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## **A TENSIVE ANALYSIS OF TRANSNATIONAL SPACES IN BESSIE HEAD'S A QUESTION OF POWER AND WHEN RAIN CLOUDS GATHER**

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### **Résumé**

Cet article se propose d'analyser les influences ou les effets de la mobilité dans les œuvres de Bessie Head. En effet, elle s'intéresse aux tensions et aux oppositions qui concourent aux déplacements perpétuels des personnages d'un espace à un autre. Ces espaces modifient également les compétences et les performances des personnages qui subissent des transformations disjonctives et conjonctives. De même, ces espaces mettent en veilleuse la notion de fixité et de rigidité contribuant ainsi à la promotion de la globalisation et à la suppression des frontières territoriales, géographiques, culturelles et linguistiques.

**Mot clés :** Espace, fixité, globalisation, mobilité, tension, transnational.

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### **Abstract**

This article intends to analyze the influences or effects of mobility in the works of Bessie Head. Indeed, she is interested in the tensions and oppositions that contribute to the perpetual displacement of the characters from one space to another. These spaces also modify the skills and performances of characters who undergo disjunctive and conjunctive transformations. In the same way, these spaces put aside the notion of fixity and rigidity. In so doing, they contribute to the promotion of globalization and the suppression of territorial, geographical, cultural and linguistic borders.

**Keywords:** Fixity, globalization, mobility, space, tension, transnational.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

From mileage to the era of "flow" and "broadband", mobility is one of the major paradigms of our society. Indeed, it is a question of possessing information in real time without much effort. Therefore, our time gainsays the notion the fixity and the

local or national confinement of objects and people. Today, having become a principle of life, Head is interested in mobility in her literary production. She pays particular attention to the effects of this mobility, which can be social, political, economic, etc. Mobility always involves objects or people

in perpetual movement from one local space to another zone or from one national territory to another one. Thus, it is to think of the influence of the dynamic of mobility that we consider the present contribution: « A tense analysis of transnational spaces in Bessie Head *AQP* and *WRCG*. » What epistemic tensions underlie the presence of these transnational spaces in Bessie Head's works? This study will be carried out in the light of tense semiotics in order to account for the tensions, the extents and the oppositions that arise in these spaces. In a taxonomic way, it is a question of treating in turn the zero degree of mobility, the existential anguish or the rise of otherness, the painful space: the mental difficulties and mobility as a necessity for opening.

## 1- THE ZERO DEGREE OF MOBILITY

To migrate is to move from one place to another. Here the notion of mobility is associated with the notion of moving from one country or space to another one. In Head's work, the characters are initiated to mobility or migration. This initiation is rooted in the social context that pushes the character to set out for trans-space or transnational journey. In the author's work, we can note two referential spaces known as South Africa and Botswana. So, the characters who leave for Botswana should cross several places before arriving at their

destination. They are considered as saboteurs of government actions and pariahs in their countries of origin. These different positions do not allow them to travel like ordinary people. Thus, « the writing of the multiplicity of places, territories and worlds » Fankoua (2002, p. 280) is a strategy for Bessie Head that allows her characters to escape from the meshes of their detractors. Accordingly, *When Rain Clouds Gather* opens with Makhaya's first place of transit: « The little Barolong village swept right up to the border fence » (p. 1). The Barolong village is not far from the border of Botswana. This proximity between the border of Botswana and the village is a strategy for the writer to shorten the journey of her hero. He cannot take the same means of transport like other travelers, because he is perceived as a « dangerous saboteur » (*WRCG*, p. 14) who is fleeing his native country.

Makhaya evolves in remote and excluded places at specific times. He reconciles space-time in his favor. In fact, this space-time is in harmony with Makhaya's identity. Therefore, the narrator asserts: « He was waiting until dark when he would try to spring across the half-mile gap of no-man's-land to the Botswana border fence » (p. 1). The appropriate time for Makhaya to undertake his journey is at night. Makhaya's movements and activities take

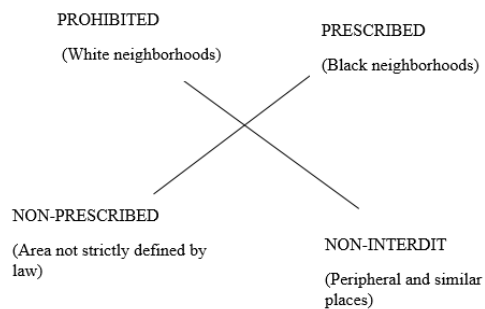
place only at night in spaces such as « Barolong Village » (p. 1) « the border fence » (p. 1) « the half-mile gap of no-man's-land » (p. 1) « He waited in the hut » (p. 5). The recurrence of time (night) and remote spaces echoes Bakhtin's (1978) definition of chronotope as follows: « We will call chronotope, which translates literally as "time space" [...]. Here, the time condenses, becomes compact, visible for the art, while the space intensifies, engulfs itself in the movement of the time, the subject, the history » (p. 237). The Time (the night) condenses and becomes compact in Makhaya insofar as his life is summed up in the night. Since his life is connected to the night, even when he manages to cross the border into Botswana, the only convenience he seeks is a shelter to spend the night. And the following extract is a good example to justify so: « I was looking for shelter for the night,' he said » (WRCG, p. 6). As a result, Makhaya transits to the home of an old Botswana woman who lives on the remote border of his family with her daughter. Makhaya seems to be fond of the dark, for at the old woman's house he sleeps in a hut set up in the dark. Let us illustrate this with the following fragment: « He struck a match as he entered the dark hut. [He lay on his back staring up at the dark, too tense to sleep » (WRCG, pp. 8-9).

What is more, another place of transit that reveals Makhaya's personality is the police station. He is taken to this station by his benefactor, the transporter who drives him from the border to the city center. Makhaya must necessarily transit through this police station because « He had entered the country illegally. He had to report to the police, register himself as a refugee, and apply for political asylum » (WRCG, pp. 13-14). Through this illustration, Makhaya's identity is finally revealed to the reader. Makhaya travels this space-time because he is wanted in the country by the authorities. Therefore, when arriving in Botswana, he loses his South African citizenship to Botswana citizenship under the name of political refugee. Makhaya moves from darkness to light. Despite his refugee status, he is received as a messiah. According to his host, the village of « Golema Mmidi consisted of individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life » (WRCG, p. 17). Refugees come to this village to reestablish their identity. And Makhaya's new identity is that of a scout who comes to sort out the village of Golema Mmidi from the darkness to the perfect light. Makhaya's host explains to him the role he will play in the development of the village in these lines: « A lot is happening in my village and a well-educated man like you can bring a little light » (WRCG, p. 16).

In addition, Elizabeth in (AQP) also experiences a wandering that ends in Botswana. In effect, the conditions of her birth force her to live a nomadic life. She is the product of an illegal union. Come to that, « She was secretly relieved to be taken away from the beer-house and sent to a mission school » (AQP, p. 15). Her identity as an orphan is transformed into that of an altar boy. This status is short-lived, as she is transited through other spaces according to the words of her foster mother:

First, they received you from the mental hospital and sent you to a nursing home. 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. My husband came home that night and asked me to take you (AQP, p. 17).

Elizabeth transits through all these places because she is not White. For this reason, South Africa becomes a nightmarish place for Elizabeth. Tired of this ordeal, she chooses Botswana as a country where she can live fully without being seen as inferior. The different spaces in Bessie Head's literary works give birth to the following oppositions: /prohibited/ vs/prescribed/.

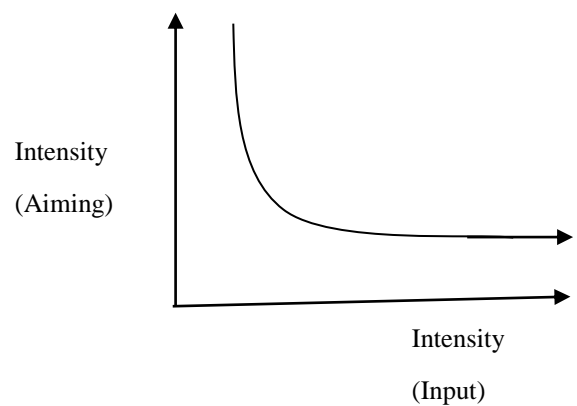


The four points of this semiotic square correspond to semantic values in Bessie Head's texts. Thus, white neighborhoods, schools or residences are forbidden to blacks « no man's land » (WRCG, p. 1). These spaces are opposed to precarious neighborhoods, the peripheral spaces in which they are forced to live. In the aforesaid, we note that white neighborhoods are central and permanent, while black neighborhoods which are prescribed, are generally peripheral, poor and precarious. Last but not least, there are also "ghettos", retreat houses, places of debauchery, and border areas where Makhaya and Elizabeth live illegally. It is in these non-prescribed areas that those who are oppressed take the freedom to express themselves, plan their future, and take the path of their migration to Botswana. Finally, there are non-prescribed areas where the oppressed are allowed, namely routes of passage and relaxation (streets, beaches, kiosks) and places of work.

Through these oppositional relationships between transit spaces in the

novelist's texts, we note that white power has divided South Africa into several distinct zones by erecting social barriers. Apartheid system pushes the oppressed towards the periphery with various forms of poverty and dehumanization. This dialectical vision of things allows the reader to note that it is from the periphery that the salvation of the populations of Golema Mmidi and Motabeng comes true. The successive displacement of the characters in the transit zones corresponds to the acquisition and actualization of a narrative skill in Head's texts. Despite the social and spatial barriers instituted by apartheid system, the characters manage to unite and develop what the segregationist law has disunited. For example, Elizabeth in her quest to find the means to realize her dream, « She reads a newspaper advertisement about teachers being needed in Botswana » (AQP, p. 19). This opportunity comes at the right time, and the job allows her to live in her dream country. In fact, Botswana is a country of enormous potential like Motabeng. The name of the village means: « the place of sand. It was a village remotely inland, perched on the edge of the Kalahari Desert. Seemingly, the only reason for people's settlement there was a good supply of underground waters » (AQP, p. 19). Such a country is bound to attract tourists and visitors. The characters in Bessie Head's texts move from areas of tension to areas of

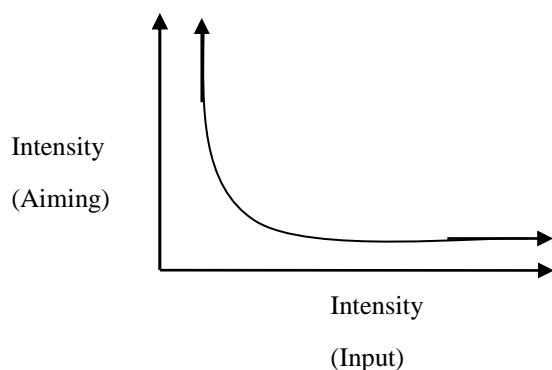
relaxation. In that case, they make « a movement directed [...] towards greater relaxation. These various movements combine lowering and increases of the intensity, with reductions and deployments in the extent » Fontanille (2003, p. 111) as the present scheme of the decadence testify:



This pattern of decadence reveals that the lowering of intensity combined with the expansion of scope provides a cognitive relaxation for the characters. In instance, they leave the zone of tension towards the so-called zone of relaxation (Botswana). In the end, we can say that the characters of Bessie Head are all ready to face time and obstacles to reach their goals. We notice that nothing can stop them from leaving South Africa for Botswana. They all succeed in reaching Botswana. However, these characters will have to deal with the existential anguish. As a result, Botswana becomes a place of otherness par excellence for the South African refugees.

## 2- EXISTENTIAL ANGUISH OR OTHERNESS IN PROGRESS

The notion of otherness always involves the relationship between the self and the other. In this regard, Moisan (2008) writes: « ...For there to be otherness, there must be two different terms: I and the other, which must interrelate, if not in everyday life, at least in symbolic exchanges, of the order of discourse » (p. 94). Botswana is the place par excellence of this relationship between the characters of Head. This everyday relationship can be fraternal, friendly or conflictual. In order to account for this relationship of tension between the “self” and others in the novelist’s works, it is appropriate to use the schema of ancestry:



The ascending pattern reveals that increasing intensity combined with decreasing scope provides emotional tension in Bessie Head’s characters. This pattern manages the gradual rise of fear in the narrative. For example, Makhaya’s relationship with the old woman on the Botswana-South Africa border is one of

mistrust. She considers him as a spy in the following excerpt: « I say you are one of the spies from over the border’s » (WRCCG, p. 6). The old lady does not try to find out who Makhaya is or what brings him here but she casts a pejorative eye on him. For her, all those who come to their country are in the pay of an enemy power. This relationship of distrust is fortunately replaced by a more fraternal and hospitable one from the driver who transports Makhaya to the city center. The driver shows himself to be hospitable, welcoming by saying: « Foreigners are always welcome in our country » (WRCCG, p. 13). However, all those who come from South Africa do not have a good reputation among the people of Golema Mmidi. That being so, Makhaya is unwelcome for being from South Africa because in Botswana, he is registered by the police as a political refugee. Refugees deserve compassion and attention from the population. But Golema Mmidi is an exception to this rule. The conversation between Makhaya and Matenge on the issue of refugees is noteworthy: « Having a refugee at the farm is going to give it a bad name, including the whole area in which it is placed. ‘What’s wrong with a refugee?’ Makhaya asked. ‘Oh, we hear things about them,’ he said. They get up at night and beat people to death » (WRCCG, p. 65). Matenge uses unsubstantiated statements to judge the refugees. According to him, the refugees

beat people to death at night. When asked to justify himself, he says, « We hear things about them »; and that is to say, he is unable to justify his thinking. Gilbert, Makhaya's friend and companion, suffers from the same fate. Gilbert is an Englishman who came from England to help the population of Golema Mmidi to set up a cooperative. Gilbert and Makhaya have a lot of fun making this cooperative a success.

However, after Makhaya, Gilbert is considered as « a foreign man and foreign men were a fearful unpredictable quantity in an otherwise predictable world » (WRCG, p. 73). From this treatment of Makhaya and Gilbert, we note that the two parties do not have the same conception of otherness. Thus, otherness fails in the village of Golema Mmidi. The functioning of otherness requires a certain complementarity between the actors. To this end, Moisan asserts: « For otherness to function, to achieve complementarity, the image of the other must be translated from each of the two points (of view), from me and from the other » (idem, p. 94). Furthermore, the students in Eugene's agricultural school (AQP) are also humiliated by a white woman because they are Black: « The students had simply become” humiliated little boys shoved around by a hysterical white woman who never saw black people as people but as objects of permanent idiocy's » (AQP,

p. 76). Elizabeth is surprised when she arrives in Botswana, a country long fantasized about as an El Dorado for exiles from South Africa. These exiles are neglected and even rejected by their homeland. However, they come to Botswana in order to belong to a state and to be recognized by that state. Unfortunately for Elizabeth, she is considered as « a stateless person in Botswana » (AQP, p. 18).

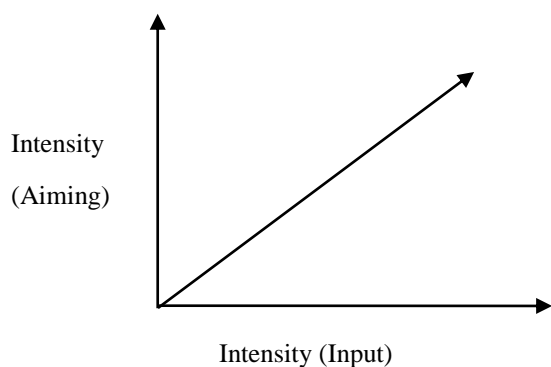
Briefly, it is noted that characters in Bessie Head's novels have all experienced otherness in Botswana. The “Other” is not welcome by the “self”. And this inevitably leads to relationships of mistrust, conflict, humiliation and rejection of the “Other”. But this experience is badly digested and remains an indelible stain in the memory of these characters. This rejection of the “Self” leads to a psychological decline for some. So, instead of being a haven of peace, Botswana becomes a painful space that leads to the madness of the protagonists.

### **3- PAINFUL SPACE: MENTAL PREDICAMENTS**

In this section, we are paying due consideration to the predicaments elements that mobility implies. The reader is brought to understand that life there is far from being unrest. The predicaments of Bessie Head's characters are rooted in Botswana as a transnational space. Amidst the



predicaments the author's characters face, there is madness. In effect, it can be used in literature as a strategy of freedom of expression in order to expose social defects. Madness makes the character suspicious; which fragments him between normal, abnormal, reason, unreason and social norms (Sayyed et al., 2012, p. 136). In the following analysis, we can notify that the first function of madness flashes back to Elizabeth's life in South Africa before presenting her new identity in a state of madness in Botswana. Freudian psychoanalysis holds that those who suffer from a mental disorder cannot live normally in the present or in the future. In (AQP), the traumatic events that symbolize the apartheid system are both the attitude of the principal of the missionary school in South Africa, Sello and Dan in Botswana. Through the principal of the missionary school, the apartheid system acts on Elizabeth's psyche. Thus, the intensity aimed at and the intensity grasped reach their paroxysms.



This diagram is said to be of implication, because it rests on the principle

of general gradation of the situation which prevails in the narrative. Indeed, it starts from a minimum of intensity and a weak extent between the protagonists to lead to a maximum tension, which in its turn is deployed in the extent. In a word, the pattern of amplification in Bessie Head's texts is the increase in intensity combined with the unfolding of scope providing affective and cognitive tension. For example, the information given by the principal about her mother's supposed insanity comes as a shock to her. The narrator describes this information as "astounding information" in the following terms: « We have a full docket on you. You must be very 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 » (AQP, p. 16). In this passage, we notice that the goal of the apartheid system is to kill the soul and then the psyche of the heroine; because this information is sediment in her unconscious. The destruction of the psyche by the principal shows the importance of the unconscious. Apropos, Freud (1900) writes, « The unconscious is the psyche itself » (p. 520). The information from the school principal is a prelude to Elizabeth's madness. The traumatic events may be omitted or forgotten. However, they remain latent and active in the character's unconscious. In other words, the

unconscious comes to the surface of consciousness through flashbacks or intense emotions.

Elizabeth's madness begins when she enters the supermarket. This state is noticed by a horrible whistling sound that echoes in her head: « 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 images to figure out the brand name of the radio » (AQP, p. 51). This whistle that describes Africans as stupid allows Elizabeth to automatically link it to the "docket" (AQP, p. 66) of the missionary school principal. Elizabeth networks the principal's docket, which contains information about her origin and her mother's state of madness. Since this incident, she transposes this hatred towards all the white people she encounters as reports the narrator below: « She had merely hated the principal with a deep black bitter rage » (AQP, p. 17). This return to the past through the process of flashback gives force to the unconscious to dominate the "Self". As a result, the heroine's mental disorder resurfaces at the slightest contact with a missionary. Elizabeth's insanity is not in doubt, for it has been proven by a scientific study which is the "talking cure" conceptualized by Freud to reveal the insane status of his patients. The purpose of the "talking cure" is to give the patient the right

to free expression (Marini, Loc, cit, 1990, p. 45). The "talking cure" can be understood through the attitude of Elizabeth's doctor at the Motabeng hospital in this conversation:

'Could you give me some idea of what is troubling you,' he'd asked?

'Sello,' she whispered.

'She could not get beyond that. Logically, a story had a beginning [...] She had no clear idea of what she was saying. [...] after a time, he closed his book, turned to her and said: 'I'm not a psychiatrist. I can't treat mental breakdowns. I'll have to transfer you to a mental hospital (AQP, p. 180).

Her people no longer understand Elizabeth, even the doctor. He decides to transfer her to another hospital which can understand her situation and be able to treat her illness. This lack of understanding between Elizabeth and her family is justified by N'da's (1996) statement that «the madman no longer speaks the same language as the others, he no longer understands them, and neither do they understand him, and they ignore him or keep him apart in a universe other than their own, because of his illness » (p. 336). Thus, this "talking cure" reveals Elizabeth's condition. In other words, the veil is lifted on the doubt that hides Elizabeth's identity. But Botswana, her dream country, becomes the place of all her nightmares or a place of great tension. Life becomes bitter for Elizabeth insofar as in their presence, her health condition worsens:

It's midnight all the time. I'd not taken note of it. I'd not taken note of real living people because so many fantastic images surround me, and they talk and move all the time, and when they address me, I just burst out with the right lines on we as though I am living with a strange "other self" I don't know so well (*AQP*, p. 58).

In this passage, the heroine knows the cause of her suffering, but she is unable to defend her personality. This inability is justified by Haar (1970) who argues: « Always the neurosis of great suffering, of which the neurotic is perfectly aware, but in relation to which he is powerless » (p. 16). All in all, the actions of the principal of the missionary school, Sello, and Dan force Elizabeth to undergo a disjunction function. She moves from an initial equilibrium to a final imbalance. That is to say, from positive to negative  $(S \cap O) \rightarrow (S \cup O)$ . This negative transformation produces an unwanted identity. Botswana becomes the place of all her nightmares and of all tensions. Once she emigrated to Botswana, she realized that nothing had changed in terms of her marginalization and uprooting. Despite her state of madness, some characters continue to migrate to Botswana.

#### **4- MOBILITY AS A NECESSITY FOR OPENNESS**

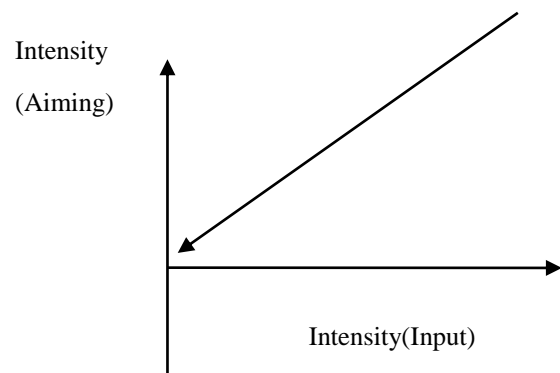
According to Coulibaly (2015) « mobility creates the world » (p. 7). And it is in the name of this creation of the world that the characters in Bessie Head's works are constantly moving on. As if by chance, they all share a taste for Botswana as a meeting place. The interest of the exiles for a given country can be explained according to Tchassim (2015): « The pleasure of society among friends is cultivated by a similarity of taste » (p. 73). This similarity of taste for Botswana focuses on cosmogony and solidarity in Botswana.

Admittedly, cosmogony is a scientific or mythical theory that explains the formation of the universe. Paul Valery (1998) brings this theory to literature. He considers cosmogony as a literary genre of remarkable persistence and variety (p. 136). In this perspective, cosmogony is used as the different varieties of the formation of Botswana society with the arrival of foreigners. The tribes that populate southern Africa are the Xhosas and the Zulus. People who come to Botswana are often from these tribes or from other countries. The Xhosa or Zulu have their own appearances. In so doing, the narrator introduces Makhaya without specifying his tribe: « His long thin falling-away cheek bones marked him as a member of either the Xhosa or Zulu tribe » (*WRCCG*, p. 1). The portrait of the character allows the narrator to classify him. And the

assumption about Makhaya's tribe is confirmed by himself when he introduces himself to the old man: « I'm a Zulu » (WRCG, p. 3). After this confirmation, the first group formation of foreigners in Botswana takes place. By the way, a second ethnic formation emerges. This one pits the "Barolongs" against the "Batswana" (WRCG, p. 4). Indeed, the Barolongs and the Batswana are neighbors, but the cohabitation is not a happy one. This cohabitation is somewhat fraught with disputes according to the words of the old man: « We Barolongs are neighbours of the Batswana, but we cannot get along with them » (WRCG, p. 41). This disagreement between the Barolongs and the Batswana is encouraged by their strong sense of rejection, discrimination and tribalism as follows: « Tribalism is meat and drink to them » (WRCG, p. 4). Well now, with such behavior, the meeting or cohabitation between the foreigners bodes ill. The double life of the exiles leads Coulibaly to write that « at the heart of mobility, there is the question of identity, whether it is identity fixity (or sameness) or identity-ipseity » (op, cit, p. 8). Makhaya experiences this discomfort during his encounter with the old woman at the Botswana border. Tired of her questions, he tells her: « How can you embarrass me like this? He said in a quiet, desperate voice. Are women of your country taught to shout at men? » (WRCG, p. 7). The

phrase "women of your country" implies that Makhaya is from another country and that he is not at home. This clash between Makhaya and the old woman reveals the tension created by mobility.

In the face of adversity, the exiles who were not well received in Botswana decided to help each other. Most of them are disappointed by the realities of the host country. In such a context, it is appropriate to reduce tensions and to lower the egos of all parties. This reduction in tension can be analyzed in light of the following mitigation scheme:



The pattern of attenuation deals with the lowering of intensity combined with the reduction of scope with a general relaxation in Bessie Head's texts. At this stage of the analysis, there is a general weakening of tension and deployment in the words of the novelist's characters. From now on, the protagonists evolve on a principle of lowering. They also contribute to reduce the forces in the speech as well as the reduction of the extent. As a result, this principle leads to a relaxation that takes the form of a

general devaluation or revaluation of the sensitive valence of intensity, and the intelligible valence of extent are then at their lowest, or even zero, awaiting amplification (Fontanille, op, cit, p. 115). So, some exiles belonging to the same country of origin, sharing and going through the same difficulties decide to unite. For example, exiles from South Africa who meet in Botswana from the community of exiles from South Africa in Botswana: « My wife will take care of your son until you come out of hospital. We are both refugees and must help each other. [...] I suffer, too, because I haven't a country and know what it's like. A lot of refugees have nervous breakdowns » (AQP, p. 52). The solidarity of the exiles is established for the South African refugees. The founder of the school in the village of Motabeng in Botswana decides to help Elizabeth in the difficult moments of her mental breakdown. In addition, Elizabeth is visited by Mrs. Jones, Tom and Mrs. Stanley, all from England met Elizabeth in Botswana. They come to the hospital to show their compassion for her ordeal.

## CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, all the characters in Bessie Head's texts are either exiles or expatriates. Although these characters are of diverse origins, they are all driven by the

desire to migrate from their home country to another destination. On their way to migrate, they are confronted with several peripetias that create tensions in social relationships. Among the spaces to be crossed or the chronotopes, Botswana remains the destination favored by the characters of Bessie Head. The choice of Botswana is explained by the fact that Botswana has long remained an unoccupied country with vast expanses of space conducive to agriculture in all its forms. The different transnational spaces reveal the identity and personality of the characters. They are divided in two categories of characters: wanted and most supreme or most God-like. This desire of belonging to a given space creates a tension of between them. Throughout the different valences, we have four semiotic patterns as follows: decadence, ascendancy, implication, attenuation. These patterns reveal the epistemic influences of mobility in the transnational space in Bessie Head's literary production. They modify the competences and performances of the characters who move between disjunctive and conjunctive transformations. These spaces are also associated to different oppositions rooted in the social and political considerations. In this perspective, we have prohibited spaces/vs/prescribed spaces. However, the characters of Bessie Head gainsay or put aside these social or political barriers by considering mobility as a

necessity for opening to another horizon. In one word, with globalization, mobility has become a principle of life.

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