

Psychological Reconciliation With Reality: Bessie Head's A Question Of Power

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Abstract

The history of writing by women in South Africa has been filled with struggle, invention and rebellion against many factors. Racial and gender oppression across South Africa has interweaved class and economic differences too where black and coloured women suffer the most as a marginal group both by traditional power structures of British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism. Women writers write of survival through conflicts, oppression, victimization, and differentiation meted out by both the prevalent social and political conditions in South Africa. Bessie Head brings forth a wide range of female characterization from victims to agents of change in her novel *A Question of Power*. This paper examines madness of Elizabeth as a metaphor to bring in realization and reconciliation of Elizabeth with Nature and mankind to evolve from a victim to that of an independent, self-reliant individual.

Keywords: *Women writers; South African context; Bessie Head; Madness; Exploration of Self*

1. Introduction

The history of writing by women in South Africa has been filled with struggle, invention and rebellion against many factors. Women writing can be traced back from 18th century onwards with Aphra Behn and Margery Kempe as the stalwarts of literature. The novel took an art form due to changing gender roles in South African family conditions. A great spectrum of writing by white and black women in South Africa emerged out of their lived experiences which made its distinct mark felt in the appearance of anthologies of women's writing. Racial and gender oppression across South Africa has interweaved class and economic differences too where black and coloured women suffer the most as a marginal group both by traditional power structures of British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism. Women writers write of survival through conflicts, oppression, victimization, and differentiation meted out by both the prevalent social and political conditions in South Africa. Bessie Head brings forth a wide range of female characterization from victims to agents of change in her novel *A Question of Power*.

2. Dreams and Madness as Exploratory Reality

Bessie Head brings out various dimensions of African dream activity significant along Eurocentric perspectives. Dreams are regarded as gifts passed down to individuals in African society from their ancestors and they are held as acceptable experiences. Dreams according to psychiatrists can sometimes predict, torture or protect and lead the

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person to face realities and transgress chaos thereby getting the person in contact with the highest sacred authority. This dream activity evolves beyond the theories of Freud and Jung and in relation to African consideration of dream activity and anthropologist Barbara Tedlocks' view can be widely accepted. She says:

... we must remember that some cultures are much more interested in and sophisticated about alternative or altered states of consciousness... Western analysis of altered states would seem primitive to peoples who have been living with and actively developing these types of consciousness for centuries. (20)

Dreams and madness constitute the main themes of many women novelists like Doris Lessing, Sylvia Plath, Jean Rhys and Bessie Head and these themes are considered as explosive subject matter by many critics.

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* is the culmination of Head's experiments and observations. The central protagonist, Elizabeth retains her personal dignity and acquires a constructive identity towards the end of the novel which is essential for establishment and recognition of individual value. She is transformed into a universal human type. She finds and creates a world of her own. She is preoccupied with the questions of finding a positive identity.

Head's characters undergo psychoanalytical struggle and come out successfully redeemed and recover their self from the transitionary traumatic period. Head's breakdown resulted from her status as a stateless exile - a woman without a place and identity. She leaves her home in South Africa in search of a place of peace away from the dehumanizing system of apartheid with its class and colour distinctions to Botswana with customs and prejudices of the blacks. *A Question of Power*, weaves in and out of sanity conveying the external life of an unwanted exile and the unbearable anguish when the mind becomes a torturous chamber. Elizabeth enters a ghastly underworld of self-loathing madness. The protagonist, Elizabeth is forced to interact with ghosts and hallucinatory figures at midnight. Dan, Sello and Medusa are the internal incarnations prevalent in her mind. The novel is set in Motabeng and the events are filtered through the disturbed consciousness of Elizabeth, the central character who in the process of continuation of narration undergoes acute mental distress with two nervous breakdowns from which she begins to feel weaker and more frightened about the world in which she lives in. Her feelings of insecurity and fear as a woman and as an outsider in Botswana are formed of her own self-doubts and she begins to experience hallucinations. In the unfolding of the mental trauma of pain and torture, she encounters two characters Sello and Dan. These two are representative of the patriarchal father and the husband who turn the protagonist's mind into a battleground as they compete for domination and possession of her personality. Sello is a symbol of love and compassion, who for three years has been "a ghostly, persistent commentator on all her thoughts, perceptions and experiences." (14)

Dan, on the other hand epitomizes destructive male egoism and all that is vile, personally debasing and obscene. The display of sexual exploits by him turns into a great threat for Elizabeth's weakened mental health and demonstrates Head's fear of evil in its various forms. Evil is presented in the form of sexual exploits constituting of Dan's display of 71 nice-time girls.

These characters in her novel transgress dream space by encountering the external conflicts in the battlefield of her mind and the reader too is tempted to enter this altered consciousness. Elizabeth becomes the soul seeker in search of sacred power and with this realization she overcomes all the private sexual passions. Sello, Dan and Medusa are figures as real in her dreams as men in actual society who provoke her to lose her sanity.

Motabeng's physical environment acts as an emotional stopgap for Elizabeth. The village co-operative movements, the garden work serves as counterpoints of real life when paralleled with the dream and hallucinatory world. They are symbols used by Head to stabilize the progressive ideas and harmonize the internal conflicts and helping Elizabeth to reassert again the ordinary impulse of life. Magically, Elizabeth in her hallucinatory world is caught in the webs of paradox. Through her illness of mental derangement Head is able to project through the character a historic quest of conflicts.

3. Madness as path to introspection of Self

A Question of Power confirms the unrelenting hope of a marginalized woman. Women are confronted on all sides with such an overwhelming sense of limitation. She avoids social interaction and withdraws into herself. Her troubled life in South Africa is compounded with her marriage to a perverse, molesting husband. Spiritual development occurs, but it cannot be transformed into action in the beginning. She rejects her deathlike state of madness and slowly turns towards life after an introspection of self towards activity by participation in gardening. Her act of piecing together the wreckage of her emotional life is a painful process extending for three years. Sello, Dan, their various malicious accomplices like the Medusa and nice-time girls, confront her with an internal war at a point when she finally expects peace.

She reflects her astonishment in Botswana: “the evils overwhelming her were beginning to sound like South Africa which she fled. The reasoning, the viciousness were the same, but this time the faces were black” (57) The Medusa in *A Question of Power* haunts Elizabeth’s mind and flaunts over her weakness over the sexual prowess which black Africans have when compared to that of whites or mixed races. She attacks her victim by reducing her to sexlessness and thereby pointing out that she had ‘no vagina’. Dan too commits similar crimes against Elizabeth’s sexuality with his ‘nice-time girls’ (197). As the main goal of Elizabeth’s quest is spiritual, she rejects the sexual exploits of her nightmare world.

Elizabeth finds herself thrown into destructive nervous breakdowns and projects her long-term relationship of a victim to a victimizer who sometimes is known, sometimes is unknown but the victimizer’s methods remain the same. She understands fully the methods of the victimizer and searches the process of overcoming the barriers that confine her to such hell. Elizabeth portrays the subjugation of all females – black and coloured Africans across Africa. She embraces a humanitarian vision based on total equalitarian grounds. She adheres to Sello – the monk’s belief that “God is people. There’s nothing up there. It’s all down here.” (109)

4. Space to explore binaries of good and evil

She uses madness and dreams space to realize and accept the system of logic in this world. This space provides her with a place to understand the aspect of survival and living. She understands that it’s the same logic to survive the world over i.e., to depend on one’s own self rather than on others. She undertakes the gardening project where land allows her to develop her creativity and regain strength of her life with more reality.

Elizabeth with the help of native Kenosi, American Tom and Afrikaner Eugene slowly builds up her own productive unit in the local industries project. Through her projective labour she stakes her claim as an active participant in the village development and thus decisively throws off her marginalized status allotted to her previously.

A Question of Power symbolically stands for the analysis of good and evil in the world, in the society and in one’s own self where resolutions are truly dependent on individual self only:

It seemed to her as though all suffering gave people and nations a powerful voice for the future and a common meeting ground, because the types of people Sello referred to as ‘the Gods’ turned out on observation to be ordinary, practical, sane people, seemingly their only distinction being that they had consciously concentrated on spiritual earnings. All the push and direction was towards the equality of man in his soul, as though if he were not fixed up there, it never would be anywhere else. (31)

Bessie Head’s approach to the problems of women in South Africa is from within their souls and minds. Elizabeth is employed as Head’s mouthpiece to issue an attack on the complex ills of the patriarchal and social behavioural attitudes. Head’s portrait of insanity concludes positively.

5. Conclusion

Bessie Head through Elizabeth presents the overall perspective of true humanity as she says: ‘There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet (205-206). This encapsulates Head’s secular and radical vision that emerged through a close confrontation with hallucinatory world leading to a triumph of herself over the nightmares of colonialism and patriarchal society. Madness constitutes a metaphor where the excruciating and painful personal experiences of life are juxtaposed to bring in realization and reconciliation of Elizabeth with Nature and mankind.

Elizabeth’s final act of placing of “one soft hand over her land” (206) and falling into peaceful sleep signals her triumph over an extended diabolical nightmare and her capacity to endure all suffering. Head has experienced the pathology of apartheid and toward the end she reconstitutes herself as a historical subject by establishing a loving bondage with all. She thus achieves psychological reconciliation with existent reality by emerging as a greater spiritual self.

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