

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

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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