indicates an achieved dedication that avoids both the arrogance of possessiveness and the humiliation of homelessness. It also points the way out of the memory trap in which victims are caught, for to belong is to be future-directed, like the enduring 'land' itself, the soil on which Elizabeth lives among plants, creatures and other 'ordinary' people" (Gagliano 2008: 187-188).

## 8. Conclusion

*A Question of Power* is a novel that lends itself particularly to a psychoanalytical interpretation. Numerous are the diagnoses that have been attached to Elizabeth (and indirectly to Bessie Head): schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder. Flora Veit-Wild writes, for instance, that the novel is "a prime example of madness being written into text, a real 'borderline' novel in which the borders between body and mind, between sanity and insanity, between reality and unreality, are all blurred" (Veit-Wild 2006: 131). All these readings centre on the question of madness, the divided self, or the concept of the "alien inside"<sup>6</sup> and often their evidence is based on the interpretation of the symptoms they can trace throughout the narrative.

The theme of violence and its relationship to literature is often reduced to the dilemma of narrativity and representability with thinkers highlighting the limits of language and the ethical concern of appropriating somebody else's pain and suffering. *A Question of Power*, however, shows how trauma becomes a whole world, a life language. The re-introduction in South African culture and literature of the extraordinary might enable critics to open up the discussion on violence on various fronts moving beyond Western dichotomies of thought that hardly reflect on the effects of violence on the life of individuals. Through the door of the extraordinary we are permitted to explore trauma, not from the outside, which

<sup>6</sup> See Gohrbandt (2007).

inevitably ends up in a theorisation and medicalisation of symptoms, but from within, from consciousness, from within the body.

In *A Question of Power* the narrative tension is based on the characters' different perception of time, on the clash between different worlds. The metaphor of the mirror and Mbembe's theorisation of the ghostly paradigm allow us to speak of sensorially invisible phenomena, to move beyond appearances and to explore the spatial-temporal crisis that is at the heart of the experience of trauma. The metaphor of the mirror captures life at the contiguity with death, enabling us to speak of death in life and of life in death.

In the specific case of South Africa, a country that for decades has been striving to redefine itself and to draw a new past, thus, a new future, the hypothesis of becoming aware of co-existent lateral worlds and of subjectivities deeply rooted in time, could open new reconceptualisations of healing. The immense possibility of change for the country lies not only in creating a platform for telling one's own stories, but it is also in the complex exchange, in the precarious synergies, between the ordinary and the extraordinary. This essay does not mean to imply that South Africa is divided into the world of integrity/the ordinary and the country of the ghost/the extraordinary. On the contrary, these worlds co-exist dialectically and the potential lies in the possibility that every encounter secretly carries with itself. Dan and Sello in *A Question of Power* are not mere ghosts, they are real persons living in the little village of Serowe, so that each citizen is potentially a ghost or potentially a human being. Thus it may happen that with a small gesture, a greeting, a glance, a touch, one might interrupt the vicious circle of the echo between ghosts and remind one's fellow brother or sister of his/her own life exactly as the absence of such a gesture, might create a correspondence with the ghostly terror of our neighbour. Among precarious balances, elusive constellations, on a long-time scale, a tiny detail, the most ordinary manifestation of the ordinary could bear the potentiality of change, and the resistance of power.

## Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Mythologies*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Caruth, Cathy, ed. 1995. *Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Memory, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP.
- Gagiano, Annie. 2000. *Achebe, Head, Marechera: On Power and Change in Africa*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. "Memory, Power and Bessie Head: *A Question of Power*." *Dealing with Evils: Essays on Writing from Africa*. Studies in English Literature 11. Ed. Koray Melikoglu. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag. 174-190.

- Freud, Sigmund. 1953-1974. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. XXIV Vols. London: Hogarth.
- Gohrbandt, Detlev. 2007. "Embracing the Alien Inside: Bessie Head and the Divided Self." *Kunapipi* 29.1. 108-120.
- Head, Bessie. 1974. *A Question of Power*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.
- Leys, Ruth. 2000. *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley, University of California Press (USUNAC).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. "African Modes of Self-Writing." *Public Culture* 14.1. 239-273.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. "Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola." *Research in African Literatures* 34.4. 1-26.
- Ndebele, Njabulo. 1991. "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa." *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. Johannesburg: COSAW. 37-57.
- Varadharajan, Asha. 2008. "Afterword: The Phenomenology of Violence and the Politics of Becoming." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28.1. 124-141.
- Veit-Wild, Flora. 2006. *Writing Madness: Borderlines of the Body in the African Literature*. Oxford: James Currey.