

# **A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings Study Guide**

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

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# Plot Summary

*A Woman Alone* is a series of autobiographical writings by Bessie Amelia Head (1937-1986), who is widely considered to be the finest Botswanan writer of the twentieth century. Born the child of a wealthy South African white woman and a black servant who tended to the woman's family's race horses, Head's birth is apparently considered a scandal. In 1937 in Pietermaritzburg, Natal, South Africa, deep racism is a fact of life and so Head's existence has to be hidden. Head knows little about her family save that she is told as a little girl that her mother is mentally ill and has had a mental break down and that her mother shares her name.

At age twelve, Head ends up at an Anglican boarding school for black girls which changes her life. While not caring for the religion or discipline, she loves the world of books and spends much of her time there. When Bessie is fourteen she is cruelly told that she is the product of an interracial marriage and that her mother is insane, a terrible burden at the time which leads her to become deeply sensitive to issues of race and discrimination.

Bessie becomes a teacher and aware of the political and racial problems in South Africa; eventually feeling she is on the verge of a mental breakdown. In 1958 she becomes a journalist, becoming even more aware of the evils of South African apartheid. While she is only tangentially involved in politics, Head is never very successful and after marriage and a child she decides that she wants to leave South Africa. The only way that the government will let her leave, however, is if she accepts an exit permit, barring her from coming back. Thus, Head comes to live in Serowe, Botswana for the rest of her life. She will live there for almost twenty years before she gains citizenship. While she describes her life as peaceful, she has a number of mental troubles that she deals with through her work.

*A Woman Alone* tells Head's story above through a number of short articles and essays that the reader can use to piece together a single narrative. One also gets a feel for Head's philosophical sensibilities. Growing up without a family, interracial and eventually without a country, Head has a Universalist perspective, trying to rise above divisions between human beings. She resists being called an "African," "black," "feminist" or "revolutionary" writer. While she has a combative, rude, and even "violent" personality, Botswana brings Head a deep sense of peace. She loves the "ancient order" of Botswana, uninterrupted by imperialism. She focuses on racial issues and South African politics, along with the psychological trauma of divisions among human beings. She is also a deeply spiritual person; while admiring some aspects of Christianity; however, she is more attracted to Hinduism and indigenous African religions.



# Chapter 1, Beginnings, South Africa, 1937-1964

## Chapter 1, Beginnings, South Africa, 1937-1964 Summary and Analysis

A Woman Alone is divided into chapters according to three time periods in Bessie Head's life. However, each chapter contains a number of short writings of different genres. They are grouped together by period, not by subject matter or genre type. The first chapter is relatively short, so all the pieces are summarized under the Chapter 1 heading.

In "Notes from a quiet backwater I", Head notes that she grows up knowing none of her relatives, knowing only herself. She is born in a mental hospital in 1937 merely because her father is black and her mother is white. About her father, she knows only that he worked in the family stables and cared for racehorses. At birth, Head is given to a black foster mother that she accepts as her mother but at thirteen the woman becomes impoverished and so her social worker transfers her to a missionary orphanage in Durban. When school holidays come, the principal, a British missionary, forbids Head from returning to the woman she knows as her mother. Head is devastated.

The principal then takes her to the Durban Magistrate's Court; the magistrate tells her that her mother is white. On the way back, the missionary woman tells her that her mother is insane and that Head needs to be careful or she will become insane as well. Head comes to hate missionaries and the Christianity they represent. She never goes to church again.

Head learns from her file that her mother wants her to receive an education. She was married but the marriage fell apart. While recovering from the loss at her family home, she starts a relationship with a black man, but the family is in the upper class of South African society so Head's existence has to be hidden. Head's mother is placed in a mental hospital and never leaves until her death in 1943. Head explains that her life is otherwise unremarkable. The piece is written in 1982.

In "Let me tell a story now ..." Head admits reacting with frustration when people ask her what she does for a living. She does not feel that she can break her whole personality down into digestible bits, as the question in effect demands. She tells people that she is a writer though her two manuscripts are lost and unpublished. People do not take her seriously even though she is telling the truth.

The fact is that Head has story ideas; she really wants to bring people alive and describes one such idea in broad outline. However, when she wants to write she starts to panic and feels dead inside. She is not clear why, but she has to tell a story eventually for her own sake. This piece is written in 1962.



In "An unspeakable crime" Head notes with horror that blacks are handing over their education to whites in the government. They are not forced. Head wonders whether all blacks deliberately support the status quo in South African. It is not at all clear why; perhaps it is just because they think nothing really matters as they are poor, hopeless, illiterate, drunk and miserable. Their children need the help a real education can give them; the government will simply teach them to live with their oppression. This piece is written in 1963.

In "A gentle people", Head writes of the "warm, uncommitted" black people of Cape Town. Head moves to Cape Town in 1958 and has always felt drawn to it. The whites in Cape are arrogant, and claim for themselves the peaceful, gentle spirit of the town which in reality comes from blacks; the whites have used violence whenever it suits them. The whites are also not the preservers of African culture, as culture is not limited to whites, Westerners or Christianity. Culture is the personality of a people.

For whatever reason, the blacks of Cape Town have not made use of their special travelling privileges in town (vis-à-vis the other minorities). The blacks of Cape Town, while peaceful, seem to accept their fate and believe that they are doomed. Yet they know their oppressors. He accepts hell to have peace and acts out his rage in drink and violence.

The piece, written in 1963, notes that the racists in the US South are making their last stand and that she thinks one day the Afrikaner racists will do the same. In that time, each man will have to find out where his real loyalty lies. Head decries the resistance leaders for acting out of their own self-interest. She then encourages her readers to not accept injustice but to fight against the status quo.

In "Letter from South Africa", Head writes that many South African refugees like her friend, D.B., did not want to leave. Those who remain, like Head, are lonely. South Africa is the one country where you really need friends because of the constant loneliness and horror. Friends help you laugh your way through. Most of one's friends in South Africa are met through political activism, which Head partially regrets.

In "Gladys Mgudlandlu: the exuberant innocent" Head introduces an artist, Gladys Mgudlandlu. Her last exhibition in Cape Town is a great success. Her success is due to her new ideas and inspiration despite very poor technique and incomplete paintings. Her art is popular, however, is because she is an escapist telling people to leave everything to God. It is easy for an oppressed people to identify with her message.

In "Snowball: a story" it is autumn in Cape Town. The sunset reminds Head of "Snowball", a Cape Town man Head knows. The man, despite his nickname, is perfectly black except for his perfect white teeth. Head had lived with him and her husband in a crowded home. He is kind and constantly studies the Bible, though it makes no difference. He thinks that science and spiritualism can somehow live together; Head thinks this is ridiculous. Nonetheless, he is a kind man and the landlady massively mistreats him despite Head's efforts to stop her. One day Snowball's dinghy capsizes and Head has no idea what happens to him. The piece is written in 1964.



In "The isolation of 'Boeta L.'", Head finds herself in the community of Atteridgeville. There is a sad trend of girls having babies out of wedlock. The fathers are usually working in Silverton at the few places of employment thirty-five miles away. They have to wake up at five in the morning just to catch the train. In Atteridgeville there is no opportunity for business because the Municipality owns everything. The girls accept their babies and unemployed men become violent and frustrated. People accept frequent murders. The people there are desperate not to resist oppression. Yet there is once an individualist in Atteridgeville named "Boeta L." Sadly, he converts to religion because no one will accept his cause. This was also written in 1964.



## Chapter 2, In Exile, Botswana, 1964-1979, Preface, Sketches

### Chapter 2, In Exile, Botswana, 1964-1979, Preface, Sketches Summary and Analysis

In the Preface to "Witchcraft", Head notes that she enjoys repetition and simplicity in life. South Africa denies her this. She and those of her generation are forced out of South Africa because they refuse to call the white man master. Head moves in 1964 to Botswana, though after independence in 1966 the government becomes hostile to South African refugees. Head has to report regularly to the police starting in 1966. Botswana is a vast, semi-desert. It has few white people. Despite its poverty, Head creates her ideal life with simplicity and repetition. The piece is written in 1975.

"Sketches" is a series of sketch pieces, starting with "For Serowe: a village in Africa." Head finds Serowe beautiful, particularly in the summer. It is a little village where Head has spent more of her life; she has developed a sense of wovenness. There is not much history to the town, just African people and mud huts. She notes that in 1965 she and the other refugees are "startled alive" by the liberation of Africa. South Africa will take a serious effort to free.

In "The Woman from America" (1966), Head describes an American woman who marries a man from Serowe. She moves to be with him and to express her love for Botswana and Africa. Some in Serowe are fascinated by her yet others fear her. The biggest threat to the people of Serowe is that the woman's husband loves her and is loyal to her. This is rare in Serowe and challenges other men to do the same and leads wives to yearn for it.

Head thinks that the people in the Southern part of Africa are strange and suppressed. They rarely engage in innovation. Those in North Africa must do things first and let them filter down. Her people are also mean and selfish. However, the American woman is different; she is resolved and unshakeable. She is even from California, a place whose people Head finds particularly creative and beautiful. Head herself needs to befriend this woman whom she so admires. Head is successful and now the woman is a good friend of hers and sends her "happy little notes." They also share readings.

Everyone in the village admires the woman. She comes from a world of great wealth to a village mud hut. Why? Blacks in America care about Africa, so the woman comes to express love and concern. Head envies the woman's ability to take what she wants from Africa and America and leave the rest.

In "Chibuku beer and independence" (1966), Head notes rumors that Rhodesia is sending free Chibuku beer down for Independence celebrations. The Independence



celebration is muted but it is still profound and significant. Some students and Head then start a mild political discussion.

"Village people" begins noting that poverty in Africa is like a second skin and is worn with unconscious dignity. The African people will not face the pain of fighting against what they feel they cannot change. They are not outgoing and push aside intrusions. They live and survive making few demands, yet their peace is deceptive and is easily torn apart. They want to develop slowly (1967).

"The old woman" refers to a woman of great frailty and loose flesh. Nonetheless she seems strong. The woman is starving and feels like a child, crying openly when she is hungry. Head helps feed her and a young woman, a relative of the old woman, thanks her bashfully by offering her a pail of water, all they have. Head notes that gods walk around Africa barefoot with nothing (1967).





## Chapter 2, In Exile, Botswana, 1964-1979, Essays

### Chapter 2, In Exile, Botswana, 1964-1979, Essays Summary and Analysis

The second part of Chapter 2 contains several essays. "God and the underdog" (1968) concerns the rise of Africa. The essay begins discussing a joke about two Ku Klux Klan members dying and reaching heaven to find that God is a black woman. Head expands the joke to imagine that the Klansmen are full of terror realizing that they not only did not understand the King of the Jews but that they despised him in their hearts. She does not judge the real Klansmen for making God a white man with blue eyes. They do that because the white peoples of the world are the most alienated from God.

This puzzles Head until she meets a British volunteer, a Cambridge graduate, who is profoundly struck by the simple piety of an old Botswana man. Head's natural hatred of the white man ebbs; she becomes excited to see good in the volunteer. Nonetheless, Africa will only rise to become a great civilization with African brains and Head's "Nigra" Goddess, the only God she can turn to. For Head, God is embodied in the African-American woman who lives in her village, who comes to Africa only out of compassion and concern.

The friendship is painful as Head is going through mental troubles when they meet. She has just escaped the Afrikaner Boer and needs to clear her heart. The woman tells her that her desire to eat good food and ignore the poor by being left in peace means that she will not feed the poor.

The two women differ in ethics. The woman is an upper-class American who never swears or drinks. However, Head not only swears and drinks, she has no problem killing someone stone dead on the spot. That is how she grew up. She has the heart of someone opposed and enraged. She is an underdog locked up. Revolutionary movements are composed of people with her rage. Liberatory movements are full of people that can be revolting due to the conditions they live under. While they are interested in brotherly love, they have a great capacity to destroy. The philosophies of non-violence recognize this propensity to destruction within them.

The suffering of the Afro-American people has given them a piece of the Nigra Goddess, of a fire from heaven. Head wants them to bring that fire to Africa as too many people have it. They need largeness of heart for a civilization. The Goddess minded begging for civil rights. One day the South African people will stop being satisfied with being oppressed.

The next piece "African religions" begins with Head admitting that most forms of organized religion repel her. Africans are determined to lack value because they do not



have ornate houses of worship. Today they are expected to borrow development and culture from Russia or the United States. For the African, the whole world is his religion and he is a religious man. Being at one with all things is the root of traditional African life. An original God manages affairs behind the scenes. Wherever the African is his religion is as well.

Any African society contains a large number of beliefs and practices not formulated into dogmas which others must accept. People simply absorb the religious ideas of various families and communities. Communal goodness is at the root and foundation of African religion. This is not an Asian religious ideal rooted in the effort of individual souls or of superhuman goals. African religion focuses not on great figures but on mutual co-operation. This is "transfused" religion, a social unity without theological depth. It is not institutional but religion "behind the scenes." Head likes this idea; she wants to let God be.

The third essay "Despite broken bondage, Botswana women are still unloved" focuses on the trials of women in Botswana. Oppressive traditions obliterate them as thinking, feeling human beings and leads to their exploitation. The mistreatment is hundreds of years old. There are fewer men than women and men mostly hunt. Polygamy is once common. The emancipation of the women of Botswana is never intellectual but is rooted in the historical role of Christianity. The British bring it on their way to find gold in Rhodesia. They also bring the iron hand-plough which makes it easier for women as food producers. Trade brings in "European clothes."

Christianity says it is a doctrine beyond traditions and mores, a moral choice available to men and women. All major social reforms happen due to this idea. A leader in Botswana in the late 19th century is persecuted by his father for converting to Christianity and he earns credibility. After surviving the persecution he leads the people to abandon the bogadi or "bride price" which makes women slaves of men because they are commodities. Women cannot lodge complaints against their husbands. Christianity also eliminates polygamy and after independence women get the right to vote and do not need to fight for it. Yet the family has broken down; illegitimate births have exploded.

Botswana men, she notes, are not nice. They sleep with you for two weeks and then pass you on to friends and then they do the same. Two thirds of the nation are women and the men do not care about their children.

The final essay "Makeba music" discusses two musicians, Pasternak and Makeba, who have very distinct styles but both speak to Head. The theme of freedom in Doctor Zhivago comes to Head through the voice of Makeba, a rebel musician in South Africa who expresses an intense passion for liberation. She shows that evil is simply rubbish and that the children of South African can have a bright future. When Head listens to Makeba, she hears the liberator of all black people, just as Pasternak is the liberator of Russia.



## Chapter 2, In Exile, Botswana, 1964-1979, Notes on Novels

### Chapter 2, In Exile, Botswana, 1964-1979, Notes on Novels Summary and Analysis

The final third of Chapter 2 is a series of notes that Head takes on novels. The first essay, "Some notes on novel writing" begins by noting that Head spends twenty-seven years of her life in South Africa but has trouble writing about it. One way of remedying the problem is writing in an area where people are tied by an ancient order, like Botswana. Most of Head's novels to the present day are didactic works with pre-planned conclusions and principles, but she cannot express her own experience in this way.

The education of black people in South Africa must always be political. They learn every day the fact of oppression and exploitation. Head summarizes her life experience as the knowledge of evil, its sources and true face. In South Africa, black people are not allowed to dream and Head knows what that is like. In her first novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* is an amateur effort but she still values it as her first ability to dream. She is focused on the first election for independence.

The novel form for Head is a form that can be stuffed with any form of speculation—philosophical, social or romantic. Head's novels aim to blaze a trail for Africa into the future.

The next essay is "Social and political pressures that shape writing in South Africa." South African history is associated with the terrors of police states, violent mass protests and degrading political systems. That it is once a wonder of the world is unreal, but before colonial invasion it is one. Head was born into this brutal world and it is decaying.

Botswana is very close to South Africa and allows Head to keep her eyes on it. It is also the most unique country in Africa because it is never dominated by foreign powers. This is why Head writes about it—it is easier than writing about South Africa. Head writes about life as a refugee; her first novel grows out of that experience. It is Head's only true South African work. Head's second novel, *Maru*, she writes about the conquered Bushmen in Botswana long ago. They are the victims of racial hatred. Studying them gives Head a method of understanding racialism in a way that she can be more objective about.

Head's third novel, *A Question of Power*, helps her to understand patterns of evil. Its private dialogue allows Head to explore her philosophy of evil, arguing that people and nations do not realize when they have become evil. Head comes to understand the Ancient Southern African Historical Dialogue through living in Botswana in a slow, free

world. Everything is touched by traditional culture. It survives by sheer luck and also benefits from the catastrophe South Africa suffers as it draws British focus.

In "A note on Rain Clouds" Head reports that in 1967 and 1968 she is part of the refugee community in Northern Botswana. Liberation and power looms on the horizon and social pressure points in that direction. When Rains Clouds Gather addresses the idealism that is tied to such liberation movements. No one plans for the idealism and so it leads to a wild rush for power and a war of extermination. African liberation movements tend to work in this way; Head's book is trying to point the way beyond this cycle.



## Chapter 3, Retrospect, Southern Africa and Beyond, 1979-1986

### Chapter 3, Retrospect, Southern Africa and Beyond, 1979-1986 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3 follows after Head acquires her citizenship in Botswana. In "Notes from a quiet backwater II" Head expresses a need for a quiet, small life. She wants her life to consist in small, individual life drama. Her earlier work is about her personal responses to challenges. Her work is influenced by the Hindu belief in rebirth and reincarnation and she begins to see her relationship to Africa on these grounds. The African experience of oppression helps her to realize that the oppressed can easily become the oppressor. Thus Head's earlier work focuses on the anxiety of making the right personal choices.

As Head's experience of oppression becomes more distant, she starts to focus on more social and outward-looking topics. South African history fascinates her; it is in some ways a microcosm of humanity's history. In her "pocket of peace" in Botswana, Head is able to get a better picture of African history.

In "Foreword to Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*", Head begins by noting that no legislation has changed the lives of black people in South Africa as much as the Natives' Land Act of 1913 because it deprives a people, sending land into the arms of the ruling whites. The Act produces the African National Congress which gives voice to a new class of black elites.

Sol Plaatje writes of this era, of wars for land as whites subdue blacks, when a quarter million whites rule five million blacks. Head then details a bit more of the history. Plaatje's book, *Native Life*, focuses on a broad historical narrative back five hundred years in South Africa's past. He wants to present black people as deserving justice; he is also passionately pro-British in his arguments. A constant theme of the book is that blacks are not represented in parliament and so parliament treats them terribly. The importance of *Native Life* is that it gives the South African blacks a sense of their past.

In "The old iron cooking pot of Europe" Head notes that rural Botswana is introduced to trade where they once have to be self-sufficient. Europe has moved beyond these days, beyond the days of cooking in an iron pot. Head notes that trade leads blacks in South Africa to accept the Trek Boers, the people from Holland who leave when the slave trade is ended. The items of trade, like sugar and tea, amaze the South African blacks but trade ultimately buys their total oppression.

"A search for historical continuity and roots" Head recalls the end of her South African citizenship. She has to leave South Africa with an exit permit as a result of small involvement in politics. Botswana, as Head says before, introduces an unknown form of



life to her, an slow, ancient form unlike the horrible, violent form of life she knows before. To work out her own ideas, Head needs this world. Botswana changes her work. Her early work is focused on the horrors of South Africa to her psyche but she comes to a broader perspective later. She finds that the tension and balance in rural Botswana a "fine order" because she can grasp the ancient way of Africa.

The next essay is "Foreword to Ellen Kuzwayo's Call Me Woman." When the English government is replaced by the Boer in South Africa in 1948, the South Africans say they prefer it since the Boer hate openly rather than in secret. However, things become horrible very quickly. Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography reveals these people as possessing a delicate nervous balance and it documents the human suffering caused by Boer rule.

Kuzwayo's lifespan covers two eras, first in her youth where she can feel South Africa as a cultural union of traditional morals and values. The second era begins with the Boer government, when she is trapped in the slums of Johannesburg townships. The morals and values are lost. The book discusses the massacre in Soweto and how unbearable oppression is.

Kuzwayo is detained for five months in 1976 and the book describes the detention, which is horrible. However the inmates of the detention center provide great love for one another which is what the book is about.

"Some happy memories of Iowa" begins with Head taking a plane from New York towards Cedar Rapids; Head is having her first experience of the American mid-country. She likes Iowa City and sees similarities with Serowe, small and rural. Head is in Iowa City to research for a historical novel on South Africa. The library quickly becomes her paradise and she enjoys meeting farm families. While they are conservative, Head does not mind.

In "Writing out of Southern Africa" Head explains that her writing career begins with a love of reading and books. Few writers plan careers in writing which can often be miserable. Head works with the young in writing workshops in Botswana about reading; they are frustrated that writing is hard work. Sometimes the children say they have nothing unique to write about Botswana as its history is so mundane, but Head tells them otherwise.

In "The world of the intellect" Head notes that she grows up reading which adds an international outlook to her mental life in addition to her national outlook. She notes that Head's gender is never an obstacle for her. She does not need to be a feminist since the world of the intellect is sexless.

In "A bit of Christianity" Head notes that she is steeped in it when she is young and while she abandons it, she is glad she has an early background in it due to Christ's moral lessons. She likes that Christ pushes back against racism and tribalism with the parable of the Good Samaritan as nationalist, racist and collectivist sentiment comes naturally to humanity. In "A bit of Pan-Africanism" Head continues that the social order in



South African involves attributing humanity only to one's tribe. Older generations use Christianity to keep themselves from returning to that mindset. The ANC once has the humble deference to Christian ideals but no long, as it has turned to harsh violence, which Head does not mind.

In "The inspiration of Bertolt Brecht" Head points out that Bertolt Brecht's book, *A Choice of Evils*, has a major impact on her. The book describes Brecht's attempt to create a new social order in Germany in the inter-war period. His desire for rebirth is not ideological but playful.

In "Experiments with the new" Head notes that she is educated in South Africa but writes her books in Botswana. She notes that the Botswana people experiment with lots of new things. In "A reverence for people" Head comes to believe in a discipline of having a loving attitude and reverence for people. This sense is all the God she can accept. When people treat one another as holy, human suffering will end. Head sees the peoples of the world drawing together on this basis. Head looks forward to unity under world government as a new race of people with only one national identity. This theme preoccupies her as a writer.

In "Epilogue: An African Story" Head describes a winter morning just before dawn that makes her think about the people of the free land of Botswana. She thinks they conceive of themselves as dreamers and storytellers, and that they always welcome the same. Yet what happens to them when they are born in a dead world of cruelty? Head is surprised how tied creative writing is to nationalism, as an expression of national ideals. Head is called "the Botswana writer" when her personality is much more violent. She again expresses her rage at the white racism in South Africa and how their dehumanization of blacks lets them excuse their terrible crimes. Every oppressed person has violence within them. This is why South Africa has no great writer but "no one can create harmony out of cheap discord."

Head has no idea how the revolution will turn out in South Africa but when people insist on their rights, it is inevitable. She hopes great leaders will arise who understand racial hatred and formulate a language of human love. She hopes that one day South Africa will be the home of storytellers and dreamers who have only stories and dreams that fill hearts with wonder.



# Characters

## Bessie Amelia Head

Bessie Amelia Head is born in 1937 to an upper class white woman and the African race horse manager that works for her family. Bessie Amelia Emery, Head's mother, is mentally unstable and so Head is born at the mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg, Natal. Her mother gives her up for adoption; Head ends up thinking of Nellie Heathcote, her black adopted mother, as her mother. However, she is eventually separated from her adopted family and placed in an Anglican boarding school for black girls. While she hates the rigidity and religion of the school, she loves the library and develops a lifelong love of books and writing.

After graduating, Head teaches briefly. Due to mental instability and religious turmoil she quits to avoid a mental breakdown. She then becomes a journalist in Cape Town and later Johannesburg. By 1964, however, she decides to leave South Africa due to the political turmoil there. However, she will only be allowed to leave with an exit permit, which prevents her from coming back for good. She accepts it and makes her home in Serowe, Botswana.

In Botswana, Head begins her famous writing career, first as a South African refugee and then nearly twenty years later as a citizen of Botswana. Head describes herself as full of violence though believing that Botswana gives her peace. She has the fury of one oppressed and is known to be combative, though she is often kind.

## The People of Botswana

When Head first comes to Botswana, she is mentally unstable and full of rage at her struggle against oppression in South Africa. The people of Botswana are refreshing because they are startlingly different from the people of South Africa who are so close by. South Africa has a long history of oppression, by the Boers and by the English. However, Botswana has no such history. While Botswana was a British protectorate, they had no interest in the territory, considering it worthless save as a pathway towards Rhodesian gold. Consequently, the sense of rage and oppression in South Africa is absent in Botswana.

Head describes Botswana as a slow, ancient country largely unchanged from its ancient past. The land and the people are calmer, uninterested in change, and mostly interested in being left alone to live their lives. They also maintain the spirituality of ancient Africa. While Christianity has infiltrated Botswana somewhat, ending polygamy and making life somewhat better for women, the religion of the average Botswanan is not practiced in a church. Instead, wherever the Botswanan goes his religion follows. There is a sense of the mystical present in every part of nature. God is not especially present in any one place; rather He is everywhere, working behind the scenes in a fairly unobtrusive way.





According to Head, Botswana gives her the ability to get a clear mind about her writing and about all the problems in South Africa. It helps her to focus.

## **The South African Blacks**

Head lives in South Africa until she is twenty-seven and identifies with South African blacks' struggle against apartheid.

## **The Afrikaners**

The oppressor class of whites descended from Dutch settlers who separate from their home country when they abolish the slave trade. The Afrikaners rule South Africa in Head's day, employing brutal means of oppression to get their way.

## **Bessie Amelia Emery**

Head's mother, whom she never knows. Her mother gives birth in a mental hospital and is apparently plagued by mental illness.

## **Head's Father**

All Head knows about her father is that he manages race horses for the Emery family.

## **Nellie Heathcote**

The black, Catholic woman who adopts Head and that Head knows as her mother.

## **Alice Birch**

A missionary who is responsible for taking Head from Nellie Heathcote and placing her in an Anglican boarding school.

## **Missionaries**

Head's experience with Christian missionaries is largely positive though she ultimately rejects the religion.

## **Head's**

Head is fascinated by an African-American woman who emigrates from the United States to Serowe as a self-expression of care for the people of the area. Head



considers her a "Nigra" Goddess, a woman from a land where her people are once oppressed who has flourished nonetheless.

## **Fellow Novelists**

Head's autobiographical writings contains a number of essays concerning other novelists or forewords written for their books.

## **Freedom Fighters**

Head admires South African freedom fighters but she knows that due to their rage (which she shares) they can be quick to oppress just as they were oppressed.



# Objects/Places

## South Africa

Head is born in South Africa and spends the first twenty-seven years of her life there.

## Botswana

After her exile in 1964, Head spends nearly all of the rest of her life in Botswana.

## Johannesburg, South Africa

Head is a journalist in Johannesburg after a brief period of work in Cape Town up until her exile.

## Cape Town, South Africa

After quitting teaching, Head becomes a journalist in Cape Town.

## Serowe, Botswana

The bustling town in Southern Botswana where Head makes her home and lives out her life.

## Apartheid

The practice of brutally discriminating against South African blacks by Afrikaner whites.

## Imperialism

Head sees the forces of imperialism as dangerous not only to physical and economic security but to the souls of the oppressed.

## Nationalism/Racism

Head opposes all divisive forms of tribalism, including nationalism and racism.



## **African Indigenous Religions**

Head finds much to admire in African Indigenous religions, particularly for their almost pantheistic conception of God.

## **Christianity**

While Head finds much to criticize in Christianity, she is amazed by Christ's teaching of the universal value and holiness of one's fellow human beings.

## **Hinduism**

Head is briefly a practicing Hindu and still believes in reincarnation.

## **Capitalism and Communism**

Head does not much care for capitalism and communism, seeing them associated with control by the United States or the Soviet Union.

## **Novels**

Head writes a number of novels that she discusses in the book; she also analyzes the novels of several other writers.

## **Mental Instability**

Head struggles with a mental disorder and depression her entire life.

## **Struggles for Justice**

Head believes it is important to struggle for justice, though she recognizes the danger inherent in those who act from rage and violence and believes that peace will only come to South Africa if it is led out of oppression by a people who believe in healing and reconciliation.

# Themes

## The Psychology of the Oppressed

While Head finds the people of Botswana fascinating and peaceful and wishes to identify with them, she cannot. Instead, she describes herself as violent and full of rage. Others confirm her sense of herself, sometimes describing her as angry and combative, at least when she is depressed. Head recognizes that her anger is due to her depression but she believes the real life cause of her depression and anger is, in part, the oppression she endures in South Africa.

Remember that Head is given up for adoption. Her parents are unknown to her and she is taken away from the only woman she knows as her mother. She grows up not only enduring the rejection of family but of the South African elites. In her short adult life in South Africa, Head becomes increasingly aware of the horrors of the apartheid regime and begins to resent it more bitterly over time. Finally when the only way the regime will let her leave the country is for her to accept permanent exile, her sense of rejection is complete. When she reaches Botswana, she is full of anger and violence.

Head sees her experience with oppression as analogous to the experience South African blacks endure. She points out in many pieces that this anger changes her and shapes her personality along with the South African blacks. She says that she has no inherent problem with violence and understands why the liberation movement in South Africa often becomes violent. She points out that the oppressed can easily become the oppressing and even murderous because of their rage. She hopes for South Africa's sake that leaders will arise who can bring the people past their anger.

## The Contrast between South Africa and Botswana

To Head, the people of South Africa and Botswana, despite living right next to one another, are psychologically worlds apart. The people of South Africa are oppressed by imperialism for centuries. The British and the Dutch rule South African society. When the Boer Dutch initially come to power, many South African blacks prefer them to the English because their racism and hatred is more open and honest. However, they soon come to regret this when the oppression they endure is taken beyond their worst nightmares. Due to this oppression, Head sees within the South African people a rage and anger that is wholly lacking in the Botswana people.

The people of Botswana, in contrast, have no real history of enduring imperialism. Botswana is a British protectorate for decades, but it is used primarily as a pathway from South Africa to Rhodesia. Thus the people of Botswana do not have the psychology of rage the blacks have in South Africa. It does not possess the major racial conflicts of the area. Head sees the people of Botswana as quiet, ancient and wanting only to be left alone. South African oppression modernizes the psychology of South



African blacks. They see the extravagance of the white elites and their oppression exposes them to modern political ideas.

Further, they have been introduced to Christianity in a fashion that the Botswana people have not. The Botswana people maintain, in a mostly unbroken chain, a connection to an ancient African past. This calmer culture allows Head to let go of her anger and to take a more objective perspective on South Africa.

## Religion

Head's religious history is complex and significant. Head's first adopted family, the Heathcotes, is devoutly Catholic. Thus, in her childhood she is raised in a black Catholic church. However, Alice, a missionary, has her removed for a number of reasons and placed in an Anglican all girls boarding school for blacks. She hates the school and comes to hate the religion associated with it for controlling her. Yet during this time she is exposed to the world of books and eventually explores other religious ideas. For a time, Head becomes a practicing Hindu.

In Head's later life she comes to admire African indigenous religion. Unlike more developed religions, it does not place God or any deities inside of a temple or church. Instead, God is simply part of nature, following the African where he goes. Further, God does not much interfere with the lives of His people, instead primarily operating in the background. This sense of relaxed governance is pleasing to Head.

That said, Head still affirms to major ideas of the two religions she has been a part of. First, she is quite attracted to the Hindu idea of reincarnation and to the Christian idea of the equal moral worth of all people in the eyes of God. These two elements push Head into embracing moral universalism, the doctrine that all divisive ideologies, political, social, racial, economic and the like, are evil. With a world people and a world government, the world can flourish.

# Style

## Perspective

The author of *A Woman Alone* is Bessie Amelia Head and the title of the book helps to explain her perspective. Head is "alone" because she grows up without a family. The only family she knows she is taken away from at an early age. Since she is interracial she does not have a clear home anywhere in South Africa and she has to endure the severe oppression of the apartheid regime. Further, when she decides to leave, the only way that the South African government will allow her to leave is for her to accept exile. Everything in her early life produces a profound sense of being both oppressed and harassed on the one hand and ignored and rejected on the other.

Head takes her sense of rage to Botswana where the ancient, relaxed culture helps to calm her. However, she always acknowledges that the oppression she endures gives her a perspective on violence that is not negative. Obviously her perspective is imbued with a hatred of racism and a hatred for the Afrikaner oppressors. She also has come to hate imperialism. Head is also a sufferer of mental illness which often causes her to feel emotional extremes about her experience.

Head opposes both capitalism and communism, seeing them as ideologies of control associated with the United States and the Soviet Union. She opposes all ideologies that separate, like nationalism and racism. While she rejects organized religion and Christianity, she is a great admirer of the teachings of Jesus on the matter of human equality, that all humans are equal in God's eyes and she expresses a profound admiration for the people of Botswana.

## Tone

*A Woman Alone* is not an autobiography but a combination of short autobiographical documents from different periods in Head's life. Thus the tone of the pieces varies significantly. The first piece "Notes from a quiet backwater" has a matter-of-fact, open and even somewhat apologetic tone. It tells the story of Head's birth and childhood, of how she is abandoned time and time again and how it affects her. In "Snowball: a story" Head talks fondly of her memory of a man, Snowball, who is black and endures the discrimination of his white landlord. She writes with a tone of admiration and of confusion. She is impressed by his devotion to Christianity but also finds his attitude towards life to be odd.

In "The woman from America" Head's tone is full of admiration and even a degree of inferiority. Head lives in Serowe for most of her adult life, and the blacks she knows are all Africans. However, African-Americans are, to these people, very different. When an African-American woman moves to Serowe to express her connection to the people, Head is overwhelmed with admiration and even comes to love the woman. She sees



the American woman as beautiful, having large eyes and having strength of soul unmatched by the Botswana people because it has overcome oppression and regained a sense of pride. Head even describes the woman as a religious ideal, her "Nigra Goddess."

Sometimes the tone turns to one of pious inquiry, as it does in "African religions" whereas some discuss the outrage of oppression and display Head's anger, such as in "Social and political pressures that shape writing in South Africa."

## Structure

A Woman Alone is a short book containing an introduction, preface and three large chapters with an epilogue at the end. The introduction explains the editor's aims in compiling the book, why he chose the essays he chose, background on Head's life and the like and the introduction briefly tells Head's story in her own words. The main part of the book divides Head's autobiographical writings into three rough time periods of her life, from her life in South Africa, to her life without citizenship in Botswana to the final stretch of her life where she has her Botswanan citizenship.

Chapter 1, Beginnings, covers the period of Head's life from her birth in 1937 to 1964. Many of the writings are written later but written about this time period. The essays largely focus on the horrible experiences she has as a child, such as in "An unspeakable crime" and "The Isolation of Boeta L."

Chapter 2, In Exile, contains writings about Head's early experiences in Botswana from 1964 to 1979. These essays show Head calming down, coming to love Botswana and partly shedding her psychology of being oppressed. In "For Serowe: a village in Africa" she expresses admiration and love for her new home town and in "The woman from America" she tells the story of her admiration of someone who has overcome oppression. The chapter is divided into three parts, some sketches of experiences and places, some full essays and finally some notes on novels.

Chapter 3, Retrospect, contains Head's writings once she achieves citizenship. It is the calmest, most reflective, conceptual and political. It contains two forewords to books she writes for other novelists after she becomes famous. It is also informed by many of her experiences in other parts of the world, such as "Some happy memories of Iowa" and describes her reaction to herself as an "African writer" or as a "Botswana" writer.





## Quotes

"I was born on the sixty of July, 1937, in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital, in South Africa. The reason for my peculiar birthplaces was that my mother was white, and she had acquired me from a black man. She was judged insane, and committed to the mental hospital while pregnant. Her name was Bessie Emery and I consider it the only honor South African officials ever did me—naming me after this unknown, lovely, and unpredictable woman." (Chapter 1, 1)

"I have always been just me, with no frame of reference to anything beyond myself." (Chapter 1, 3)

"Whatever my manifold disorders are, I hope to get them sorted out pretty soon, because I've just got to tell a story." (Chapter 1, 8)

"In a cold and loveless country like South Africa his warmth of heart and genuine friendliness is like a great roaring fire on the white icy wastes of the Antarctic." (Chapter 1, 10-11)

"We were forced out of South Africa because, unlike our parents and our ancestors, we refused to call the white man baas ('master')." (Chapter 2, 27)

"Africa was never 'the dark continent' to African people ..." (Chapter 2, 29)

"No, tell her she helped our relative who collapsed this morning. Tell her the relatives discussed the matter. Tell her we have nothing to give in return, only that one relative said she passes by every day on her way to the water tap. Then we decided to give a pail of water. It is all we have." (Chapter 2, 42)

"Tell them, those who judge my country, Africa, by gain and greed, that the gods walk about her barefoot with no ermine and gold-studded cloaks." (Chapter 2, 42)

"Wherever the African is, there is his religion." (Chapter 2, 51)

"My writing is not on anybody's bandwagon. It is on the sidelines where I can more or less think things out with a clear head. We may be at a turning point and need new names for human dignity, new codes of honor all nations can abide by." (Chapter 2, 61)

"I need a quiet backwater and a sense of living as though I am barely alive on the earth, treading a small, careful pathway through life." (Chapter 3, 77)

"The world of the intellect is impersonal, sexless." (Chapter 3, 95)

"I am the dreamer and storyteller. I have seen life. I am drunk with the magical enchantment of human relationships. I laughed often. The big, wide free world is full of innocence ..." (Epilogue, 101)



"Possibly too, Southern Africa might one day become the home of the storyteller and dreamer, who did not hurt others but only introduced new dreams that filled the heart with wonder." (Epilogue, 103)



## Topics for Discussion

What is of psychological significance about Head's parents and the circumstances of her birth? That is, what does she take from it?

Why did Head leave South Africa? Why did she feel exiled?

Describe Head's understanding of the different psychologies of the peoples of South Africa and the peoples of Botswana.

Describe in detail what Head understands about the psychological effects of racism and oppression in South Africa.

Explain Head's religious views. What does she like about Christianity? What does she dislike? Why was she attracted to Hinduism? What does she like about indigenous Botswanan religion?

Explain Head's conception of the psychology and spirituality of the people of Botswana.

How does life in Serowe help Head understand South Africa and herself?