Questions of Adaptation: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and Ingrid Sinclair's *Riches*

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Riches (2001) is a short film directed by Zimbabwean filmmaker Ingrid Sinclair. The film is about a fiercely independent coloured woman, Molly McBride. She is a single-mother who is exiled from South Africa on an exit permit, with her young son Peter, at the height of apartheid in the mid-1980s. Hoping to find peace and a sense of 'home' in neighbouring Zimbabwe, Molly settles and finds a job as a primary school teacher in the country side. Before long, however, Molly feels exiled in her new home. Struggling to fit in with the other teachers and with the larger community due to her liberated, 'city woman' ways, Molly survives by incessant writing in her journal, and by heavy drinking and smoking. She fights the onset of poverty and mental breakdown by befriending an ostracised old woman from the village. Sinclair's film draws on Bessie Head's life and work, and significant parallels can be observed between the film and Head's autobiographical novel *A Question of Power* (1974). This article examines Ingrid Sinclair's short film as an adaptation. It argues that *Riches* not only draws on Bessie Head's work, but also creatively re-imagines it.

Keywords: Bessie Head; Ingrid Sinclair; *A Question of Power*; *Riches*; film adaptation

This article examines the adaptation of a book, Bessie Head's autobiographical novel *A Question of Power*, into the short film *Riches*, by Ingrid Sinclair and draws attention to the page-to-screen transformation that has occurred. *Riches* is the first and only significant screen adaptation that draws from Bessie Head's life and texts. Adapting Bessie Head's written work into film is important as it has the potential to make the stories available to different and, hopefully, wider audiences. For Jean Cocteau, film was a means for transforming thoughts into images "of greater immediacy and potency than verbal ones" (Turk 1980: 25) while "the privilege of film is to render the unreal real" (26). What is submerged and merely hinted at in the written text is forced to the surface. Further adaptations of Bessie Head's work would also place her in the continental tradition set by Sembene Ousmane who has recast a number of his written works into film. Indeed, six of Sembene's eighteen films are adaptations from his novels and novellas. Sembene considered film to be an *école du soir* (Murphy 2000: 68) or night school that, being more accessible, would teach African audiences.

To adapt a work is to recast it into a new form. Film adaptation is, thus, the 'derivation' of motion pictures from other sources such as written narrative, oral sources and drama. Linda Hutcheon (2004) and Vernon Young (1986) regard adaptation to be an art and fine art, respectively, and the point is well established that the praxis and technique of deriving films out of earlier texts is "virtually as old as the machinery of cinema itself" (Andrew 1980: 10 and Leitch 2007: 22)¹. Several theories and critiques of theories of adaptation have been proffered since the 1940s; these were signposted by, among others, Sergei Eisenstein's classic essay on Charles Dickens and DW Griffiths (1944), Francois Truffaut's "A Certain Tendency of the

French Cinema” (1954), and George Bluestone’s *Novel into Film* (1957). The field of adaptation studies has, since the mid to late 1970s, become something of a crowded field.²

Lindiwe Dovey has argued that African filmmakers treat literature with “a critical, modifying eye” and in doing so they “extend”, rather than oppose, the works they modify so that adaptation becomes a way of projecting the filmmakers’ “own versions of rationality into their films” (Dovey 2009: 13). The adaptation is hence a strongly authorial representation. This is an important claim in relation to *Riches* for it enables a questioning of extent to which Sinclair has treated Bessie Head’s biographical journey and literary work with a critical, modifying eye. What are the implications, or non-implications, of such filmic modification? Dovey has argued that adaptations in fact “update” their source texts (2007: 151). In her study of Gavin Hood’s *Tsotsi* and other South African film adaptations such as *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1995), *Fools* (1997), and *Nagstappie* (1998), she notes that they offer a critique of contemporary violence in South Africa “through their updating and re-historicization of the diegeses of the novels on which they are based”. Hood’s *Tsotsi*, Dovey argues, is firstly a “modernization” of Athol Fugard’s novel and, secondly, offers “criticism of the novel itself” (2007: 151).

Ingrid Sinclair and *Riches* (2006)

Riches is a 26-minute film written and directed by Zimbabwean filmmaker Ingrid Sinclair³ and produced by Zimmedia, a production company run by Sinclair and Simon Bright. Sinclair is well known for her debut feature *Flame* (1996), a film about rape during the Zimbabwean war of liberation. *Flame* courted controversy. It was initially banned by the government, war veterans protested against what they perceived as the film’s lack of authenticity and ‘faithfulness’ to the historical record, and there was a bizarre charge of pornography centring on the rape scene. *Riches* is part of the *Mama Africa* series, a co-production initiative with M-Net, the South African broadcaster which has broadcast rights in much of Anglophone Africa, and the European Union which provided 18 per cent of the budget for the series. In the words of Mari Snyman, “[t]o challenge the stereotypical perception of women and the people surrounding them in Africa is the avowed intention of the producers of *Mama Africa*” (2002: 133). Six African women directors were selected to participate in the compilation of the *Mama Africa* series: Fanta Nacro (Burkina Faso), Bridget Pickering (Namibia), Ngozi Onwurah (Nigeria), Zulfa Otto-Salie (South Africa), Raja Amari (Tunisia), and Ingrid Sinclair. *Riches* won the City of Venice prize.

Made twenty-one years after the publication of *A Question of Power*, *Riches* was shot entirely in Zimbabwe. It is about a fiercely independent coloured woman, Molly McBride (Cindi Sampson), who is a single-mother who has been exiled from South Africa along with her young son, Peter (Damien Chamley), at the height of apartheid in the mid-1980s. Hoping to find peace and a sense of ‘home’ in neighbouring Zimbabwe, Molly takes a job as a rural school teacher. Before long, however, Molly is socially and mentally traumatised, finding herself shunned in her new ‘home’. Struggling to fit in with the other teachers and with the larger community because of her ‘urban’ ways, Molly survives by incessant writing in her journal, and by heavy drinking and smoking. Mr. Murisi (Stephen Chigorimbo), the headmaster, who shares Nelson Mandela’s *A Long Walk to Freedom* with Molly, tries to force himself sexually on her. Molly finds a way to fight poverty and the onset of mental breakdown when she befriends a mentally fragile, ostracised old woman (Sara Mageza). Two important events, therefore, are at the heart of *Riches*: the attempted rape and the meeting with the outcast old woman.

The film credits for *Riches* mention that it is an adaptation of Bessie Head’s “Village People” which is a short story posthumously published in the collection *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989). The introduction to the collection points out that all the stories are rooted in actuality. Three of the four voice-overs used in the film are indeed extracted from “Village People” but

the fourth voice-over is taken from Head's social history, *Serowe: Village of the Rain-wind* (1981). Interestingly, the narrative of "Village People" does not approximate to the events described in *Riches*. Closest to the events represented in *Riches* is the narrative of parts of *A Question of Power* for which Bessie Head drew on her own biography.

Snyman is convinced that *Riches* "is the most disappointing of the three" (2002: 137) *Mama Africa* shorts. The reason she gives for her verdict is that the film's claim to have been inspired by the writings of Bessie Head created expectations in the reviewer that remain unmet. Snyman writes:

The actress portraying the Molly MacBride character, supposedly inspired by Bessie Head, seems to have been dubbed, and not well at all. The stereotypically bigoted male characters – the train conductor and the principal – are embarrassingly bad actors, making them ludicrous instead of menacing. The little boy, however, is convincing as Molly's son, and it might have been a better idea if the film had been told from his point of view. The voice-overs by the main character are actually drawn from the writings of Bessie Head, but instead of enhancing the film, giving it a deeper dimension, the result is melodramatic and even embarrassing. (Snyman 2002: 137–138)

In Snyman's view, although one cannot fault the intentions of *Riches*, "the final visual product unfortunately does not convince" (2002: 139). It is not, however, correct that Cindi Sampson's voice-over is dubbed. The charge of bad acting and Peter's role will be looked at in the sections below.

Bessie Head and *A Question of Power* (1974)

Bessie Emery Head was born in 1937 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. She was exiled to Botswana on a one-way exit permit in 1964, taking with her Howard – her young son – and leaving behind a South African society in the grip of apartheid. At that time South Africa was, as Head expressed it in *Power*, "a country where people are not people at all" (1974: 17). In South Africa, Head had been an outcast. As Linda Beard notes with reference to the character of Elizabeth in *Power*, her "background [...] automatically place[d] her [...] outside the usual" (1979: 270). Head was born to a white woman and a black man, making her a Coloured under the Population Registration Act of 1958. Apartheid South Africa was marked, among other things, by a morbid fear of miscegenation and all sexual relations between whites and 'non-whites' were strictly prohibited in a succession of increasingly stringent laws.⁴ In the context of rigid Calvinist morality, in particular, both sex and dark skin colour were associated with sin and damnation, and mixed-race people such as Bessie Head were regarded as "bastards". Head related that she was, in fact, born in a mental hospital where her mother had been placed as a result of the prevailing "miscegenophobia". Bessie Head therefore left behind a South Africa she had found "an intensely lonely, intensely sad country" (qtd. Eilersen 2007: 69). Head applied for Botswana citizenship in 1977, which was granted in 1979. In Botswana, Head was gradually accepted into Serowe life while simultaneously remaining on the margins of its society (Head 1990). Head died in Serowe on April 16 1986, aged 48. She noted that she was "shaped by (her) South African experience" but "could not be considered as a South African exile, but as one who has put down roots" (1990: 62). Head's life was thus a search for home and citizenship, for escaping from alienation and oppression.

Bessie Head did not leave behind an autobiography. The closest she came to it, in fact, is in the fictional *A Question of Power*. Published in 1974, it was Head's third and last novel after *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) and *Maru* (1971). *Power* is written in the third person but critics have read it as at "the borderline of fiction and chronicle" (Rose 1994: 402) or, even, as "highly autobiographical" (Lorenz 1991: 593).⁵ Elizabeth Evasdaughter suggests that whether

Power is considered an autobiographical novel or a third-person autobiography, it is still “full of the author’s experience” (1989: 72) and Elizabeth’s “life history and that of Bessie Head are nearly, if not completely, identical”. *Power*, she concludes, is perhaps “more vivid and compelling than summaries of Bessie Head’s life have been” (Evasdaughter 1989: 74).

Elizabeth, the protagonist of *Power*, is a 32-year-old single mother, newly arrived in the village of Motabeng. She has no surname and is the narrator-writer of the novel. She is a refugee from South Africa on an exit permit who settles in the village and works firstly as a teacher and then agriculturalist. As the Coloured offspring of a white middle class mother and a black stable boy, Elizabeth had grown up in South Africa threatened with the ‘insanity’ that had marked her mother. The headmistress at Elizabeth’s school, for instance, used to watch her for signs of insanity. As a young woman she married an ex-convict gangster whom she left after about a year due to his promiscuity and cruelty (1974: 18–9). After the disastrous marriage, poverty and bouts of political activism, Elizabeth is exiled to Botswana where her struggles with identity issues, sanity, poverty, alienation and oppression continue. After hundreds of hallucinations, in which she is persecuted by surreal characters, chief of whom are Sello, Dan and Medusa, she emerges with a new-found clarity of identity and sense of peace, place, healing and contentment. Shannon Young (2010: 227) refers to what happens in *Power* as “therapeutic insanity”.

Critics have emphasised various themes in Head’s “very complex novel” (Lorenz 1991: 592). For Evasdaughter, its subject matter is paranoia and the central narrative problem is “How much dignity can an African black woman have?” (1989: 73). For others, the novel is about the search for “a cure for the cultural psychosis which is the result of colonization in real, personal, tangible terms” (Lorenz 1991: 592). Linda-Susan Beard writes that it represents “a journey through disintegration to wholeness” (1979: 267):

Beginning with the novel’s epigraph from D. H. Lawrence’s poem, “God,” Head warns the reader of the danger of “disintegrative knowledge” which pulls one away from “God” and towards “the abyss.” This is the fundamental polarity on which the narrative rests and which, moreover, Head will use to dismantle the myth of polarity itself. (Beard 1979: 268)

Supporting the idea of integration, Margaret Tucker argues Elizabeth “travels from a state of alienation and silence to a world of community and language” (1988: 170).

Adapting Novel into Film

The concept that pervades every element of *Riches*, thereby holding the story together, is that of Molly’s search for a home. This is the spine, or main action, of the film. As she says in the film’s first voice-over, “I have lived all my life in shattered little bits. Here, I want all the little bits to come together”.⁶ The superstructure of the entire film plot is that Molly embraces her new home, gets estranged from it, and re-embraces it again.

The issues of race, gender and class are key to a comparison between *Riches* and *A Question of Power*. Molly, like Elizabeth, is Coloured, female and poor so her search for a home is unavoidably complicated by these three factors. Molly is placed in a liminal space: rejected by the whites of South Africa who offer her only an exit permit, she is also rejected by the villagers for her ‘cheeky’ city ways. Her gender places her in conflict with the entrenched patriarchy of the village. Finally, although the villagers consider her relatively well off, her precarious economic situation threatens both her sanity and her independence.

These issues have all been adapted from the original, source text which implies the possibilities of “versioning” as Sinclair re-reads Bessie Head for the screen and therefore *Riches* simultaneously becomes a re-reading of race, gender and class. In principle, Sinclair’s adaptation is only one possible version or ‘edition’ of *Power* upon which the themes of race, gender and

class may be anchored. Not only could several other versions be adapted from the same story, but there is no limit on how many such versions could be made. Basically, it could be argued, anyone with the means and sufficient interest may make a version of *A Question of Power*. For critical purposes, this implies finding a means for evaluating the success of *Riches* as a version or edition and recognising what Roland Barthes (1981) called the “death of the author”. Bessie Head no longer controls the range of meanings or the types of stories and counter-stories that her life and work inspires. Not only does the text possess fluidity, plurality, reflexivity and indeterminacy; it lacks finality.

Is *Riches* a translation? There are a number of parallels between the characters of Molly and Elizabeth. Like Elizabeth, Molly is a coloured woman who is exiled from South Africa on a one-way exit permit with her young son. Each takes a train hoping for a new start; one goes to live in rural Botswana and one in rural Zimbabwe. In *Riches*, the constricted spaces of the train from South Africa are visually contrasted with the open savannah of Zimbabwe, but this contrast works in the service of a marked irony, since Molly – like Elizabeth – will soon find that the quiet rural area to which she goes also harbours its own sinister ‘apartheids’. Both Molly and Elizabeth find work as primary school teachers and then have to fight ostracism as the villagers and fellow teachers are suspicious of their urban ways and light skin. Like Elizabeth – and Bessie Head (Bruner 1985: 224) – Molly is also disliked because she was an educated woman who showed confidence, city ways and authority. She is poor and mentally strained. Just as the headmaster of Elizabeth’s Serowe school hands her a letter of dismissal on the grounds of insanity, Molly’s headmaster hands her a letter of suspension on grounds of insanity. Both Elizabeth and Molly fight hallucinations and bad dreams, and are only sustained by their dogged commitment to their young sons.

Elizabeth, like Molly, finds intellectual solace in discussions with a man. In *Power* it is the Peace Corps volunteer Tom and, to some extent the apparition of Sello, while in *Riches* it is Mr. Murisi the headmaster who likes to share, and discuss the tenets of, Nelson Mandela’s *A Long Walk to Freedom* with Molly. Tom, however, is not a sexual predator while Mr. Murisi tries to manipulate Molly and force himself sexually on her. Mr. Murisi’s behaviour is somewhat similar to the way Dan manipulates and torments Elizabeth with his sexual perversions. In the end, however, both women find that in the question of power also lies the question of survival.

Nonetheless, *Riches* goes beyond mere page to screen translation, making several significant transformations of Bessie Head’s narrative. These transformations include – at the surface – basic ‘technical’ changes such as shortening the filmic version, narrative-diegetic alterations such as setting the film in Zimbabwe in 1986 instead of Botswana in 1964, inventing new characters and – at a deeper level – a transformed plot-line. Basic changes at the level of the narrative structure of the novel – non-linear narration is abandoned in favour of a transparent ‘three act’ plot – march in step with Sinclair’s transformative re-reading of Head.

A significant aspect in transforming *A Question of Power* is its basis in exploring “things of the soul” and “inner hells” and its extensive use of internal monologue. In Rose’s view, *Power* closely recounts details “of one episode of Head’s life” involving “breakdown and cure” and the novel is written “effectively from inside (Bessie Head’s) mind” (Rose 1994: 402). This placement of the narrative “inside” the author’s head presents specific problems for adaptation. Sergei Eisenstein’s (1944) suggestion that film adaptations succeed when they adapt novels that have lots of physical description but fail when they attempt to adapt material such as internal monologue, casts light on the problem of adapting interior journeys. These are said to be difficult to film because they are not visual. Dovey has quoted Gavin Hood, the director of *Tsotsi*, acknowledging that Fugard’s novel was particularly difficult to adapt since it is ultimately about Tsotsi’s “deeply interior, psychological journey”:

The book is brilliant, but it's a book and it's an interior journey and a lot of those interior psychological journeys are difficult to translate into the film medium because, what are [you] going to do, have voice-over saying what he's thinking? You have to find visual ways of generating a sense of what he's thinking. (2007: 152)

Dovey argues that Hood manages to find “visual as well as aural ways of conveying Tsotsi’s consciousness” (Dovey 2007: 152).

In part, Ingrid Sinclair’s solution to the problem of adapting Elizabeth’s “inner hells” in *Riches* is to use voice-over. It is used to comment, chorus style, on the action during the arrival scene while Molly sits by her veranda, towards the climax when Molly imagines that she needs to ‘shake up’ the village, and at the end when she accepts and is accepted by the community. The atmosphere of the film is also made to follow this accordion pattern, changing from a beautiful and expectant mood to one that is tense and forbidding, and then back to hope and calmness. The soundtrack, a powerful addition at the level of transposition, partly helps the atmosphere of the film along. The film score supports and drives the narrative: it moves from the forbidding clanging of the train wheels in the establishing shots of the film, to Leonard Dembo’s pop music that punctuates Molly and Peter’s arrival, to the dramatic timbre during the attempted rape, to the tones of fear and falling apart when Molly is labelled “*ane chivanhu*” (a Shona term for one who is possessed by evil spirits) and, finally, to the serene calm of the conclusion. In its progress, the film score welcomes Elizabeth and Peter to the village community, shuts them out of it, and finally welcomes them back again. Swishing camera movement, eerie sound and lighting effects are also used to represent Molly’s inner torment, particularly in the emotionally overloaded breakdown scene when Molly chases Peter out of their house. The subjective camera, including the POV (point of view) shot, allows the audience to participate more fully in the interior life and perceptions of Molly and to see what Molly is seeing and experiencing. This contrasts with the use of the objective camera, which maintains a storytelling distance from Molly and refuses to interfere, and is used, for instance, in the attempted rape scene.

The closest the film comes to rendering the nervous breakdown that happens to Elizabeth in *Power* is the scene in which Molly, who has been drinking and smoking non-stop, shouts at Peter: “Perhaps I’m mad.... How is this for an explanation? Everybody hates me! I have got no friends! I am not fit to be a teacher! I have got no money! And soon they will say I am not fit to be your mother because I am mad! Leave me, just go! I don’t wanna hurt you anymore!” She pushes Peter out of the door and angrily pulls at her Afro hair.

Does *Riches* show that “inner hells” are filmable? As has already been noted, practitioners such as Cocteau and Truffaut and critics such as Robert Stam and Thomas Leitch believe that there is nothing that cannot be filmed. James Decker’s insightful discussion of Joseph Strick’s adaptation of Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* is critical to the discussion of filming the so-called ‘unfilmable’. Working with the view that there are both film and print editions of a work, Decker calls films such as *Tropic of Cancer* and *Riches* “cinematic editions” (2007: 144). Following Decker’s logic, the film edition, while not the novel, is both of the novel and a stand-alone work of art (2007: 145), a unique reconstruction that is neither more nor less valid than the print edition. The possibilities of cinematic editions can be explored by seeking out novels that rely less on exterior action than they do on “interior description and development” (2007: 141). Much like Bessie Head’s *Power*, Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* relies on an idiosyncratic first-person narrator whose “brocaded verbal flights subvert traditional notions of plot” (Decker 2007: 141), and unfolds mostly via “dreams, diatribes, catalogues, reveries, and other conventions” (147). Like *Power*, *Tropic of Cancer* is dependent on “effusive language and interior growth rather than on action”. For this reason, says Decker, these types of texts are precisely those whose adaptation “so often leads to bitter dissatisfaction”, but their “interior”

(2007: 141) quality is ironically what makes them the best texts to use in a re-examination of filmic adaptation.

The problem of representing texts that ~~represent~~ interiority strongly is pronounced where characters are not really there, but are merely hallucinated as is the case in *Power*. Alastair Renfrew argues, in relation to a Russian adaptation of the short story *Poruchik Kizhe* (*Lieutenant Kizhe*) that this is because “it is more difficult in the cinema to obscure the boundaries between different levels of reality, to destabilize the viewer’s perception of the ‘realness’ of different sequences without undermining the narrative altogether” (Renfrew 2007: 164). In *Riches* Sinclair manages to represent “inner hells” essentially through re-imagination.

The most central of the re-imagined figures is that of the old woman, particularly her costume and props. Along with Molly, the old woman is the bearer of stigma and the supposed curse of madness. She is stoned and chased away by the village children, and uncared for by the village women who believe that she is possessed. Interestingly, Mr Murisi tells the children that Molly ~~is also~~ *ane chivanhu*. It turns out, however, that the old woman is only hungry and tired, and it is Molly’s kindness to the old woman that begins her rehabilitation in the eyes of the villagers. The old woman wears black, signifying that her life has been one uninterrupted state of mourning. Her tattered shoes represent both the exterior and interior journeys that she has had to travel to find other human beings (Molly and Peter) who would accept her and offer her food and water. Finally, the old woman is perpetually leaning on her walking stick, pointing to her internal quest for balance and stability.

Re-imagination is also central to the transposition of graphic scenes from *Power* to *Riches*. The subject of representing sex, for instance, appears to pose important problems in adaptations in general. Decker has observed that Joseph Strick undertakes a “reimagining” of the “sexual ethos” of Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*’s, wilfully omitting graphic sexual scenes. Hence, despite “the sexual candour of his source text, Strick [...] refrains from even approaching what later became the X rated genre’s notorious ‘money shot’” (2007: 148). In the film edition, Strick de-emphasises the sexual plotlines in favour of comedy. Arguably, some of the changes from Head’s novel to Sinclair’s film have led to a re-imagined film, for Sinclair has elided all the graphic sexuality of *Power*. With the writing out of the sexuality of the novel go the female ghosts of the novel: wild-eyed Medusa, who also possessed thunderbolts; B..., The Womb; Miss Sewing Machine; Miss Body Beautiful; Miss Pelican-Beak; Miss Chopper; Miss Pink Sugar-Icing; Madame Make-Love-On-The-Floor; The Sugar-Plum Fairy; Madame Squelch-Squelch; and Madame Loose-Bottom. Dan’s “extreme masculinity” (1974: 105) and sexual excursions with the female ghosts is replaced by Mr. Murisi’s commemorative card to the lady teacher, Elizabeth Chideya, and a verbal report that he had sexual relations with all the lady teachers in his school. As the teacher, Mai Dube (Imelda Mahaka), says “Mr. Murisi uses women. We have all been through it. Ms. Chideya, Ms. Kamba, Ms. Kondo and me.” Murisi, which means ‘shepherd’, is a figure who is meant to take care of the flock. Instead, he abuses vulnerable women at will. Only the newcomer, Molly, resists his predations. Thus, where *Power* is about “things of the soul” (199) and “serenity of soul” (202), “inner life ... perceptions ... development” (11,12), *Riches* seems to be about a straight-forward struggle against a combination of social stigma, poverty and a predatory man.

Reading *Riches* in the context of Sinclair’s filmic *oeuvre* – and not just for its relationship or lack of a relationship to Bessie Head’s work – reveals that Sinclair’s work fits the concept of an *auteur*. Firstly, Sinclair’s eponymous heroines – Flame (*Flame*), Amai Rose (*Africa is a Woman’s Name*), and Molly (*Riches*) – suggest that Sinclair prefers a distinct kind of female heroine. Secondly, Sinclair’s plot-lines include the contrast between appearance and reality, followed by solid epiphanies that strip away the veil of illusion. For instance, the characters of Flame, Amai Rose and Molly are almost instruments for pointing out that in a woman’s world life is

never what it seems and that a woman's duty is to strip away the social convention and reveal what festers beneath. Finally, Sinclair appears to be comfortable working with narratives that fall within what could be described as a generally feminist outlook.

The nature of the transformation of Bessie Head's story into *Riches* helps to fit Sinclair to the portrait of an auteur. Sinclair, as auteur, is defined by her concern with "women's issues" in *Flame*, *Africa is a Woman's Name* and *Riches*. Kerstin Bolzt (2007) uses the label feminist to describe Sinclair, identifying her need to project a female perspective of the Second Chimurenga without undermining male comrades. Ingrid Sinclair's long-standing preoccupation with women's issues is embodied in her statement that "Fighting women are my heroes... I used the independence struggle (in *Flame*) as a metaphor for the struggle for personal independence of all women."⁷ As noted earlier, the *Mama Africa* series – and *Riches* in particular – had the same preoccupation. If Ingrid Sinclair's debut feature *Flame* is "a gendered critique of nationalism" (Niang 1999: 209), then *Riches* is, in large part, a gendered critique of patriarchy. In each film Sinclair blends voice-over and dialogue as a device to reinforce the authenticity of the woman heroine's perspective.

Interestingly, Sinclair's gendered position in *Flame* is plagued by ambivalences. For instance, despite Cde Che's raping Flame, he ends up – after a problematic apology – as her lover and, later on, husband. *Flame* "attempts to give voice to the disenfranchised, grant a space to the dislocated, but ends up grounding these characters at the margin" (Niang 1999: 210). Similar critique can be levelled at *Riches* which allows for a half-successful gendered critique of patriarchy. Despite Molly's fight back, Mr. Murisi is – at the end of the film – still headmaster at the primary school and his abuse of the other three women has been swept under the carpet. It is not made clear, anyway, why the women did not have the courage to fight back against Mr. Murisi before Molly arrived on the scene. Notably, the subject of male sexual predators has carried over from *Flame* to *Riches* as has the sense of the ambivalent, pyrrhic victories that Flame and Molly enjoy.

When Peter asks Molly "Ma, why do you always have to get into trouble?" she says to him, "Peter, you have to stand up for yourself". This, then, is theme of *Riches*: the oppressed, especially women, standing up for themselves. This theme gives Sinclair's film a feminist angle which is largely absent in *Power*. The plot of *Riches* is no longer about 'the things of the soul' (1974: 199) but about a woman's struggle firstly, to fit in in the face of prejudice and, secondly, against male patriarchy. Basically Molly McBride is Ingrid Sinclair's creation. Molly's screen persona is invented for her by the director, who infuses her with cinematic traits that seem meant to appeal to audiences who have not (and may never) read Bessie Head. One of Molly's first actions when she arrives at her new place, for instance, is to take out the box of Benson and Hedges cigarettes. She also sits down at her type writer, and her journal (Figure 1). It is apparent that the box, the journal and the type writer are prized possessions and her actions have heightened symbolism and a visual markedness that is not found in *Power*. The lady teachers in *Riches* are both magnetised and repulsed by Molly's public act of smoking during break time. The cigarette smoking, journal writing, beer drinking and the type-writer are simultaneously the markers of Molly's failure to fit in and to be 'ordinary', and her own individualised way of surviving the surrounding hostile rural ethos.

In showing women in situations weighed down by patriarchal burdens (Figure 2), Sinclair seems to be pointing at the problem of unquestionable domesticity. Molly, in particular, strives to avoid the uniformity imposed by domestication and indiscriminate objectification on the women teachers at the primary school and in the village at large. She also challenges rigid social expectations and the trap of social convention. Sinclair seems to have drawn somewhat on feminist film theory which is critical of the male gaze and the ideologies, such as the "fantasies of the voyeur" (Doane 1981: 22), which sustain it. In *Riches* Mr. Murisi exercises the male gaze

Figure 1. Beer, cigarettes, journal, pen and typewriter as markers of the 'outsider'.

disguised as social convention and so, to some extent, Ingrid Sinclair can be said to cast her work in the mold of feminist filmmaking which addresses itself to the activity of uncoding, de-coding, deconstructing the male gaze:

Figure 2. Molly struggling with a tin of water. Note how the composition of the two shots comments on the man holding a bottle of beer while the village women are working.

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey 1975: 11)

The project of such deconstructive practice is hence “not necessarily that of seeing the female body differently, but of exposing the habitual meanings/values attached to femininity as cultural construction” (Doane 1981: 24). The project is actualised in the continual displacement of the male gaze and in the refusal “to hold or fix (women) in the frame”. As such, the feminist camera attempts to consistently transform its own framing to elide the possibility of a fetishism of the female body.

Sinclair’s eponymous heroines are notable for being their own therapists. When Mr Murisi tries to force himself upon Molly, she refuses and throws him off. Until recently her friend and confidante, Murisi immediately starts to plot how to ruin her and this takes the form of labelling her as ‘mad’. The villagers and the teachers, of course, already gossip about her ‘madness’ on the basis of her idiosyncratic ways. The stigma of madness, constructed from the perception that Molly has failed to fit in with the villagers, is a key factor in the branding of Molly not only as an outsider but as a destabilising force. Molly refers to herself as “the outsider”. Things come to a final crisis with Peter’s question to Molly: “Ma, are you mad?” which precipitates Molly’s nervous breakdown. Part of Sinclair’s solution to this crisis, similar to the one devised by Head in *Power*, is to turn Molly into her own therapist through writing. *Riches* updates *Power* by adding the episode with the outcast woman, and Molly also fights back against Mr. Murisi, managing to get her job back and to earn the respect of the other lady teachers and the local villagers.

Conclusion

This article has examined the adaptation of Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* into Ingrid Sinclair’s film, *Riches*. The adaptation of Head’s text means that her work is being shared with new audiences, or with old audiences in new ways. Through adaptation and re-situating, *Riches* becomes a form of memory of Bessie Head’s life and work. Ingrid Sinclair’s version or “edition” of Bessie Head’s story reflects Dovey’s conclusion that discussions of fidelity to the original text are not particularly useful to analyses of African adaptations. Sinclair has treated the literary original with a critical, modifying eye and, in doing so, extended and updated rather than contradicted *Power*. Adaptation has been used as a way of projecting the filmmaker’s own extended and strongly authorial representation of the original story. As the credits point out, “This film was inspired by Bessie Head but it is a work of fiction and characters portrayed are fictional”. *Riches* signifies that literary texts, in the hands of film directors, are profoundly malleable. In *Riches*, it is not so much a question of keeping faith with the book as keeping solidarity with the book. In the end, the quantitative differences are not the most essential point. *Riches* is no formal transposition. Ultimately, judging *Riches* by its relationship to Bessie Head’s fictional work or her life is not the most fruitful way to appreciate the film’s richness. The more rewarding alternative, it appears, is to regard the work through notions of re-reading, re-interpretation, solidarity and intersection.

Notes

1. According to Dudley Andrew, “Well over half of all commercial films have come from literary originals” (1980: 10).

2. Some of the seminal studies from the late 1970s to the present include Geoffrey Wagner's *The Novel and the Cinema* (1975), Morris Beja's *Film and Literature* (1979), Michael Klein and Gillian Parker's *The English Novel and the Movies* (1981), Stuart McDougal's *Made into Movies* (1985), Brian McFarlane's *Novel to Film* (1996), James Naremore's *Film Adaptation* (2000), Sarah Cardwell's *Adaptation Revisited* (2002), Kamilla Elliott's *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (2003), Robert Stam's *Literature through Film* (2005b), Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo's *Literature and Film* (2005a), Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), John Desmond and Peter Hawkes's *Adaptation* (2006), and Cartmell and Whelehan's *Screen Adaptation* (2010).
3. Sinclair's filmography includes four documentaries *Biopiracy: Who Owns Life?* (2002), *Dance Got Me* (2006), *Africa is a Woman's Name* (2009) and *Tides of Gold* (1999). *Dance Got Me* is about dancer Bawren Tavaziva; *Biopiracy* is an activist take on patents, local know-how and biodiversity; *Africa is a Woman's Name* is a three-director film by Ingrid Sinclair, Wanjiru Kinyanjui and Bridget Pickering about gender and empowerment in Zimbabwe, Kenya, South Africa respectively; *Tides of Gold* is about ancient trade routes and networks.
4. The Immorality Act of 1927 prohibited sexual intercourse between Europeans and Africans; the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 legislated against intermarriage between Europeans and all non-Europeans; in 1950 and 1957 the Immorality Act was amended to further criminalise sexual intercourse, immorality and indecent acts between whites and all non-white groups.
5. Cherry Wilhelm (1983) and Shannon Young (2010) also emphasise the autobiographical approach.
6. All quotations from the film are taken from the DVD, Sinclair (2001).
7. California Newsreel, *Flame*, <http://newsreel.org/video/FLAME>

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