



# The Marxist Aspect in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

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## Abstract

South Africa is one country where racial discrimination was widespread. Like the rest of the color-skinned people, colored writers in South Africa are marginalized and denied the right to express their experiences of living in a society riddled with racial inequality and oppression. Marxism is a school of thought that is concerned about the conflict between the dominant powerful classes and the oppressed ones in any given society. According to Marxism, literary texts are viewed as material that can be interpreted within historical contexts. South Africa is a country where the Apartheid System has been dominant. It is a country that has people of different ethnicity: the White, the Black and the Colored who are known as people of mixed race or hybrid. In South Africa colored people are doubly oppressed by their community, as they belong neither to the Black nor to the White. The colored people are marginalized and demeaned to a very degraded status by their society. Bessie Head is a South African female writer who is concerned about the clash between the different classes in her society. In this study the researcher wants to explore the class-struggle of women in general and the hybrid females in particular under the Apartheid System from a Marxist point of view. As a South-African female writer, Head is concerned about the struggle for power between the White and The Black, on the one hand, and between the hybrids on the other. *A Question of Power* can be seen as an indictment of the governing system in South Africa. It is a system that governs people not as ordinary human beings but according to the color of their skin. It is an autobiographical novel that tells the story of Elizabeth as a woman living under the Apartheid System. Elizabeth, the fictional character of Bessie Head, has to suffer greatly as a woman but her suffering as a hybrid is even greater. On the one hand, she is socially marginalized as a female living in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, she is also culturally colonized as an individual living in a society where racial discrimination is prevailing. On account of what is mentioned so far Elizabeth is suffering from an identity crisis.

**Keywords:** Oppression, mixed, patriarchal, power, conflict, Marxism, deprivation, Apartheid, hybrid, indictment, colonized, marginalized

## 1. The Marxist Theory in Literature

Marxism is a philosophy that is concerned with class struggle in literature. "Marxism assumes that literature can be interpreted within the social realities of any given society. It views man as a socioeconomic and social being." Eagleton (1996), a Marxist theorist, illustrates:

Marxism is part of a larger body of the theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies- the ideas, the values and feelings by which man experiences the society at various times. And certain of these ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature. (12)

Karl Marx, the pioneer of Marxism, sees human history as a continual struggle between different classes in a given society. That is between the oppressed and the oppressors, the powerful and the powerless.. He thinks that literature is a true reflection of social institutions from which it springs. As Afolayan puts it"

Marx had observed a continual conflict between two main classes- those who own the means of production and those who provide the labor. The former category is the minority, made up of people who own everything needed for livelihood, while the latter, which comprises the bulk of the world's population, consists of people who have nothing they could call their own. (2011: 6)

One of Marx's (1976) popular statements is that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness." (181) Here, Marx wants to stress that the norms and values that govern any given community have their own impact on the feelings, beliefs, actions and thoughts of the different classes that are governed by the same system that governs the same community as a whole. He also wants to emphasize that all people in general came to the world without a set of values or conventions to live by. Automatically, they acknowledge the values and ideas or ideologies by which the people of their community live. In the process, they internalize such ideologies and values that determine their social being in a certain community.

## 2. The Apartheid System in South Africa

People around the globe are faced with hindrances, hardships and difficulties that they should try to overcome one way or another. They are faced with so many difficulties because of their ideologies, ethnic origin, race, and gender, color of their skin or even their beliefs. Of course, the ideological, biological, cultural, social, political and economic constituents of a certain group of people are the very aspects that constitute, govern and shape their consciousness. South Africa got her freedom as an independent republic in 1961 and the Apartheid system was institutionalized. Racial segregation has emerged and black people have found it inevitable for them to leave and settle in the township. Sets of legal acts were introduced. One of these acts was the **Immorality Act** which incriminates sexual intercourse between white women and black men so as to keep the race pure white in the future. Thus, according to this law, the hybrid, resulting from the relationships between the black and the white have to bear the overwhelming consequences all their life. For black people, the hybrid can be accepted as black because they are too light-skinned. For the whites, the hybrids are too dark to belong to the white community and their dark complexion places them within the black race.

In the context of the South African society, people of mixed races undergo the same oppression that people of black skin undergo. Like the black, the colored are forced to live according to the controlling white system. The hybrid, because they are both black and white, they are marginalized and have no specific position in the society. They are deemed by both the black community as well as the white community. Of course, both the subjugation and exploitation of the colored result in overwhelming effects on the individual that, in turn, result in spiritual, emotional and psychological traumas. In the due light, Adewale Ajayi (2009) remarks:

The hybrid culture forces separation from the soul, it takes away the comfort of traditional secular and social support or attitudes, replacing them with an outsider's view on the world. Thus, separation causes untold stress and mental anguish for the "commoners" or everyday person, almost poor or powerless. (8)

## 3. The Marxist Approach of Bessie Head

Bessie Head is one African female writer who explores the trouble of socio-political society in her novels. In her exploration of the struggle of women in general and of the hybrid women in particular, she provides a Marxist perspective into the lives of many of her characters. She presents the difficult experiences that an African female character faces in the context of the Apartheid system. She is concerned with the struggle for power between the white and the black, on the one hand, and the struggle for the same between people of similar ethnicity on the other. Head wants to stress that, for a hybrid woman, she is victimized by race as by gender. In the world of Bessie Head, the women of color in Africa find themselves doubly oppressed, more marginalized and subjugated than the black male characters. Their lives are controlled on the ground of both racial as well as gender inequality.

Women of color have a history of oppression within African culture which is rooted in patriarchal custom and traditions. In this culture that the male supremacist beliefs forced women into a state of double oppression in this period of racial and gender inequality in Africa. (Kirton. 2010 101)

### 3.1 *A Question of Power* as an Indictment of the Apartheid System

*A Question of Power* is the third novel written by Bessie Head. It is an autobiographical novel. It tells the story of a life of neglect, isolation and deprivation. Head presents an individual struggle for identity within a community which is colored bias. It is the story of a woman produced by the South African Apartheid system. As LaRose Parris (2005) puts it "*A Question of Power* is a story of inhumanity, oppression, alienation and individual success and the indictment of the socio-political conditions responsible for causing them." (13). Bessie Head wants to condemn a system that governs the people on the basis of the color of their skin. It is a system where the whites consider themselves as a civilizing force to the black people of African. "They seem to themselves to be most supreme, most god-like, most wonderful and most cherished." (p. 19) On the other hand, black are said to be "naturally stupid, inferior" (57)

*A Question of Power* is the story of Elizabeth and her experiences as a typical woman living under the apartheid system. Elizabeth is the fictionalized character of Bessie Head. The novel openly charts the terrifying course of Head's mental breakdown, oppression, poverty, deprivation, isolation and human suffering. She has to face a lot of social as well as personal oppression on many grounds. At one level, Elizabeth has to suffer because she is a woman, and at the others, she has to suffer because of the color of her skin. In Elizabeth's world, both gender and race inequality have become an inevitable part of the hybrid female characters' lives.

### 3.2 *Elizabeth's Victimization at Different Levels*

Early in her life, Elizabeth realizes that she is oppressed by different powers in the form of race, class, patriarchy and gender. She is marginalized in many ways. As Fetson Anderson Kalua (2001) puts it, "Elizabeth's marginality takes different forms and included different domains of power. She suffers because she is a woman, a product of mixed race, an exile of apartheid and a foreigner in Botswana". (28) She is culturally colonized because of living under apartheid system. She is socially marginalized on account of being ostracized and compelled to leave her homeland for another land. According to Hetcher (1979) "the Marxist approach is naturally concerned with analyzing patterns of uneven development in the world economy and tends to revolve around the dependency framework" (376) Here, on account of the different aspects that characterize Elizabeth's life as well as the aspects of her social existence and her complex social and individual realities, the novel can be examined from a Marxist standpoint. She lives as an outsider both in the land of her birth and in the land where she seeks peace and a good living. According to a Marxist theorist, Fatton (1989), "To be outside the state is to be condemned to a subordinate and inferior status. In Africa class power is state

power; the two are fused and inseparable..... State power is male power. This, in turn, implies that African women have been marginalized. (48)

To begin with, it is important to examine Elizabeth's suffering as an individual living under apartheid. She is rejected by institutions, groups and individuals across the society. Being an orphan of a mixed race, she has to suffer as a child, an adult and an exile. Primarily, Elizabeth is told that as a baby, no one, no institution accepts her as a child to be loved. Her mother's family is rejected by her mother's family and foster parents take care of her. They regard her as an embarrassment than as a child or a relation. Elizabeth's uncle refuses to accept her as a member of the family. He says "We want to wash our hands of this business. We want to forget it. If the family that can by relationship brings her up throws her away in this way, the society is the next to take care of her." (17)

### *3.3 Elizabeth's Impoverished Childhood Experience*

As a child, Elizabeth is sent from one foster home to another. Ncube (2001) remarks "Being the offspring of a white woman and a black man, Elizabeth was branded as a racially unstable hybrid specimen of humanity unfit to be classified as either black or white." (29) Elizabeth is adopted by a foster family and she grows up with the impression that her foster parents are her real parents. The foster mother, later, tells her:

My husband worked on the child welfare committee, and your case came up again and again. 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 Beer family. A week later you were returned. The woman on the committee said what can we do with this child? Its mother is white. My husband came home that night and asked me to take you, I agreed". (17)

Elizabeth's childhood is marked by misery and poverty. It is void of love and empathy. Later, the husband of the foster mother dies and the foster mother has to turn the house into a beer bar for a source of a living. The situation of the fostering family is deteriorating. "She was secretly relieved to be taken away from the beer-house and sent to a mission school, as hours of her childhood had been spent sitting under a lamp-post near her house, crying because everyone was drunk and there was no food." (16)

### *3.4 Elizabeth's Troubled School Experience*

As a school girl, Elizabeth has also to suffer at school. She faces oppression and discrimination as a student because of her color of skin. She is rejected by both blacks and whites. When she joins the mission school, the principle of the school tells her:

We have full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to look her up as she was having child by the stable boy, who was a native. (16)

Elizabeth is discriminated against. She is also despised by both other students as well as the principle. They are not happy with her because she displays a distinctive skill. They practice racism on her as the following lines indicate:

Knowing that Elizabeth was more literate than the students, she trust her down too. She flung information at her in such a way as to make it totally in comprehensible and meaningless, subtly demonstrating that to reach her level of education; Elizabeth had to be able to grasp the incoherent. (16)

Elizabeth is traumatized by the principle who punishes her especially hard. Again, she tells Elizabeth that she may go insane as her mother has done. Other children also notice something unusual about Elizabeth's isolation. None of them will listen to her. They say to her "Come. The principle said you must be locked up." (16) In the context of South African society, Elizabeth is considered as different because of her skin. Jackson Lynnette (2005) notices "Being colored Elizabeth was considered as the "other" by her community. She is marginalized, unable to define herself and has to submit to the descriptions assigned to her by the dominant group. She is robbed of voice, identity and a sense of self." (100)

### *3.5 Elizabeth's Unsuccessful Maternal Life*

From a Marxist point of view, Elizabeth's identity or existence is determined by the different socio-economic conditions of the society in which she lives. Being disenfranchised, Elizabeth strives to find a place to herself in her community. One of her attempts to adjust to her situation is to get married. She marries a man one week after their first encounter. Due to the socio-economic conditions in which she lives, she gets married not to a man whom she loves but to someone who shows that he interested in equality and mankind. However, a month after their marriage, other women complain of being harassed by her husband. A neighbor says to Elizabeth "You have a strange husband. Sussie was standing outside the door and called him. He walked straight in and they went to bed. He's been doing this nearly every day;" (18) Elizabeth's marriage is not a success. She gets a son as a result of that marriage. However, she decides to break the marriage and goes to find a job for a living. In marriage and maternal life, Elizabeth challenges cultural ostracization of the female role in society. She gives priority to her desire for self-actualization to the call for social conformity. Here, Elizabeth's endeavor to overcome her situation is pure Marxist.

### 3.6 Elizabeth's Identity Crisis

Elizabeth is not psychologically stable. She is a person of no entity. She sees herself as ugly as she does not have that standard of beauty of either whites or blacks. She says "I'm not saying I am not ugly, I shouldn't mind if anyone told I 'm ugly because I know it's true." (43) She is unable to adjust to the traumatic events of rejection by all those around her. "In South Africa she had been rigidly classified colored. There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality. There was not any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. There were races, not people." (44)

Again, being disenfranchised and classified as colored, Elizabeth is to suffer an identity crisis. She is denied of her identity as a South African because of her mixed race. She is told that the colored people are not African but "Dogs filth" (104) She is considered as unfit and this renders her powerless. She is left wondering "Why white people .... Had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you? They were just born to be hated." (19) She wants to associate herself with Africans to gain an identity. She is always reminded of her despised racial identity as a half-bred and not African. As a result, Elizabeth decides to leave for another place where she will not be exposed to violence. She is dismissed from her homeland and is seen as an outcast immigrant rather than as a citizen. "Expelled from the earth, Elizabeth remains in the world of the ordinary as a walking body, but her invisible "I" gets confined at the edge of life and is suddenly placeless." (Borzaga, 2010 .33)

### 3.7 Elizabeth's Traumatic Experience in Botswana

Elizabeth decides to leave the whole of South Africa away from the Apartheid system. She leaves as an immigrant to Botswana. Primarily, Botswana is a country of a different culture. There Elizabeth has to face some differences at the cultural level. "People there had a written law. They hated any black person who was important." (26) Again, Elizabeth has to experience another form of discrimination. The people in Botswana speaks a language that she does not know. Elizabeth's interest and her way of life are quite different from the average Botswana citizens. Again, she lives as an outsider. "Definitely, as far as Botswana society was concerned, she was out-and-out outsider and would never be in another things." (Ajayi, 2009 26)

In Botswana, Elizabeth feels more alienated and estranged. She suffers greatly from social exclusion. She finds herself a victim of different sorts of suppression for reasons she cannot understand and unable to resist. Elizabeth develops a sense of sexual and racial inferiority. As a colored female, Elizabeth is denied freedom as her skin classifies her as inferior and her biological sex confines her to the lowest status. "Elizabeth cannot enjoy the "joy" of being a human being with a personality because there are "races" not people. First, she thinks that segregation is there only in South Africa. Yet, she discovers that it also exists in Botswana." (Mbadji, 2000 72)

Elizabeth is seen as an outcast by the people of Botswana. Her behavior is considered as actions that violate the soul and moral conventions of the society. Therefore, she is denied access to the mainstream of life. She undergoes nervous tension and her situation deteriorates. The society does not see her psychic condition but her actions and judges her by them. She does not feel at home among the people. She develops a sense of hatred toward them. She shouts "Oh, you bloody bastard Botswana, Oh you bloody bastard Botswana." (51) On the other hand, she keeps hearing "Dogs filth the Africans will eat you to death." (47) As a colored person, Elizabeth is discriminated against by both blacks and whites in Botswana. At another level she is discriminated against as a female living in a patriarchal society. In this due light, Amanita Kamara Mbadji states:

Generally, women have suffered from undervalued status in societies ruled by patriarchal white or black leaders. Here, victimization is practical not only by male but also by female counterparts or the social system itself .....Sufferings resulting from racial oppression and gender victimization have great psychological impacts on women. (2000 73)

## 4. Gender Oppression from a Marxist standpoint

Sola Afolayan remarks "Marxism can be seen as a living body of thought with the complex nature and formation of men (people) in society." (2) She wants to emphasize the impact of gender psychological oppression on the female characters and how men are behind the psychological traumas experienced and endured by them. Bessie Head wants to express her Marxist view of gender oppression. She wants to explore the influence of patriarchy on women. It is part of Elizabeth's social realities that patriarchy has become an inescapable for her as a woman. Consequently, she is excluded from solidarity with the people because of her race and gender. That is the people of Botswana contribute to her insanity.

Elizabeth is traumatized on account of the bizarre experiences she is exposed to. "Elizabeth is so oppressed by the social forces that she already has a second nature by the time she wants to rely on herself to combat the evils of oppression external to her." (Ajayi . 2009. 7) She is the product of the apartheid system which attacks her identity and disturb her relations. Much of mental disorder that Elizabeth develops can be attributed to the oppression she experiences at the hand of men. This idea is explained in the following notion of the phallus. "The phallus is the main transcendental signifier which defines sexual differences that guarantee the patriarchal structure of the symbolic order. Besides, the phallus signifies power and control through the satisfaction of the desire which is the dominant force of life." (Fetson, 2001 40)

#### 4.1 Elizabeth's Traumatization at the Hand of the Patriarchal Power

Elizabeth is aware of the different oppressive forces around her and this drives her out of her mind. She has to identify these forces before trying to get rid of them. As she settles in Motabeng, Elizabeth begins to realize that she has to undergo another kind of trauma. She realizes that her life is destabilized by the influence of the imaginary character of both Sello and Dan. They represent the patriarchal oppressive power which has become inescapable for Elizabeth. She starts to feel totally entrapped by them. "The fearful thing was that Dan had decided that he was a much better manner of the universe than Sello. What was eating him was that no prophecies had proceeded him; and yet in some way he had gained directorship of the universe." (25) Elizabeth suffers from hallucinations. These hallucinations provide an insight into how she is objectified and haunted by Dan and Sello who do not have any esteem for her as a woman and seeing her as sexual property. "In a patriarchal society, women are classed as objects, more specifically they are categorized as objects of desire used to perform sexual labor." (Kirton, 2010 55) Elizabeth becomes mad and her madness comes from her inability to adapt to the patriarchal repressive society. She states "All men were like that, they had prostitutes in the background. A long story was to unfold about the woman. Half of them belonged to Dan's". (119)

#### 4.2 Elizabeth's Traumatic Experience with Sello

Early in the novel, Elizabeth's psyche is subordinate to Sello. First, he appears to her as "the father, the man who has the face of an almost universally adored God." (23) Sello has two different appearances. One in white robe and the other in brown suit. On the former, Elizabeth sees a man who embodies divine and human characterization and in the later, she sees her tormentor who is "a history's cycle of oppression and domination." (Kalua, 2001 32) Here, Sello appears as representing and intensifying the oppressiveness of patriarchy with its standards. Of course, this intensifies Elizabeth's despair and mental agony.

Judith Butler (1998) contends that gender is "Performative and men and women perform roles that are applicable to their specific gender ... women perform the certain gender requirements that they are expected to perform in a given society; they are expected to be submissive." (900) The argument of Butler is applicable in the case of Elizabeth here, she lives in a gender-biased oppressive society. She is forced to be submissive. She is colonized by the politics of her society and subjugated by its norms that make of women only objects Bessie Head wants to affirm that the perpetrators show no remorse towards their victims and they continue to inflict their oppression at them. "The faces of oppressed people are not ugly. They are scarred with suffering .But the torturers become more hideous day by day. There are no limits to the excesses of evil they indulge in." (84)

#### 4.3 Medusa as an Instrument of Traumatizing Elizabeth

Moreover, Sello goes to use his wife, Medusa, to taunt and torment Elizabeth as a kind of demonstrating the patriarchal power. Medusa is Sello's instrument to inflict his oppressive male power. She, violently, attacks Elizabeth and drags her into a hole where she feels imprisoned. "She had a clear sensation of living right inside a stinking toilet, she was so broken, so shattered, she hadn't even the energy to raise one hand." (14) Medusa taunts Elizabeth by reminding her that she does not know any African language and she cannot identify with Africa neither in South Africa nor in Botswana because of her racial and sexual inferiority in a way to affect her mentality. For Elizabeth, Medusa is not an ordinary woman but she is "haughty, arrogant and so real....that Elizabeth lives in terror of her." (58)

Medusa violently attacks Elizabeth as she sees her lacking those aspects that enable her to conform to her notion of a woman identity as an African. During the night she scares Elizabeth with pictures of hybrid men as they are dying. She says to Elizabeth "Your people are not African people" (71) Furthermore, Medusa goes to claim that Elizabeth is a sexual perversion, a woman with no vagina. She displays her amazing and intimidating vagina to Elizabeth mocking at her "You haven't got anything near that. Have you?" (44)

Elizabeth-Medusa's relationship is one marked by violence and perversion. Medusa shows Elizabeth something like a cesspit where "she was immersed in the filth from hand to toe. It was like swimming in it whole and the ordinary pleasure of life, like eating food, because an excruciating misery. It was as if excrete where everywhere." (64) Thus, gender is depicted through the violent relationship between Medusa and Elizabeth. Not only such a relationship is confined to males against females but it is also enacted by women against other female characters in the novel. This goes hand in hand with the opinion that:

Medusa stands for a demonic image of women created by men in patriarchal society to represent women as evil beings who need men to become good. Medusa can be seen as a strong one but he has turned into a kind of women to cry and wipe their men's feet with their long black hair. She can be seen as one of Sello's women whom he has killed. Medusa herself is a victim of men's power. (Mbadji, 2000 72)

#### 4.4 Elizabeth's Traumatic Experience with Dan

Like Sello, Dan sees Elizabeth as an instrument for his own advantage. He perceives her as a means to overcome Sello's power. He taunts her nights by his prowess with a number of women he considers as his mistresses and servants for sexual pleasure. He asks his nice-time girls to stand in front of Elizabeth in a queue like a gang of slaves. "The women prostrate Dan's feet." (163) showing Elizabeth that she does not belong. Furthermore, Dan's women go to wear Elizabeth's dresses, steal her. Of course, Elizabeth's experience with Dan and his nice-time girls are of overwhelming impact on her mind and soul and pushes her further toward madness. He captivates her mind with erotic gestures and emotional appeals to her womanhood.

But Dan thrust black hands in front of her black legs and a huge, towering black penis. The penis was always erected from that night he kept his penis down, after all, the women of his harem totaled seventy one. They put on Elizabeth's dresses and underwear and made use of her perfumes He had been standing in front of her, his penis down, as usual, flaying his powerful in the air saying "Look" I am going to show you how I sleep with B .... She has womb I can't forget....You haven't got a vagina. (13)

Dan also goes to inflict his sexual oppression on Elizabeth making her feel that she is not like other women. He wants to enforce her sexual inferiority and undesirability. He taunts her saying " You are supposed to feel jealous ... You haven't got what that girl has got." (127) Further, he says to her "When I go with a woman I go for an hour. You can't do that." (13) Dan always wants to control Elizabeth and her mind to ensure that she will remain under his control. Through Dan's acts, Elizabeth realizes that she is denied access to ordinary life as a female being. Further, he taunts her by his evil prophecies that she will die "die, die you dog, there is no place for you." (192) In another situation he says to her " You're going to commit suicide" (186) Thus, Dan reduces Elizabeth to a person who is identityless as a woman and even as a human being turning everything upside down. For Elizabeth, Dan symbolizes patriarchal power that seeks to destroy femininity in many ways. Dan's power is overwhelmingly destructive." "Dan is Elizabeth's personification of pure power. Through Dan she explores the nature of power and its relation to evil, discovering that the two are related." (Heald, 1995 6)

### 5. Elizabeth as Marxist Figure

*A Question of Power* explores Elizabeth's struggle to identify herself with a community that is gender-and colored-biased. It is a detailed investigation of Elizabeth's life and her endless effort to make the world around her meaningful both in South Africa and in Botswana. She wants to construct a world of her own amidst the very oppressive socio-economic condition. It is a world that is presented as rational in the midst of apartheid and masculine oppression. Elizabeth's awareness of the oppressive forces around her derives her out of her mind. In her struggle to find a place for herself Elizabeth appears as a Marxist figure who is trying to identify the different forms of the socio-economic forces that govern her society before attempting to get rid of them. Thus, Elizabeth represents an oppressed class demonstrating how this class will rise up forming a utopian society of their own.

Elizabeth gradually struggles to liberate herself from the shackles of self-hate characteristic of the apartheid system. She wants to survive in a society where the evils of racism are abundant. "Her loud wail had only the logic of her inner torment, but it was the same thing, the evils overwhelming her were beginning to sound like South Africa from which she fled." (57) Elizabeth goes for an attempt to have some control over her consciousness which has shaped her self-identification. She is disenfranchised and her disenfranchisement does not dictate her existence. She develops a sense of great importance in her life. According to Marxism "the individual has limited agency, he/she is a reactionary being whose identity formation is determined by socio-economic conditions." (Parris, 200 7)

### 6. Elizabeth's Adoption of a Coping Mechanism for Survival

In Motabeng, Elizabeth has to find a job for a living for her and her son. She joins the Motabeng secondary school. Again, she is rejected by the school because of the mental breakdown she is experiencing. Elizabeth has to find a coping mechanism to deal with her situation. She has to find a way to escape her subjugation by the oppressive culture of her society. She has also to escape the patriarchal efforts to manipulate her spiritual and sexual being. She develops a sense of self-awareness of her situation as a whole. She realizes that she should not respond passively to those who want to dominate her. Elizabeth appears as a Marxist character who has to overcome oppression and social conflicts. She wants to create a classless society where equality and justice prevail.

Elizabeth realizes that as a woman, she should work to change her situation. She works with other women for both individual as well as public benefit. She discovers that she can have a personal relationship with both people and land. It is only the community that can help her to get out of the hell in which she finds herself. She realizes that only work and loyal friendship can help her to overcome her situation in her journey for self-integration:

She spent most of the holidays of the rainy seasons taking long walks across Motabeng village with the small boy, absorbed by the sky which had turned into a huge back-drop for the swaying, swirling movements of the desert rain... In movements of vast, extensive peace like that evening, she liked to imagine that she was gathering all the threads of life together and holding them in her hands. (60 -61)

Elizabeth is ostracized and is desperately mad. However, this madness helps her to gain insight into the reality of life. She rises up rejecting to be oppressed by the same powers that used to oppress her any more. She starts gradually to regain sanity and encourages her to mingle with the Motabeng community. Elizabeth's willingness not to yield to anymore oppression is self-induced. It is also supported by the company of the good people of the Motabeng Project. LaRose Parris (2005) asserts that "Elizabeth's potential for transcendence is linked to the resolution of her mental crisis. She has to find a means to defend a new feminine consciousness." (11)

### 7. Elizabeth's Journey through Integration

Elizabeth joins the Motabeng Farming Project. There, she is impressed to see people from different cultures speaking different languages living and working together. Though most of her work is voluntary, she finds fulfillment in

empowering and supporting the workers. She sees them working in harmony and peace showing a lot of understanding. She is impressed by Kenosi who plays a vital part in helping her to recover. She encourages Elizabeth saying to her "never leave the garden." (142) She succeeds in convincing her that they will succeed despite whatever difficulties they will face. They become close friends. She helps her to recover and get back every time she falls a prey to Dan and Sello. Elizabeth regards her as "sudden appearance as one of the miracles that saved her life." (89)

Elizabeth has good relationship with other people on the farm like Tom, Birgette and Eugene. In her association with these workers, she builds herself as an individual. She feels at home among them and together they collaborate to build the garden. Together they want to up-lift the economy of the village by producing new products and growing more crops. Elizabeth displays a great ability introducing new products. She does the great task for the good of the community of Motabeng. "As a humble woman, Elizabeth had constructive power, which demanded no pride, prestige or orgasm, but only dedication for the benefit of the Motabeng society." (Ncube, 2001 84)

Elizabeth is given emotional support by more other friends. Tom, who is white American, helps her to recover from her illness. He becomes her regular caller. His affability with everyone helps her to recover. He advises her that her problems can be solved by working on the farm. He pays regular visits to her after she comes out from the hospital. Moreover, he looks after her and saves her from committing suicide. She tells Tom "The first thing I've always done is to act on wild impulse. My temperament was unequal to what I've through for three years or more. I seem to have taken a strange journey into hell and darkness. I could not grasp the darkness because at the same time I saw the light." (190)

Birgette is a sensitive Danish worker who sympathizes with Elizabeth. Also, Mrs. Jones is helpful to her. She comes to see her on her return from the hospital. She also takes care of cooking and praying for Elizabeth. Moreover, Elizabeth is also impressed by the humanity of a class instructor named Gunner. She is loved by all the people on the farm. All these people help Elizabeth to overcome and master her own situation. Further, she admires her friend Eugene's genius. He has a pragmatic view of life. Elizabeth likes many things about him. She is impressed by his education, intellect, skill, individual empowerment and personality. Thus, Elizabeth can see solidarity with people from different cultures, of different mindsets and different backgrounds. As Townsend (1994) puts it "It is only by entering into Eugene's world of commitment and by developing a garden with fellow human beings who become profoundly meaningful to her life, that Elizabeth is gradually restored to sanity." (27)

Elizabeth's son, Shorty, also, plays a vital part in helping his mother to recover from her illness. He remains beside her throughout most of her sufferings. In his mother's illness, Shorty provides his mother with the emotional support for her own survival. Even when she is hospitalized in the mental hospital six hundred miles away from Motabeng, Shorty keeps sending her letters assuring that she will recover and come back home. He says to her that he "does not like to die." (179) Shorty's presence beside his mother gives her better therapy than that she is given in the hospital. "It is Shorty's presence of mind that constantly allows his mother to go back to the hard reality of keeping alive." (Kalua, 2001 50)

At the Motabeng Farm Project, Elizabeth acts as an active inhabitant through the external labor. The garden provides her with solace and peace. It provides her with " a new milieu that nourishes her psyche and helps her to circumvent her marginalized situation. Davidson (1990) argues: "Elizabeth's final state of complete integration synthesizes an internal and external labor. Her success in the vegetable garden is the external symbol of her creative act of regaining a foothold on life. Elizabeth's early act of renaming Motabeng signals her fundamentally positive outlook." (25)

### *7.1 Elizabeth's Newly Acquired Sense of Selfhood*

Elizabeth has a constant quest to develop some mastery over her consciousness that has shaped her newly acquired sense of selfhood. She starts to look at the world differently. She is no longer a victim of her society. One of her coworkers says to her "I sense something in your argument that does not apply to my own life. You might not realize it, but you are placing tremendous importance on your own life." (86) Together with her coworkers, they establish a vegetable batch as part of the local industry project. They grow a lot of crops and opened a shop where they can sell a lot of vegetables. They become close friends leading the same life together. P. H. Lorenz (1996) remarks "It is the realization of the full potential of one's soul and its interdependence with souls around it that makes one free." (593)

The key for Elizabeth to survive whole in her new adopted community is also to recognize the true nature of Dan and Sello. In the process of recovery, Elizabeth's power to heal means recognizing the faces of good and evil. Having recovered from her illness, Elizabeth starts to see both Sello and Dan differently. Sello's former tremendous size is reduced that he appears as a scarecrow to Elizabeth. Sello is no longer has the same influence on the mind and soul of Elizabeth. The cesspit that he has regularly employed to torment her is now empty, clear and full of light. She realizes that she can disempower him and this is why he does not have power over her anymore. Finally, Sello goes to apologize for whatever he has caused.

Also, Dan's efforts to oppress Elizabeth is no longer effective. He no longer has any influence or power over her. She can discover all the power structure which he embodies. All his former deeds that used to torment Elizabeth become of no influence on her mind and soul. Elizabeth's resolution is finally attained. Compell (1993) remarks "Elizabeth survives her insanity and emerges as a well and productive member of the project community. The question of power is resolved. After three years of mental torment, Elizabeth emerges victorious and more powerful than all the demons have plagued her." (12)

Having struggled against all male domination and female subjugation and resisted the controlling dominance of an oppressive patriarchal society, Elizabeth, eventually, triumphs. She is able to achieve integration and fulfillment on her

own. This integration exposes Elizabeth as triumphant over evil and it also indicates that men, eventually, will be forced to accept women as equals. She is no longer guided by those around her. She has already acquired a new sense of selfhood and understanding that helps her to discover the value of personal relationship with the people as well as the land. It is through such relationships that Elizabeth enhances her own sense of self-worthiness. This goes hand in hand with Mhlahlo's remark about Elizabeth female status:

Elizabeth accesses her inner strength and drive in order to rise above the brutalizing experiences that confront her. It is through sheer will power, her enhancing relationship with associates and with the land as well as her productive service to the larger community, that Elizabeth manages to relinquish her negative self-perception as a political refugee. (Mhlahlo, 2002 61-62)

Thus, Bessie Head has sketched Elizabeth's personality and fictionalized her demons in a way to express her Marxist outlook of the world in which her protagonist lived by deconstructing the oppressive patriarchal world both in South Africa and Botswana. Finally, Elizabeth refuses to be constrained by the forces that have been oppressing her. She appears as a liberated woman who no more succumbs to oppression or yield to obstacles of traditional societal values. As Fetson Anderson Kalua points out:

*A Question of Power* is a huge, cosmic act of deconstruction which liberates Elizabeth's soul. After this liberation, Elizabeth knows that she is no longer on the margin of society. She is at liberty either to come to terms with those identities that have been imposed on her or merely reject them, seeing them as mere tools and strategies of hegemonic social structures to subjugate those without power. (2001 18)

Elizabeth ends the novel on the liberating message that "there's no God and his name is Man, and I am his prophet." (206) She is able to free herself from the anguish brought through rejection. She possesses power and she "makes a gesture of belonging to her new land." (206)

### **8. The Epitome of Bessie Head's Marxist Vision**

Again, Bessie Head has a message to convey. This message is pure Marxist in the sense that she wants a world void of inequality and oppression condemning those in position of power for prolonging human suffering. She could masterly create a new world for Elizabeth in which she enables her to challenge and defeat the socio-political and psychological effects of racism and oppression. Having redefined a sense of self, Elizabeth can move forward. LaRose Parris (2005) remarks "In Head's treatment of the oppressive socio-political systems and their impact on human psyche, she charts a path to an unprecedented future by indicating the past as insufferable and inhumane." (20)

From a Marxist point of view, gender injustice is not possible while stratification is not eliminated. Bessie Head's vision of a classless African society void of gender oppression is manifested in *A Question of Power*. Head dreams of a utopian society where people are regarded as equal citizens but not as classes because of their gender, color or race. Elizabeth has been traumatized and tormented by Dan and Sello, but she could free herself of their influence. Finally, she was able to regain her sanity by recognizing that she has to get rid of those who have been dominating her. Bessie Head's Marxist vision can be summed up in Remi Akujobi's words. Head dreams of:

A society that aims at establishing a just order and focus should be on human development. Apathy that allows for injustice and exclusion, rejection and discrimination should be replaced with the policy of inclusion, social justice, honesty, relationships and consideration. A classless society where everyone is equal and free should be built. A society that respects its citizens irrespective of gender and class. (Akujobi, 2006 13)

### **9. Conclusion**

Bessie Head preaches for a world where people are not subjugated on the basis of their gender and race. A world where people in general and women in particular should not give up their battle to withstand the hindrances on the way of their progress. It is through the character of Elizabeth that Bessie Head wanted to describe the experience she has had. Skillfully, she could pinpoint to what extent the society has influenced her as a writer. She wanted to demonstrate how individuals can make changes in the society. To Head, the individuals are the very people who can change the whole structure of their society. It was the people of South Africa and Botswana who were the agent of racism and other racist ideologies. She wanted to call for racial tolerance, social justice as well as equality.

*A Question of Power* can be seen as a novel of great significance today. It increases the reader's knowledge and understanding of an issue of great importance in an era of racial oppression that Head has lived in. Also, it enforces one's understanding of such knowledge within a literary context. In a word, assimilating Head's Marxist outlook is a gateway to the reader to adapt himself/herself to whatever situation or circumstances that life might impose on him/her. A Marxist reading of Head's novel can be also seen as an invitation to adopt whatever mechanism available to come adjust with life with its situations and experiences.



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