



**HAL**  
open science

## Communication by Pr Cecil Abrahams

Cecil Abrahams

► **To cite this version:**

Cecil Abrahams. Communication by Pr Cecil Abrahams. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1997, Women in Multicultural South Africa, GRAS International Seminar 1996, 14, pp.101-112. hal-02348352

**HAL Id: hal-02348352**

**<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02348352v1>**

Submitted on 5 Nov 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# *Communication*

## *by Pr Cecil Abrahams*

Quite a number of people have asked me what the title of my paper was because they have looked at the programme and they have noticed that I have no particular title. So I suggest that maybe my title should be “ramblings.” Just ramble on and we will find something inside the ramblings, that was my suggestion. But I am going to try to be serious, often I try to be not serious.

I first of all, want to take this opportunity to thank Doctor Féral, and the Université de La Réunion and those who have sponsored this conference for having given me the opportunity to visit for the first time your island. I have of course been very impressed with the island, and what I noticed at this conference is the students in particular and they are so many; I wish that we would get so many students at our conferences on our campus so I must congratulate you. I hope that the students will feel comfortable during my rambling to ask some questions, as well as to make some comments on the status of women on this island. I would like to know how they are faring and particularly in comparison with how women fare in South Africa. It is not easy, I am a South African but I lived outside of South Africa, particularly in Canada, for a very long time in my years of exile. I returned to South Africa in September 1995, so I have just been home for over a year. And I took on a very difficult job, namely, as you call it, “president of a university,”<sup>1</sup> but it is not president of a university such as yours, it is

---

<sup>1</sup> University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X17, Belleville 7535 (South Africa).

president of a large university in a very difficult country, a country in transition and transformation and so the issues are many. I particularly took over a university which is regarded as historically a disadvantaged institution meaning that there are many problems, not only of the students that we educate but in particular the resources that we have to deal with; we are under resourced, and that creates, that in itself will create, a number of difficulties for somebody who tries to head an institution in South Africa.

I had not expected to give any talk while I was at this conference. My invitation is somewhat different from the invitation of my colleagues who are experts in this field, and have given a lot of thought to women in a multicultural South Africa.

I, when I joined the University of the Western Cape, very quickly met the President of this university, and later on the Vice president of this university. And as you know, the Université de La Réunion has an agreement with my university, particularly in the field of law but we also have a general agreement. So, we have had visitors from South Africa coming to your university and right now we have one of your professors of law teaching at my university in Cape Town. So, when I spoke to Doctor Féral my understanding was that I would have an opportunity to come and see what is here and to talk further about the agreement that we have between the two institutions, as well as to extend that agreement. We are going to do that. I am going to meet with many of your administrators but I am sure when she realised this was possible she also said "would you speak in our conference on women in a multicultural South Africa?" — and a vice-chancellor I can assure you knows a little about everything but knows very little, in depth about anything. And so, whereas I know a little about everything, I know not very much about anything in any depth. So, I was obviously not going to write a paper about a very important subject, very serious subject, where you require experts to speak to the issues. In fact I didn't think I would come to the conference because as I was preparing to leave, our government announced the support for our universities on the day I was leaving, and the government had decided to reduce the funding to my university by R23,000,000. Now, no vice-chancellor can leave the campus knowing he is looking at a reduction of such a large amount,

and I must say I was crumbling because the newspapers were onto me wanting to know what was my reaction to losing so much money and I must say I didn't feel very comfortable leaving South Africa knowing I would have to give up my own Christmas, wondering how I am going to fund this institution for 1997.

**Someone in the attendance** : Are you going back?

**C. A.** : I hope I can stay on the island for as long as possible and maybe collect Rd 23,000,000 over here before I go back. So, I am using this just to indicate some of the difficulties one must experience in the new position I took on. My own interest of course is literature, English literature and over the last 20 years I spent a lot of time in the development of African literature and particularly South African literature. What I want to do is, in what I call "ramblings," to have a look at one South African writer. Unfortunately when I look at the books outside on the table, that you are selling, you seem not to have any book of black South African writers and I think that is unfortunate, I hope you will correct that and hope that in your courses you are actually teaching black South African writers.

One of the best known South African writers, certainly known world wide, is this writer Bessy Head. I don't know how many students have read her work, and she is by far the person who speaks, if you want in a deep sense, she is by far the person who addresses the women's issue in Southern Africa and in Africa, in a way that no other writer has attempted to do. And in particular this novel, *A Question of Power*, which in a sense has become a novel that is regarded as a cult novel for the feminist of the international world. Bessy Head is often used as the guru if you want on feminism particularly in North America. I thought, by looking at *her* life we would get another insight into the difficulties women experience in Southern Africa. It is clear when we organise a conference called "Women in multicultural South Africa," we have to be careful how we deal with this issue. It is very difficult to simply make broad generalisations, in view of the fact that for a long time South Africa was a country filled with very severe racism, wherein the women developed into their particular racial community. And although they

will share a lot of things in common, they also have many things which separate them, which make them different. My mother, certainly lived an experience that was quite different from mothers in some of the other racial communities in South Africa. My sisters lived experiences that were somewhat different from that of other sisters in other racial communities. So, I think we have to be careful not to generalise too broadly. There are some things women will all have in all the racial communities. The lifestyle of a woman herself, which is what Bessy Head in some sense will address, namely: "Where were you born? What were the difficulties? What is the general view of the women in the particular country you find yourself in?" Without a doubt, regardless of the new constitution our president has just signed, and regardless of all the laws that we have created over the last two and a half years, South Africa still remains a deeply patriarchal society. Women are, and they have been, and I sincerely hope in the future that it will change, but they have been seen as second class citizens or third class citizens, as inferior. They have been dominated, they have been abused, they are the people who receive the worst attention in many ways in the country, and obviously, some women in some groups will do better than others but in a large part, the country is still very much a patriarchal society where women are treated not as equals with the men of the society. That runs right across the society. Regardless of whether women were in better groups under apartheid, they too suffered under this patriarchal way of looking at society. I want to look at Bessy Head not only because I knew her intimately or rather I knew her as a good friend, but also because she has stood out as such an important figure in the whole question on women's place in Southern Africa and in Africa.

Now, here is a woman who was born in what is called an unfortunate situation. Her mother was an English woman, a white woman, and she was made pregnant by the stable attendant, who was a black South African. In the days when this pregnancy took place, the idea of a black man sleeping with a white woman was not possible in South Africa. South Africans, particularly white South Africans, particularly on the Afrikaner side, could not believe it possible, that a white woman would ever want to sleep with a black man. But, this relationship took place, and Bessy Head was in her mother's womb, when the white family, the mother's family, could not accept this. And,

they, at first, wanted to abort the child, but their daughter refused, and so the next thing they did was to admit her to an asylum as a mad woman. So, it was in that asylum, that her pregnancy continued, and it was in that asylum that the baby was born, Bessy Head. She was born in a mad house, and she lived in that mad house for two years, when her own mother died. And, she was then pushed around from family to family, mostly to white families, who of course once they discovered the birth of the child, refused to have the child in their house; eventually, she was given over to a Coloured family, and, she grew up within this family. Now, you can imagine, this is part of the tragedy of South Africa. Not only is it a woman child, or a girl child, but here you have a situation, where there is also a serious race issue. So, when you are looking at multiculturalism you must not forget, the issues in South Africa, they are not simple. You can not simply make broad generalisations about the people. Bessy Head grows up in a family, that she is not attached to in terms of true family situation. She later on goes to a boarding school, she completes her high school and becomes a school teacher. And then begins to teach at school. She doesn't like teaching, she takes up journalism because she thinks that is an area that is more in line with her kind of floating personality.

While she lives in the Cape area she meets another journalist, who is a Coloured South African. And, they get married and they decide to leave South Africa because they can't live in this land because of its racism and move to Botswana, a neighbouring country, in the hope that they are going to find some peace, they will be able to live a life without racism, and they will be able to make true contributions as human beings. Once they get to Botswana, they realise very quickly that Botswana is not much different from South Africa. In Botswana what is the "separating area" is that tribalism becomes a major problem. She happens to be brown in skin, the majority population will be black in skin, and so, she is quickly seen as an outsider. She and her husband then planned, while she was pregnant, that he would go off to the United States for them, they would emigrate to the United States. When he gets to the United States, he starts forgetting about his wife; he later on moves to Canada where he still lives, and ignores his wife completely; by now a child is born to the wife in Botswana and he himself continues to live in Canada.

The wife now is alone in Botswana. She has a child, she is not of the predominant racial community, and she is now to struggle. A woman who has race against her, a woman who had a birth that was not normal, a woman who is in a very patriarchal society, where women are regarded as inferior, where women are regarded as not much better than the cattle that you find in the country, and she now has to struggle as a woman. And it is that struggle which she writes about in a novel; beginning with *When Rain Clouds Gather*, her second one *Maroo*, and the best novel of all it is *A question of Power*, she tries to deal with what it is to be a woman in Southern Africa, with race against you, with a family situation, where you are alone, in a society where tribe is more important than humanity, or rather where tribe is more important than general humanity, and she has to struggle to become a human being in this country.

If you read those novels, you here have them, you have a case study which is perhaps the most interesting one you can find in South Africa. And South Africans who want to learn more about women and their struggles and South Africans and Southern Africans and Reunion people who want to learn more about South Africans struggling, they should read Bessy Head.

In the first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, she finds solace; she is an exiled South African, she is living in a country that is hostile to her, she has a child, she has to find work, she has to produce food, she is entirely on her own, which is often the history of many South African women. and she has also to establish herself as a human being in that country.

Her connection is to other women who have come from other villages, and to other women who have come from other countries. And she writes a novel called *When Rain Clouds Gather*. And in there, she praises collectivity of women. Women together, have a much better chance of standing up against the hostility that is being offered by the society they find themselves in. It is often said that women are much better at socialising, that women seek solutions together rather than be like men who always think they have the answers in their own heads.

Women therefore are often seen as being superior in the way they behave because they see the answers through a social compact. And in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Bessy Head pretty well says the same thing. The women work together, and as they work together, even though they have very difficult lives, they find a collective, and it is in that collective situation that they make their lives more bearable in Botswana, and they give some leadership in their country. She then skips to a second novel — she herself is brown skinned — in a country where the people are black skinned. She skips to another study in her second novel called *Maroo*, in Botswana there are people who are brown skinned, and they are called Ma'sawa or as they used to be called, Bushmen people. The Ma'sawa in colour come closer to Bessy Head's own colour. And she looks at this group of people, as a small group, a marginalised people, dealing with a much larger community. And she uses one woman in that group, a teacher of the Ma'sawa community, who begins to contribute to that society, and most of all, the chief of the society begins to fall in love with this girl. And it is in that falling in love of the chief with this Ma'sawa teacher that a great number of hostilities come out. And the hostilities are towards the race, the Ma'sawa race, but it is also towards women. And, it is quite an interesting novel, in the way you see a woman who is of another group, trying to survive in that society. She finally brings all of this together in a novel called, *A Question of Power*.

In *A Question of Power*, she really deals with power issues. Because, at the end of the day, women in a multicultural society, have a lot to do with the power issues. First of all, there is the universal battle between males and females. There is the battle between men and women. This is universal, it is not South African. It is everyone's story. It happens on this island, it happens in Europe, it happens in Asia, it happens in America, it happens all over Africa. It is a battle, between women and men, and that battle is as old as the story in the Bible, it is as old as any of the other myths which we find in any other religious community. That is the first thing, she has to deal with. And, in the novel, there is battle between the women and the men, on many, many occasions. And the battle often is a battle of simply beating each other out, of simply fighting. The battle largely goes against the women, because when force is used women find themselves in a more difficult



situation. Men use force far more effectively, in its violent sense. And so, there is a tremendous amount of abuse that takes place. And the violence is not only force in terms of violence through weapons, and through physical beatings; but the violence is also very sexual. Sex in itself is a battle ground. It is a ground, where women and men will meet, and it is a ground where favours can be given, or what else, and it is on this ground that you have major battles in this novel. That is one area.

But the worst kind of violence is really psychological. It is the battle between women and men in terms of their minds, in terms of subjugating each other, in terms of embarrassing each other, in terms of destroying each other's well being, in terms of destroying the inner soul of the person. And here too the male dominates for a long time, because male psychological domination is largely a domination of the male who cannot utter completely what he feels, so that psychological battering comes through nastiness, through cruel words, through hurts, if you want. So you have that aspect taking place. At times in the novel, the woman of the novel, gets close to going mad, if you want, going insane, because of the tremendous amount of aggression which takes place in the novel. And this battle goes on throughout the novel. And Bessy Head, often connects male behaviour to political behaviour. She tends to shy away from party behaviour. She is often criticised, particularly by those of us who have been active members of the African National Congress, who were very active in exile around ANC issues. She is often criticised for not taking a stand, for refusing to take a political position on behalf of a party or a group. Because Bessy Head believed, as she says in the novel, that politics in itself, the way it is practised, is often a power game. It is a pressure that is being put on individuals, so that they can be destroyed or dominated, or if you want, controlled in a certain fashion. And so, she resists it, and she says that women are particularly subjected to that kind of domination in a political sense. So she resists it a great deal in the novel.

The novel deals with many issues, all of them in the end related around women and male issues. It deals with madness, it deals with male domination and maliciousness, it deals with single parenthood, with poverty, with hierarchies of chiefs and commoners, with racial communities and with political communities. For Bessy Head, every-

thing is a question of power. And in all of these fears, women have been relegated to an inferior position. And so in the novel, she begins the battle to affirm women. In the novel, the main figure begins to fight back, begins to go to war if you want, to reclaim the land, or reclaim the space, or to reclaim the night and the day, that women find themselves so often being subjected to through all kinds of oppression. It is that, in the end, that she wants to pass on to all women in South Africa and to all women in the world. But the struggle out there in South Africa is going to be a long one. The constitution might talk of non-sexism, and this constitution might talk of human rights, and it might talk of all sorts of wonderful things, and we must give South Africa a great deal of credit. And perhaps it is because it has come so late into the game of democracy. South Africa has, as I said yesterday, the best constitution you can think of. South Africa provides guarantees for everything. Some of you would be interested to know that even our gangsters now march onto a parliament talking about their rights. We allow everything in South Africa at the moment. We provide everybody every right you can think of. And we have created all sorts of commissions to protect everybody's rights. In fact some people say, criminals have more rights now in South Africa than the people they criminalise. So we have gone to the other extreme, if you want, of providing all sorts of opportunities. But the real test for South Africa is going to be, "how are we going to implement it?" That is really the issue. Our government is too young, it has only been here two and a half years. And you do not ask a two and a half year old to do things that an adult should be doing. It is a long history we have ahead of us. The South African government of today is only two and a half years old, don't forget that. You cannot expect of South Africa the miracles which you have not yet created in your own countries. But South Africa is going to make a valiant effort to become a true miracle. South Africa is only new as a baby is new because it is two and a half years old; as a parent you still talk of your child: "O yes, thirty months old," because you can't stop counting. When that thirty month old become twenty nine, then you have a hard time remembering. So, we still have a long way to go, and as Tshinwa Atshibe said: "It is morning yet on South Africa creation day, it is morning on our creation day."

The issues of whether women are going to play their rightful role in that country will have to be addressed, as the morning comes, as we get later into the morning, and as we get into the early afternoon and the late afternoon. But we have to work at it. There is no time to sit back; nobody is going to correct South Africa's problems if South Africans sit back. This is a time for action, it is a time to aggressively try to address the issues in that country. When we get into the early evening some day, I hope we will be able to enjoy a glass of good Cape wine. And we will all be able to sit and enjoy the evening sun and say to each other we have truly built a new South Africa.

But we are not new; that is only a nice slogan we like to use. We are not new. Yes, we are new as a baby of thirty months but we have some way to go, we have some way of growing; but the hope is there; South Africa has tremendous potential, we have good people of all racial groups and all communities. But we also have a history of destruction, a history of oppression that we must fight against. And we need your help; when I look at your island I am very impressed with how you have dealt with multiculturalism. I don't know if behind the facade you have been showing me — and you have been showing me very attractive facades — I don't know if behind that there are all sorts of problems, I have been here too short a time to tell, but I hope you will tell me in the few days I am with you, whether there are issues behind that facade. But the way you have displayed yourself, you have displayed what the new South Africa should become someday, when we enjoy our glass of wine. I would like to bring all of your home with me, so that we can learn from you at first hand. But I hope with the agreement we have with your university many of you will come, so that we can learn from you, your experiences, your successes. There is truly a home for all of us, women and men, in a new South Africa. There is truly a home to build a new multiculturalism in South Africa. There is truly a home to build a South African culture. Because right now, we have four cultures in one country. But if we work hard together, we can, at the end of the day, that early evening with your glass of wine, celebrate the true and real South Africa. And now, I will end my ramblings. Thank you.

**Pr SEVRY** : Any questions?

**Someone else in the attendance:** When I chose the topic that was on the programme today and not the one I presented today, I wanted to look at the situation of the black women, here in South Africa, whether something has changed since the elections in 1994. And, I am very grateful that you evoked that question of race, which is involved in the women's struggle, I mean nowadays. Before going back to South Africa perhaps I would like anyone to tell us, what should be done to redress the damage that has been done by apartheid to black women, without hurting the women of other races. Anyone who is present here perhaps can give us the solution?

**C. A. :** Here is an open invitation to you.

**Pr SEVRY :** Est ce qu'il y a des réactions? Oui.

**Someone in the attendance:** I think that South African people ask themselves too many questions, because in fact it just happened like that. You need not look at the skin or... you only speak with the person. I think you don't have to see if he is black, white, pink, green (laughter) or whatever you want, but you only speak to the person, to his mind, to his spirit, to his soul, or what... I think, that you don't have to ask yourselves questions because it is just like that — for us it is like that, because... But without forgetting your past, because I think that people...

**Pr SEVRY :** (Interrupting) Oui?

**Someone else in the attendance:** You say that you are also fascinated by the multiracial community here in Reunion island. Personally, I am researching on *District Six*, and I think that there is an experience there that you can... you can look at the way people lived there because they really lived like we live here now.

**Pr SEVRY:** Est ce qu'il y a encore des personnes qui souhaitent intervenir, avant qu'on ne passe à la contribution suivante? Oui?

**Someone in the attendance:** O. K., yes. What I want to say is that, in fact, I think that the problem in South Africa, is that you, as

Nathalie said, is that you ask yourself too many questions. But, I think that the problem is that this natural capacity and will to talk and to live naturally together has been repressed. So, I think that this essence is in fact our roots, and, as it has been repressed, it cannot... how can I put it... (laughter)... Oui, euh, en fait oui cette capacité naturelle de vivre entre chaque communauté, ne peut plus s'exprimer de manière naturelle. Je pense que c'est le problème.

**Pr SEVRY** : Did you get that?

**C. A.** : Yes, I did. I think first of all I want to thank all my friends from the island for finally speaking up at this meeting, I am glad you did. I did bribe them outside, I told them that I am going to buy each one of them a punch if they speak here; so, I think it is important what they are saying, that there has to be a naturalness, but you must remember South Africans have been going through a long history of unnaturalness. And, because they have to deal with that unnaturalness, there will be many questions. It is a natural process, to ask those questions. And we agree with you that sometimes we become so intense, and we can only see the questions, and we are not dealing with the solution. But, we thank you for those comments.

**Pr SEVRY**: J'espère qu'un jour on boira effectivement un verre de vin du Cap avec le Professeur Abrahams. Merci.

