

DECLARATION

I declare that *From Proscription to Prescription: Marginality and Postcolonial Identities in Bessie Head's A Question of Power* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Signed:  Date: 28 February 2002.

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**FROM PROSCRIPTION TO PRESCRIPTION: MARGINALITY AND POSTCOLONIAL
IDENTITIES IN BESSIE HEAD'S A QUESTION OF POWER**

by

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ABSTRACT

In A Question of Power Bessie Head explores metaphysical forms of knowledge and systems of belief (against a background of what is verifiable and can be called the truth) and finds them necessary but flawed because they are illogical. The experience of madness in Bessie Head's main character, Elizabeth, (which is caused by a deep fear of domination and oppression), provides an opportunity for the character to raise propositions and questions of philosophy related to race, class, heterosexuality, God, to mention but a few, and to come to the conclusion that the 'truth' claims which are implied in and suggested by these notions do not obtain in real life. In other words, there is no stable, transcendental reality. It dawns on Elizabeth (the main character) that certain realms of knowledge which society has determined as objective truth will remain forever unknowable. Thus Elizabeth, the main character in a A Question of Power, identifies and challenges all patriarchal structures and power hierarchies in society, seeing them as the real causes of her suffering. After completing this process of deconstruction, she is able to integrate herself into society.

Key Terms

Proscription, Prescription, Postcolonial Identities, Marginality, Essentialism

Constructivism, Embodiment, Patriarchy, Sexuality, Heterosexuality, Identity

Materialist Discourse, Phallus.

IMPORTANT TERMS

1. Constructivism

An anti-essentialist view that there is no transcendental reality in nature; that meaning is produced and constructed in culture and society. It is a rejection of the notion of identity based on universalism and essentialism.

2. Embodiment

The general appearance of a person. See sexuality.

3. Essentialism

The view that there is an essential or intrinsic transcendental reality, truth, meaning in nature.

4. Heterosexuality

That coitus between man and woman is the only normal and natural sexual relationship.

5. Identity

The term associated with oneness or sameness. It is often bound up with essentialism.

6. Materialist discourse

The kind of logic that considers the relevance and validity of social reality from a non-transcendentalist and non-essentialist point of view.

7. Patriarchy

Male domination.

8. Phallus

Designates the symbolical status of the penis.

9. Postcoloniality

A literary theory which explains and basically challenges identities based on essentialism and universalism.

10. Postcolonial Identities

Identities that emerge in the wake of constructivism.

11. Prescription

A medical term used in a very unusual but special way to mean the process of therapy and wisdom which comes about after going through suffering.

12. Proscription

The condition of marginality, of generally being seen as the 'other'. It is the condition of exclusion, of denial of identity, of being seen as different.

13. Sexuality

Understood in all its permutations, it means any one or a combination of the following:

- a. embodiment or the general appearance, the nature and meaning of the physical body
- b. drives and impulses directing a subject toward an object
- c. identity
- d. orientation, positions, desires
- e. practices and behaviours involving bodies and pleasures usually but not always involving orgasm.

(the above definitions of sexuality are found in Grosz, E. 1994. See Bibliography).

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INTRODUCTION

‘What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence’ (Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1918).

The above landmark statement not only summarises a vital strand in the argument of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous Tractatus Logic-Philosophicus but is also evocative of postcoloniality’s impulse of demystifying and deconstructing authoritative power structures. Wittgenstein had a compelling belief that problems of philosophy come about because we misconstrue the polemics of our language. He asserts that whenever we make propositions about any form of knowledge, we often take for granted the fact that we understand the logic of the language, with the result that we usually talk about things that are really beyond language and the realms of human acuity. In the Tractatus, for example, Wittgenstein investigates the nature of what society regards as absolute values and finds them empty of all meaning. In other words, while it is necessary for people in their daily narrative of their existence to make statements such as ‘God exists’ – a proposition which in purely philosophical terms is neither axiomatic nor false but probably meaningless – their essential value and truth cannot be established in any determinate way.

In like manner, Leon de Kock argues that postcolonial discourses ... ‘share the aim of decolonising knowledge’ (De Kock 1993: 52). That is to say, the Western constitution of political, economic, religious, socio-cultural (including literary) epistemologies, veiled in the term ‘universal’, is seriously questioned by

postcoloniality. Maps of provenance of knowledge, meaning, desire, and even difference, have been redrawn, with a view to emancipating all forms of knowledge from frames of reference that make words stand still and refer, that fossilize all forms of identity in ‘conventional’ and ‘universal’ modes of cognition.

In A Question of Power, Bessie Head investigates certain questions of philosophy in order to establish whether or not they are grounded on essentialism and determinacy. Essentialism is here understood as a firm belief that certain notions such as nature, truth, meaning, value, gender, identity, embodiment, to mention but a few, have inherent, irreducible qualities that delineate what they really are as units, entities or “existencies”. Thus in A Question of Power, Bessie Head rejects the liberal-humanist view that meaning systems built around notions such as gender, race, class, religion, God, and other hierarchical differentiations are natural and fixed.

In this dissertation, I employ postcolonial literary theory or postcoloniality to explore various kinds of identities that emerge from conditions of marginality in Bessie Head’s A Question of Power. Postcolonial thinkers characterise marginality variously as any of the following postcolonial conditions: class mobility, exile, lack of institutional base, expatriation, travel, women living on the margins of patriarchy, minorities living under the domination of a majority and vice versa, or any form of displacement which leads to a condition of ‘refugeeism’. Homi Bhabha makes an insightful comment about postcoloniality:

The postcolonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive 'liberal' sense of the cultural community Questions of race and cultural difference overlay issues of sexuality and gender and overdetermine the social alliance of class and democratic socialism. The time for 'assimilating' minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed (Bhabha 1994: 175).

In other words, postcoloniality is no longer a concept whose emphasis falls on just 'anti' (as in anti-imperialism) or 'after' (as in post-imperialism), but is now so broad, so plural that it subsumes other discourses of modernity which explore and interrogate narratives such as subalternity, postslavery, gender, refugeeism, and the histories of nations, races, minorities, communities and peoples. This realisation hinges on the truism that almost any community or nation has gone through or been affected by an experience of colonialism either directly or indirectly, wittingly or unwittingly. The postcolonial prerogative has now become a dynamic of resistance to perceiving the terrain of history as holistic, organic and transcendental. The binary dialectic, through which identities of difference have been understood in the past, is called into question; thus postcolonial identifications open up possibilities of cultural hybridity or multiculturalism which entail difference, without a hierarchy that has been prescribed from outside.

Bessie Head's A Question of Power falls within the ambit of and lends itself to postcolonial literary theory. Non-sequential and complex, A Question of Power

is a series of protracted reiterations of the inner workings, the feelings, emotions, mental turmoil, torments, pain, and struggles of Elizabeth, the main character, with a bare thread of day-to-day 'real' world narrative to hold it together. These intermittent and rambling labyrinths of Elizabeth's inner life are forms of knowledge and discourses which reflect the fragmentation in her subjectivity. Elizabeth's menaced soul clearly clamours for healing, and release from the demons that appear to her in the forms of Sello, Medusa, and Dan. These characters represent several knowledges and regimes of power such as racism, God, sexual oppression, religion, to mention a few. As Margaret Tucker succinctly puts it,

[t]he suffering of oppression when dragged to the surface causes Elizabeth to go insane and redelve into herself, the second journey is one of naming and dispelling the horrors. The first journey, that of recognizing oppression, is complete when the novel begins. Elizabeth is now figuring out what to do with oppression once it is recognized (Tucker 1988: 171).

In other words, Elizabeth's intense awareness of proscriptive regimes around her drives her out of her mind. She has to identify these forms of oppression before getting rid of them.

As a coloured, pro-feminist, illegitimate 'single' mother who once lived in apartheid South Africa, Elizabeth is quite literally 'proscribed', colonized, 'othered', marginalized. As Elizabeth grows up in South Africa, she is struck by the brutal reality of her pariah status because she is not white. This realisation is

one reason for leaving the country. Secondly, because she speaks only English, Elizabeth is linguistically marginalized in rural Setswana-speaking Serowe, Botswana, where, also as a coloured, she is never really accepted. Further, through mental breakdown, which is occasioned by the intrusions of Sello and Dan into her life, Elizabeth realises that she is, in fact, colonized by a panoply of knowledges and powers in the form of race, class, God, patriarchy and heterosexuality. Though Sello and Dan are living persons in the village of Motabeng, the Sello and Dan who oppress Elizabeth by intruding into her wakeful life as well as in her hallucinations are chimerical figures. All these experiences Elizabeth goes through and endures constitute the conditions of proscription: proscription is the state of being seen as the 'other', of suffering isolation, of denial of identity, of finding oneself on the fringes of existence.

My thesis in this dissertation is that the process of 'proscription' eventually leads to mental breakdown and is gradually exorcised by the process of deconstruction, of decolonisation. After this Elizabeth breaks through the proscriptive straight-jacket of oppression, not only by adopting a radically different model of vegetable cultivation, but also through the emotional support given to her by her compassionate friends such as Kenosi, Tom, Birgette, Eugene and her son Shorty, all of whom help Elizabeth through her difficult time of madness. I call this second process prescription.

The term prescription is not used in the imperative sense (as in prescriptive linguistics). Rather prescription is used in a psychomedical, therapeutic, curative

sense to mean a wholesome alternative remedy (other than chemical-medicinal) for illness. Elizabeth's madness opens up a world of paradox which becomes a rite of passage, an initiation into wisdom that was hitherto unknown. Prescription for Elizabeth is a process of self-therapy, of self-discovery which is partly self-induced and partly assisted by well-meaning friends such as Eugene. As a sequel to proscription, prescription is a process of healing, of learning to belong, especially where the prescription of conventional medicine fails. Through prescription, Elizabeth regains her sanity, begins to see things in a different and informed light, and is thus able to start living her life anew.

One of the central tenets of certain types of literary criticism, in particular phenomenological criticism associated with Edmund Husserl, is that the text alone is what matters. This type of criticism offers the kind of reading that ignores the context of the work and its author. For Husserl, 'the actual historical context of the literary work, its author, conditions of production and readership are ignored; phenomenological criticism aims instead at a wholly "immanent" reading of the text, totally unaffected by anything outside it' (Eagleton, 1983, 2nd ed.: 53).

And yet, when a close reading of A Question of Power is attempted, this tenet seems inadequate and excludes layers of meaning which can only be derived from an awareness of interesting, if shifting, points of equivalence and divergence between the character of Elizabeth and Bessie Head. That a link exists between the two seems incontestable, and is worth exploring so that, in

the spirit of Roland Barthes, according to whom a text 'dissolves all distinct meaning into a free play of words, which seeks to undo repressive thought systems by a ceaseless slipping and sliding of language' (*Ibid*: 71). In other words, the reader can fill in gaps, silences, hiatuses and missing connections that many texts are made up of. This is more closely related to Poststructuralism according to which meaning 'cannot be easily nailed down, it is never fully present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together' (*Ibid*: 111).

First, consider a central issue of identity: names. The forenames Elizabeth and Bessie, like Bess, Beth, Liz, Lizzie, Eliza, and others all belong to the same generic or 'family' of which Elizabeth can be seen as the 'head' name, (no pun intended). Early in the novel, as the details of Elizabeth's life in South Africa begin to emerge, clear equivalents with the life of Bessie Head are instantly established. These equivalents extend into the flight to Botswana and many events and circumstances of Elizabeth's life there. For example, even though no evidence obtains, the facts about the fictional Elizabeth's circumstances of the birth, upbringing and marriage fit the reality of Bessie Head's life. Further, even in the absence of psychomedical evidence, the fact that Elizabeth suffers a nervous breakdown corresponds with the clinical madness that Bessie Head suffered whilst living in Botswana.

As for points of divergence, some interesting issues are raised: about the nature, substance, progress and detail of mental illness, and about the process of healing or prescription. It is possible to assert that the clinical details of Bessie Head's

mental illness and breakdown, resulting in hospitalization in Lobatse, Botswana, are subordinated in the novel to her artistic purpose of deconstruction, the prime impulse of A Question of Power. In other words, it would seem fairly safe to assert that the madness of Elizabeth and that of Bessie Head are fundamentally divergent. Elizabeth's mental anguish, protracted hallucinatory agonies and recurrent, nightmarish pains are the very means by which the many demons of patriarchy are exorcised. This wide-ranging deconstructive attack on establishment hierarchies, really, transcends the real life details of Bessie Head's illness. Thus Bessie Head has formulated the character of Elizabeth and fictionalized her demons in order to forge an ontological vision of the world, the nature of meaning, thereby serving her artistic purposes of deconstructing oppressive hierarchies, and this process brings about a form of therapy.

What is also clear is that Elizabeth's healing leads to the adoption of utopian socialist farming cooperative ideals which, sadly, offered no lasting solution or prescription for either Bessie Head or for any postcolonial African state. Beyond the publication of A Question of Power Bessie Head's self-destructive behaviour seemed to have continued, probably leading to her early death. Likewise, the failures of socialism in Africa and beyond, culminating in the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union, point to the naivety of the Motabeng agricultural experiments as a deconstruction of capitalist economic power. A Question of Power is not an autobiography in terms of psychological verisimilitude; the text instead fulfils the need to deconstruct various essentialisms, therapeutically as life-giving prescription. In other words, 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 margins 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 used to subjugate those without power.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO BESSIE HEAD'S WORK

Bessie Head was born 'on 6th of July 1937' (Birch 1995: 10) in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, of a white mother. 'Who the father was is completely unknown, and speculation is a waste of time' (*Ibid* 1995: 10). Because of the apartheid system and its discriminatory laws, Bessie Head's grandmother, Mrs Birch, arranged for her adoption immediately. Different families fostered the infant Bessie Head, and she grew up not knowing her mother.

After training as a primary school teacher Bessie Head had a brief stint in teaching and journalism before leaving South Africa to take up a teaching post in Serowe, Botswana, where she established herself as a writer of repute. Bessie Head's first novel was When Rain Clouds Gather (1968). This was followed by Maru (1971) and A Question of Power (1973). Her last work of fiction was a short story anthology entitled The Collector of Treasures (1977). Serowe : Village of the Rain Wind (1981) is a sociological text. Finally, A Bewitched Road (1984) – Bessie Head's final work – is a detailed historical account which critiques South African history and society and projects a utopian framework for a Southern African future. Bessie Head died in 1986.

The Zeitgeist of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s was characterised by the phenomenon of change, and in this respect Bessie Head is certainly a product of her time. The calls for reform following the end of the Second World War were not a new thing *per se*; they reflected natural progressions from earlier

movements (such as the suffragetism of the 1920s) and the changes in Western society largely caused by the social impact of the two world wars.

The significant changes were to occur in the realms of literary theory, politics, history, culture, to name but a few. The issue of the civil rights movement in America in the early 1960s, for example, triggered a revival in the debate about the validity of the hitherto legitimising discourses of the enlightenment era. Terry Eagleton argues that global struggles around this time were characterised by 'political militancy and high theory' (Eagleton 1993: 190). In literary theory, for example, the Russian Formalism, the French Structuralism and Poststructuralism took a centre stage while Feminism was born as an offshoot of the civil rights and the Women's Liberation Movement. At the same time, Marxism was under close scrutiny by Feminists, for its economic determinism; and, finally, psychoanalysis was being revisited.

All of these discourses, commonly known as 'materialist', began to call into question those ontologies and collective entities (such as God, religion, politics, culture, patriarchy) that had, earlier, been seen to bestow meaning and identity. Materialist discourses adopted an anti-essentialist view of reality.

Foremost amongst the thinkers and one of the most influential anti-essentialist was Michel Foucault whose perception of any discourse in society is informed by 'formidable materiality' (Coursework: 84). In other words, discourse or knowledge is neither intrinsically absolute nor transcendental but produced in culture and society. According to Foucault, for example, 'knowledge is a major

instrument and technique of power' (Grosz 1994 : 148), and 'sexuality ... is nothing more than the effect of power. Power is able to gain hold on bodies, pleasures, energies through the construction and deployment of sexuality' (*Ibid* :154). Thus Foucault sees an inextricable link between knowledge, power and sexuality: that knowledge is the main tool of power, and that power constitutes and governs bodies by exercising control over the bodies. Therefore, Foucault sees the meaning and identity of a subject as socially constructed.

It is important to note that before Foucault, Freud had argued that the protean nature of identity resides in psycho-sexual processes. And Lacan, who made revisionist readings of Freud, has said that the *phallus* guarantees the patriarchal structure of the symbolic order and thus determines sexual difference and gender identity. As for Derrida, meaning or identity is contingent on difference as well as *différance* - a system of shifting relationships among signs.

Since all these developments which critique social totalities such as capitalism, racism, class, patriarchy, gender and sexuality reflect the spirit of the time and that the developments form Bessie Head's recurrent motifs in her work, it can be extrapolated that Bessie Head was influenced by these issues, wittingly or unwittingly.

When Rain Clouds Gather, Bessie Head's first novel, is about a young South African Zulu by the name Makhaya who arrives in Botswana, running away from the injustices of apartheid in South Africa. Makhaya leaves South Africa

also because of his active involvement in South African politics and he is therefore running away from victimization.

As an exile in Botswana, Makhaya settles in Golema Mmidi, a small village with an agricultural cooperative which is run by the local people and a sizeable number of refugees. It is in this village where Makhaya and Gilbert, a British agricultural worker, strike up such a good friendship that everybody admires it, seeing it as a typical example of how human relationships can rise above parochial boundaries of race and colour. Inspired by this relationship the people of the village of Golema Mmidi decide to unite against Matenge, their oppressive chief, to root out evil from their society. They besiege the chief in his house but he takes his life before anybody can lay a hand on him. This brings happiness to the people who are now able to forge a peaceful harmonious community. Thus oppression and racism of any kind have no place in the village of Golema Mmidi.

Maru, Bessie Head's second novel, has been described as her 'most direct attack on the practice of racism' (Townsend 1994: 28), especially in terms of its 'fearless and honest treatment of the apartheid practised by blacks on blacks' (Maxwell-Mahon 1992: 12). In Maru, a whole village is plunged into agitation following the revelation that Margaret, the new school teacher, is a Masarwa, a Bushman. Only Maru, Moleka, and Dikeledi warm to Margaret, much to the outrage of the villagers whose fuming, not surprisingly, arises from the fact that Basarwa or Bushmen are treated as second-class citizens. Maru makes the bold step of marrying Margaret, even though this forces him to relinquish his

kingdom for the sake of the woman. A feeling of euphoria and genuine jubilation grips the entire Basarwa tribe, a euphoria generated by the apparent obliteration of their stigmatised pariah status in society, now that they have achieved a humanity that has been earlier denied them. This is their reaction to Maru's marriage to Margaret:

When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their soul had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. As they breathed in the fresh, clear air their humanity awakened. They examined their condition. There was the fetid air the excreta and the horror of being an oddity of the human race, with half the head of a man and half the body of a donkey. They laughed in an embarrassed way, scratching their heads. How had they fallen into the condition when, indeed, they were as human as everyone else? They started to run out into the sunlight, then they turned and looked at the dark, small room. They said : "we are not going back there" (1987 : 126 – 7).

Maru's marriage to Margaret, a woman that he really loves, from a despised section of society, is significant in that he triumphs over the cancerous evil of racism, in this case inverted racism, in which people of the same colour oppress one another. The reaction by the villagers to the events in the novel represents the village as a microcosm of a society which has been afflicted by the bane of racism in all its manifestations.

Thus the Masarwa people, in their pariah status as second-class citizens, are indeed on the margins of society. This status can be seen as the state of proscription which is obliterated through Maru's marriage to Margaret. The marriage precipitates a prescriptive celebration among the Masarwa who have been catapulted into freedom and acceptance.

In A Question of Power, the triple inducements of a failed marriage to a phallically domineering man, the excesses of apartheid, and the lure of a well-paid teaching job force Elizabeth to leave South Africa for Botswana. But no sooner does Elizabeth settle down in Motabeng than she begins to experience strange hallucinatory visitations which make her chronically ill. These visitations are tropes for various forms of powers and knowledges that underlie all domains of oppression and domination in society. Thus in When Rain Clouds Gather, Maru, and A Question of Power, Bessie Head deals with the realities of power and oppression and how the human spirit is able to rise above these hegemonies.

In A Question of Power, Bessie Head employs eclectic references ranging from Greek mythology through oriental religions, including the Bible, to modern times. For example, the following references are made in the 'text:' Osiris, Perseus, Caligula, Darwin and his theory of the evolution of species, Hitler, Medusa, God, Satan, Lucifer, Jesus Christ, Moses and the Jews, the Roman Catholic religion, the Ku Klux Klan in America, the monk, the Father, apartheid, Buddha and members of the Hindu Pantheon, David and Goliath, Gulliver, Casanova, Allah and Mohammad, and so forth. These eclectic allusions make A

Question of Power a difficult novel to unravel. However, these references, which are largely associated with Sello and Dan, are tropes for regimes of power that dominate and oppress Elizabeth.

A Question of Power was followed by “The Collector of Treasures”, an anthology of short stories which, rather than being seen as merely pastoral anecdotes that celebrate Botswana’s rural life (as some critics have put it), reveal Bessie Head’s continued engagement in a fierce struggle against the powers and forces of exclusion that oppressed her earlier in A Question of Power. The stories reflect Bessie Head’s preoccupation with materialist discourse which deconstructs social totalities such as culture and tradition ‘at a time when traditional practices are being uprooted and influenced by a new urban lifestyle’ (Way 1987: 28)

In one of the stories, ‘Life’, Life, a clever girl, returns from the city to her home village where she is welcomed with expectation. The village believes that she has brought with her some exciting things from the city, for it is thought ‘she is going to bring us a little light’ (p. 38). But having led a life of loose living in South Africa, the girl finds herself on a collision course with most members of the community, who believe in the principle of self-respect as opposed to the dalliance she revels in. The man who marries her, Lesego, will not allow her any freedom to behave as she wills. But she will not compromise either. So he kills her. Thus Life is represented as ‘a figure of freedom who refuses to accept the constraints of boundaries’ (Harrow 1993: 174). Like Elizabeth in A Question of Power who finally refuses to be constrained by the forces that oppress her, Life

eponymously stands for a liberated woman who is not prepared to yield to the encumbrances of traditional societal values.

In “The Collector of Treasures”, the story which gives the title to the collection, Dikeledi refuses to yield to her husband’s demands that she be a submissive wife by preparing his meals and a bath and serving him in bed while she is supposed to ignore his philandering and earlier desertion. She locates the double standard which marginalises all women in a polygamous society. But she will not take this lying down (no pun intended). She cuts off her husband’s genitalia when he is in a drunken stupor. Even though she is later sent to prison, awaiting possible capital punishment, she finds fulfilment in the sisterhood of the fellow inmates she finds in the prison who also were fighting male hegemony, having also murdered their oppressive husbands.

All through her work, from the publication of her first novel to the short stories, Bessie Head has one single vision: deconstructing what society deems as legitimising discourses. Even after publishing A Question of Power, there is no doubt that Bessie Head remained a marginalised person; she continued to encounter similar oppressive patriarchs in society long after her prescription in A Question of Power. Dikeledi’s act of castration reminds one of Elizabeth’s recurrent encounters with Dan in A Question of Power, where probably, she was too debilitated to effect the kind of revenge that Dikeledi carried out on her husband. But certainly, the postcolonial identity issues that are played out in Bessie Head’s work are broader and more far-ranging than her own personal

suffering, in that they transcend Motabeng and South Africa: they reverberate to the world.

CHAPTER TWO

PROSCRIPTION

Proscription refers to various manifestations of marginality experienced by Elizabeth, the main character in A Question of Power, who finds herself on the fringes of society. The forms of marginality that Elizabeth identifies, caused by different domains of power over which she repeatedly agonizes, include the fact that she is a woman, a product of mixed race, an exile of apartheid, and a foreigner in Botswana. Besides these, Elizabeth discovers that Sello and Dan – the phantom figures in the novel – are causes of further conditions of marginality for her. Proscription here constricts Elizabeth's power and has a limitless ability to control her thought, deny her freedom, and even stifle her speech, at times. She is hopelessly sick in her room (in Motabeng) in which she is often cloistered, colonized, as she battles with hallucinatory Sello and Dan, who are tropes for all the power behind her oppression. The proscription, which brings about her nervous breakdown, causes Elizabeth to confront and deconstruct the core metaphysical issues, as the only way of achieving self-therapy.

Until she is thirteen, Elizabeth's story is 'shrouded in secrecy' (p. 15). Born in a mental hospital in South Africa to a mentally unstable mother, Elizabeth is sent to 'a nursing home' (p. 17) by 'the child welfare committee' (p. 17). Upon discovering that she is coloured, the authorities return her. For a week, Elizabeth is fostered by 'a Boer family' (p. 17) which also later returns her. Apart from her grandmother, who very much wants to see her, none of Elizabeth's family

members will have her. In the meantime, another woman, who is 'part African and part White, like Elizabeth' (p. 17), is paid to bring her up. Later, Elizabeth is moved to a mission where she learns snippets of the true story of her life from the principal of the mission school.

At the mission, the principal breaks the news to Elizabeth of her insane white mother who was locked up when she was having the child of a stable 'boy', an African, a black, 'a native'. Further, the principal tells Elizabeth that her mother was a good woman who had set aside some money for her education, and that she (Elizabeth) must be careful not to become insane like her mother.

Further, as Elizabeth's past life is revealed, the woman who fosters Elizabeth tells her more information about her mother. Perhaps most importantly, Elizabeth is told that her mother, who remained emotionally attached to her, took her own life when Elizabeth was six years old, and that her grandmother was the only one who would acknowledge Elizabeth as family.

After training as a primary school teacher, Elizabeth lives quietly in South Africa, spending some time with Asian families where she learns about India and its philosophies. She also lives with a German woman from whom she learns 'about Hitler and the Jews and the Second World War' (p. 18). A year before she gets married, Elizabeth 'joins a political party' (p. 18) which is 'banned two years later' (p. 18). A state of emergency is declared and Elizabeth 'is searched by the authorities of the apartheid regime along with other people,

briefly arrested for having a letter about the banned party' (p. 18). She is later involved in a court case which 'eventually made her a stateless person in Botswana' (p. 18). Whilst still in South Africa, Elizabeth marries 'a gangster just out of jail' (p. 18) and they produce a child. The marriage lasts for only a year, because the man is a philanderer, abuses women and he is also bisexual. One day, Elizabeth takes her small boy and walks 'out of her house, never to return' (p. 19). Alone, she reads a newspaper advertisement about a teacher shortage in Botswana. She is 'forced to take an exit permit' (p. 19), which holds a "never to return" clause' and she leaves the country for good.

In Botswana, Elizabeth lives in Motabeng village, and teaches at Motabeng Secondary School, where she discovers that almost the entire staff comprises IVS (International Voluntary Service – now called VSO or Voluntary Service Overseas) and Peace Corps volunteers. While it is evident that Elizabeth leaves South Africa largely because of apartheid and race problems as they relate to power, most of the truths about power are uncovered in Botswana through her abnormal, if largely imaginary, relationship with two men, namely Sello and Dan. She finds these men very strange. For example, Elizabeth discovers that, like racists in South Africa, both Sello and Dan are manic about power; that these two men are not aware of humanity, compassion, tenderness, but they focus on only their domination of others, their own influence, and their own selves.

Proscription begins for Elizabeth when she joins the mission school in South Africa. The principal of the school tells Elizabeth:

“We have a 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 lock her up as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native.” (p. 16)

Horrified by the revelation, she breaks down and weeps. The callous principal is always watching for Elizabeth’s apparently latent insanity to emerge. Again, when Elizabeth strikes a child in the school, the school principal suggests that she be locked up and separated from the rest of the children. This state of affairs causes a deep sense of isolation and rejection in Elizabeth and a deep hatred for the society which tells her she does not belong. As Elizabeth reflects on these memories in her Motabeng home in Botswana, they drive her into deep despair.

Barely three months after settling in Motabeng, Elizabeth realises that her life is becoming destabilised as she begins to experience Sello’s visitations in the form of a monk in flowing robes. Elizabeth’s first reaction is to become panic-stricken. She is subsequently plunged into a turmoil and flurry of confusion. This affliction by Sello becomes so repeated that, in her paranoid, almost schizophrenic state of mind, Elizabeth begins to converse with the Sello monk on regular basis.

Elizabeth is clear about the monk. He is not Sello the heterosexual, living figure who drives a green truck in Motabeng village – and is famous for ‘keeping order in his house’ (p. 26), although he may occasionally make forays into other forms of sexuality. Elizabeth’s link with this Sello seems tenuous, even entirely imaginary. The Sello who crowds Elizabeth’s mind with horrors is a spiritual, demonic creature who is a trope for a dazzling array of shifting discourses, knowledges, multiple identities and embodiments of history’s cycle of oppression and domination. Thus, Sello embodies both divine and human characteristics.

Sello, the mystical prodigy, wields unlimited powers in the universe. Elizabeth realises that in his varying guises Sello is a trope for discourses with their inherent ironies and ambivalences. He appears to her as ‘the Father’ (p. 30), the man who dons ‘the soft, white flowing robes of a monk’ (p. 22), the man who has the face of an ‘almost universally adored God’ (p. 23), ‘the prophet of mankind’ (p. 25) whose ‘past life had pervaded the whole world’ (p. 25), one who ‘has accomplished billion cycles in ... destiny’ (p. 32), the man who resists death’ (p. 118) probably because he ‘has a thousand lives’ (p. 118).

The same Sello ‘gained directorship of the universe in 1910’ (p. 25), the year in which white power structures were established in a unified South Africa, and the year 1910 was also fateful because it paved the way for the elimination of the Cape Coloured and black voting rights. Sello is also credited as ‘the originator of the caste system, alongside his other theories on the heavens’ (p. 32). The

Hindu caste system is a particularly virulent form of oppression. And Medusa, whom Sello uses as his agency is the 'true measure of his greatness as the prophet of mankind' (p. 44).

Sello's portrayal is evocative of Foucault's profound understanding of discourses in every society. According to Foucault, discourse is neither stable nor constant nor absolute:

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality (Foucault in Coursework: 82).

There is little doubt that Sello represents an assortment of discourses for which there is neither discernible pattern nor any essential character except in their common power relationship of dominance and subservience. Like discourses, Sello has some appearance of benevolence. The fact that Sello is associated with God, the monk, the prophet, implies virtues of holiness, wisdom, chastity, knowledge, to mention a few. But beneath the veneer of Sello's high moral rectitude lies a shocking character. The fact that Sello became the director of the universe in 1910 points to his involvement in setting up the oppressive power structures in South Africa at the time. What is more, Sello is also seen as the architect of the obnoxious caste system which defines one's identity in society on the basis of one's social standing at birth.

Sello goes on to oppress Elizabeth through the means of Medusa. Margaret Doody sees the powerful figure of Medusa as a historically pervasive image of ambivalence in several western cultures. While in Asia Minor Medusa is 'beautiful and awe-inspiring' (Doody 1996: 65), in other regions the gigantic statue-head of Medusa has snaky hair and inspires horror. For instance, 'Freud thought the Medusa represented the female pubic hair and the female genital – and hence was frightening to see' (Doody 1996: 66). Bessie Head portrays Medusa as having 'hissing serpents for her hair and her face' (p. 40). ✓

It is this creature of malevolence which preys on Elizabeth's mind and haunts her recurrently.

Medusa also displays her amazing and intimidating vagina to Elizabeth, deriding her thus: 'you haven't got anything *near* that, have you?' (p. 44). Further, Medusa shows Elizabeth something like a cesspit which looks 'like seven thousand vaginas in one ...' (p. 64).

This experience makes Elizabeth wallow in 'a deep hole of such excruciating torture that ... she went stark, raving mad' (p. 44). This happens intermittently. Tucker says that 'to be a passive receiver of horrors is to become the object, the undesirable' (Tucker 1988 : 172). In other words Elizabeth's individual autonomy is encumbered to a point where she is plunged into a state of inertia. Medusa, the shameless moral reprobate, further taunts Elizabeth by reminding

her that she (Elizabeth) does not know any African language and therefore she cannot identify with Africa. As a Coloured person, Elizabeth is denied Africa. Furthermore, she does not belong to South Africa where coloureds are hated because of the apartheid institutionalised class system. Thus Elizabeth realises that her place in the symbolic order of society is on the periphery.

Sello's association with the monk – the robed man who appears like God – is another cause of emotional turmoil in Elizabeth's mind. This monk is also referred to as 'the Father' who takes up residence in Elizabeth's house 'near the top of the bed' (p. 118). At times 'the Father' is seen in Elizabeth's house wearing the tattered rags of the poor in Africa. As Elizabeth evaluates the nature of this spiritual figure she is convinced that he represents the patriarchal, religious dominating principle in society. This explains why the monk is 'the prophet of mankind' (p. 44). In other words, all that he says and stands for must be taken axiomatically. Elizabeth is pained by the hypocrisy associated with a religion which attempts to identify with the poor, whose happiness is guaranteed only in the after life. Thus, as Sello puts it, 'God is people. There is nothing up there. It's all down here' (p. 109). As Sara Way argues, Bessie Head's concern here is to 'explode the myth of a single God, a single omnipotent personality ruling mankind' (Way 1987 : 26). In other words, believing in one almighty, dynamic God is tantamount to accepting Sello's attempts to dominate in all spheres of life. This state of affairs brings about a great deal of evil such as class systems and other forms of oppression.

Sello further tortures Elizabeth by revealing to her his unlimited destiny (having completed so many cycles of reincarnation already) and the fact that he does not die. The assumption here seems to be that Sello's consciousness is the sole provenance of knowledge because he displays a transcendence that predates human consciousness. In other words, Sello's life becomes a pervasive dynamic of the world. Sello's association with transcendence and perfection is meant to dominate and proscribe Elizabeth's being for good.

As already noted earlier, the contradiction between the living and the hallucinatory Sello leaves Elizabeth with the lasting impression that the world is largely characterized by constricting heterosexual institutions dominated by patriarchal bias. The living, real life-Sello is a calm man who presents his ideas in a well-thought-out way. He is also 'a wonderful family man' (p. 29) known for keeping 'order in his house' (p. 29). Thus, Sello clearly panders to the norms of heterosexuality as defined by the patriarchal symbolic order. However, what Elizabeth finds particularly agonizing is the hallucinatory Sello's display of a disjunction of the hegemonic heterosexual order, by making occasional erotic excursions into homosexual life. In addition, Sello has a mistress, besides being a paedophile. Sello's predilection for multiple sexuality within the trammels of the symbolic order underlies the oppressiveness of patriarchy with its double standards and this realisation sends Elizabeth into depths of despair and mental agony, because her sexuality and identity are fixed by external forces.

The Danish workers on the Motabeng farm project cause Elizabeth to ponder the nature of culture. With the exception of Birgette, Elizabeth discovers that a majority of them share a visceral rejection of cultures other than their own. Their bigotry is based on their false sense of racial superiority. For example, most of the Danes spend 'all their sunset hours of leisure denigrating their pupils.... Apparently they had a high standard of culture and civilization' (p. 71). Hysterical and invasively racist Camilla to whom '(h)uman relationships ... were starkly black and white' (p. 77) sees black people on the Motabeng project as 'objects of permanent idiocy' (p. 76). Homi Bhabha calls this kind of discourse stereotyping which is 'a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ... already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated... (Bhabha 1994: 66) in order to portray the 'other' 'in excess of what can empirically be proved or logically construed' (*Ibid* : 66). The Danes on the Motabeng project see the black people as constituting a social reality which is different from their own and yet completely knowable. For Camilla, for example, blacks are objects of desire and derision as she fantasizes about their low culture. Bhabha argues that stereotyping is based on narcissism, signifies power and reveals misconceptions about notions of culture. Bessie Head herself had this to say about culture:

Another fallacy of the whites is that they are the preservers of White Western culture in Africa. Culture is not limited to the West or Europe or a white skin or Christianity. Culture, in its truest sense, in its universal sense is the expression of a personality of a people....' (Maxwell-Mahon [p. 40 – 41] in Mackenzie : 1989).

Elizabeth spends all her time frustrated by people like Camilla who are 'impossibly God-like' (p. 80) and think that their culture and civilisation are superior to those of other peoples. Elizabeth finds Camila, who 'takes the inferiority of the black so much for granted' (p. 82), vexatious. Thus she is often 'wilting under the strain of Camilla's company' (p. 77).

Bhabha argues that 'cultural statements and systems are constructed ... in [a] contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation ...' (Bhabha 1994: 37). In other words, culture is an area of abstruse uncertainty which we inhabit. Culture cannot be essentialised, and thus the notion of culture cannot be ascribed a primordial unity or intrinsic homogeneity because long histories of domination belie this logic. What the Danes say about their culture vis-à-vis black culture can be described aptly as stereotyping of the 'other'.

Also, Sello's relationship with the Hindu caste system, as well as Buddha, is another recurrent source of Elizabeth's inner turmoil. Names such as Brahmin and Rama – various manifestations of power in Hindu society – are a resounding reminder of the presence of proscriptive religions and political hegemonies in our society. At times Elizabeth seems to admire certain aspects of Indian culture which, as embodied in Hinduism as a religion, she sees as an alternative to Christianity, but she is ultimately disillusioned by both Christianity and Hinduism. She is also critical of Buddhism for its passive acceptance of tradition. Regarding Buddhism, Lorenz puts it clearly:

[from] Elizabeth's perspective, ... Buddhism is not satisfactory as an ultimate guide. The Buddhist assumption that suffering is inherent in the material world, that suffering, oppression, is a given of life on earth does nothing to relieve the oppression of the colonized mind – it merely confirms the belief that escape from oppression is impossible in this life (Lorenz 1991: 601).

In other words any uncritical acceptance of religious hegemonies actually allows oppression to flourish.

Elizabeth becomes even more aware of oppressive hierarchies in her relationship with Dan. This awareness is represented by Lacan's notions of identity which are summarised by Bronfen:

the masculine subject ... has a fixed position in the realm reigned by the phallic reference as Law. Woman's subjectivity ... asserts itself as lack of a fixed position She is constituted in the symbolic relation to the privileged signifier for paternity, the 'phallus' ... (Bronfen in Coursework: 188).

Lacan's use of the term phallus is an evocative designation of the metaphorical or symbolical status of the male sexual organ. According to Lacan, the phallus is the main transcendental signifier which defines sexual difference, guarantees the patriarchal structure of the symbolic order and bestows identity. Besides, the phallus signifies power and control through the satisfaction of the desire which is the dominant source of life. In other words, the male subject's position in the

symbolic order is privileged as a signifier. The phallus (which is an arbitrary but conventionally accepted symbol for the social order, the paternal law, the Father) not only sanctions the male's position but is also the stake on which a social construction of gender difference is based. Dan represents that phallic power that oppresses Elizabeth.

The Dan that torments Elizabeth's mind with hallucinations is not the short, black, handsome, millionaire and African nationalist who lives in Motabeng. Rather, this Dan is an illusory, metaphorical figure who keeps horrifying Elizabeth by frequently swaying his towering penis in front of her before indulging in amazingly unbridled sexual orgies with his harem of women. With his colossal penis Dan seems to be a cultural reactionary representing an arch patriarch in the symbolic order. By denigrating and using women, not only does he stand for the muting of the female voice but he also shows their embodiment as inscribed by the phallus. Dan's women's bodies are the biological, passive and manipulable objects of desire. The women are 'his slaves' (p. 128), and their bodies are marked and engraved by social pressures external to them.

Deeply associated with Sello and his activities, Dan oppresses Elizabeth, first with his monumental penis and second, through parading his good time girls with whom he has a sexual carnival. Thus, Dan and Sello, the Father, 'have performed the same roles' (p. 106) in oppressing Elizabeth. They both fight for control of Elizabeth's life. Like Sello, Dan, who plays the 'role of God' (p. 167),

'was only there to kill her' (p. 163). At times, Dan is 'the extension of Medusa' (p. 168).

Sello and Dan's complex and often antagonistic relationship is reflected in the demented psyche of Elizabeth. Elizabeth's understanding of Dan begins with the fact that he is 'the king of women' (p. 149) charged with 'directing the affairs of the universe' (p. 129). But unlike Sello, Dan is preoccupied with desire. As already indicated, Dan has a predilection for all-night orgies as a way of tormenting Elizabeth. When he has sex with Miss Sewing Machine (who is one of his girls), he does it in Elizabeth's bed with Elizabeth beside them. Dan taunts Elizabeth thus: 'You are supposed to feel jealous You haven't got what that girl has got' (p. 127). Further, Dan says to Elizabeth: 'When I go with a woman I go for an hour. You can't do that. You haven't got a vagina ...' (p. 13). ✓
Following these taunting remarks, Elizabeth momentarily blacks out. She spends almost a year slipping in and out of madness, without rest, because Dan has taken total control over her.

Through Dan's acts, Elizabeth realises that not only is she denied femininity because she is sexually undesirable, but she also begins to reflect on the reasons why her marriage failed because most men think of the satisfaction of their phallic needs to the detriment of love and the emotional treasuring of their women. Further, Dan parades his women as a gang of slaves before Elizabeth. The women 'prostrate at Dan's feet' (p. 163), ✓ showering him with praise and adoration. By uncritically adoring Dan, the women are showing Elizabeth that

she does not belong. These activities are meant to make Elizabeth envious, distressed and to further weaken the already passive Elizabeth, who is colonized from all angles.

There are a myriad other ways in which Dan's women oppress Elizabeth. They crawl 'over her in a slow death-dance' (p. 173). Sexually insatiable Madame Loose Bottom and Body Beautiful have orgasms on top of Elizabeth. Very often, the women wash in Elizabeth's bathroom, wear her dresses, steal from her and yet they are jealous despite being openly contemptuous of her. These experiences make Elizabeth hysterical and she is pushed intermittently further towards madness.

A part of Dan's strategy to drive Elizabeth mad is to make gloomy prognostications about her future. This is done so as to entice her into submission. Dan predicts that she 'will have eight love affairs' (p. 13, pp. 186 - 7), and that he 'will kill her' (p. 14). In order to ensure that Elizabeth remains within his power, Dan taunts her thus : '(d)ie, die you dog, there is no place for you' (p. 192). At this point Dan believes he is in total control of Elizabeth, especially when he discovers that these predictions drive her into depths of turmoil and anguish. Whereas for Dan discourses about sex 'induce pleasure and generate power' (Foucault in Coursework: 38), Elizabeth becomes aware that culture both constricts, and silences women. As Margaret Tucker puts it,

A Question of Power is about finding freedom from and amidst oppression, by exposing hierarchies of power and in

particular, the objectification of women as the foundation of patriarchy ...(Tucker 1988: 181).

In other words, in madness or proscription, Elizabeth identifies oppression by examining the nature of discourses and abstract realms of knowledge, the so-called universal truths as revealed to her by Sello, Dan, Medusa and other characters such as Camilla. Elizabeth analyses and historicizes those universal categories that are taken as givens in order to fathom the multiplicity of functions or uses that these categories have been deployed as social practices in our civilisation. Elizabeth's proscriptions or spiritual agonies begin and end with her deep understanding that Sello and Dan 'are powers that make history' (Tucker 1988: 174) whereas she, as 'the other', does not participate in the forging of that history. This awareness causes the dreadful images of Sello and Dan to recur into Elizabeth's wakeful life as well as in sleep, leaving her slipping in and out of insanity, where her life is a 'stormy centre' (p. 170). Madness makes Elizabeth act impulsively, swear damnably, lash out at people, not greet people and commit other antisocial acts. Her tempestuous temperament becomes her hallmark. Maxwell-Mahon makes a fitting comment on Elizabeth's proscription :

Fear of dominance by male power, by ethnic aggression and by white racism and black nationalism are the operative forces that cause mental anguish and moral tension in the narrator Elizabeth's mind (Maxwell-Mahon 1992: 43).

CHAPTER THREE

PRESCRIPTION

'O, matter and impertinency mix'd! Reason in madness!' King

Lear (iv/vi/155 – 6).

Edgar's comment, above, on Lear's ability to see the world differently, but ironically only after going mad on the heath, occurs after Lear has seen through the illusion of outward appearances. This comment is provoked by Lear's insights into the nature of social justice, of power structures, as he moralises to Gloucester on the folly of this world. The insights are forged in the fierce storm on the heath, where madness is part of the process of stripping back the 'Robes and furr'd garments' which 'hide all' (iv/vi/146). Lear is essentially deconstructing the power of paternalist monarchy, exposing the inequalities of the society beneath it and the inequality of human judgment, particularly in terms of interpreting experience carefully.

Lear's madness is a product of his abdication of power, coupled with the desire to retain many of its trappings. Inept, rash, and a complete dupe, he rewards his disingenuous daughters, Goneril and Regan, but punishes Cordelia, his third, whose only sin is that of plain speaking. When, after the rejection and humiliations by Goneril and Regan, he confronts not only the storm without but also begins to internalize the consequences of his folly, some form of madness overtakes his fragile balance. By the time Lear is restored to his beloved Cordelia, albeit briefly, he has been through a form of restorative therapy, of

prescription, which is cathartic. Had Lear survived, he might have tackled the social issue of inequality, especially the question of the poor in his kingdom.

It might be extrapolated that a common factor in some mental illness is the effect on an individual of powerlessness, particularly when identity itself is caught up in a struggle for power. The clinical aspects of Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* can be compared to Lear's on the heath in that, crucially, both suffer a form of personality disintegration linked to issues of power and identity. Both suffer excruciating, protracted agonies, characterised by hallucinations, but, significantly here, both locate their prescription for a return to sanity in the deconstruction of the social power bases, identifying the poorest, the simplest agrarian peasant as the target for future social reform.

In madness, Elizabeth meditates on the absolute emptiness and vanity of all mundane knowledges and values as projected to her by Sello and Dan. Like Lear raving mad on the heath, Elizabeth is afflicted by myriad demons which make her isolated, desperate, lonely and mad but it is this madness which later helps her gain profound insights into the reality of life. Prescription for Elizabeth causes her to reject her proscriptive current of life, helps her regain her sanity and fires her with a crusading zeal to join the Motabeng community. Elizabeth refuses to yield to the proscriptive demands of Sello and Dan who are really tropes for hegemonic domination. The condition of prescription is partly self-induced and partly brought about by good-natured personalities such as Eugene, Kenosi, Tom, Birgette, Mrs Jones, the white doctor who treats

Elizabeth in the mental hospital, and finally, Shorty, her son. Like Foucault who, 'highly suspicious of claims to universal truths' (Rabinow 1984: 4), rejects nature as the foundation of truth, Elizabeth sees that Sello and Dan's projection of their realities is mere trickery.

It must be made clear that both proscription and prescription are not systematically linear experiences, with one methodically following the other. Rather, they are on-and-off occurrences. Sometimes, moments of proscription are preceded or followed by prescription, and vice-versa. At other times the two conditions are juxtaposed. It is only after one has read through A Question of Power that one becomes aware of Elizabeth's total recuperation which, interestingly enough, is followed by intriguing episodes, including the disempowerment of Sello, and Dan's realisation that he no longer wields any power over Elizabeth. For example, because of prescription, Sello has no terror at all, and Dan stops waving his penis before her.

In prescription Elizabeth is fascinated by her friend Eugene's 'practical genius' (p. 61) or his pragmatic outlook on life which makes him refuse slavishly to kow-tow to a Western academic mode of education to the detriment of vocational training. The Motabeng farm project is Eugene's brainchild, and his commitment to a practical, broad-based model of education that develops intellect, skill, personality, and individual empowerment – beyond hegemonic domination, elitism and patriarchal influence manifested in Western forms of education becomes useful to Elizabeth. Joining the project helps Elizabeth

immensely to recover from her nightmares. As Townsend succinctly puts it, '(i)t is only by entering into his world of practical commitment, and by developing a garden with fellow human beings who become profoundly meaningful to her life, that Elizabeth is gradually restored to sanity' (Townsend 1994: 27).

Following Elizabeth's dismissal from her teaching post at Motabeng Secondary School after an early mental breakdown, Eugene offers her a job at the Motabeng farm project. It is on this farm that Elizabeth not only finds joy and fulfilment in gardening and other practical ventures, but also begins to see wisdom in human goodness and humanity. Most of the work on this project is voluntary but it still empowers the workers who form a communistic idyll.

Gardening *per se* can be seen as a simplistic model of prescription, but fortunately Elizabeth is impressed to see people of totally foreign backgrounds working together in peace and harmony, almost reminiscent of a regained Eden. The fact that most of these foreigners on the Motabeng project are able to understand each other's humanity gives Elizabeth reason to heal.

Kenosi is one of the project workers who helps Elizabeth to recover. Humane and industrious, Kenosi arrives on the Motabeng project after all the villagers initially attracted to the venture have run away because the work is voluntary and often without reward. Kenosi encourages Elizabeth to 'never leave the garden' (p. 142) because she believes that the two of them will succeed in spite of everything. They establish a vegetable patch together as part of the local

industries project and grow staple crops such as cabbage. They also grow the Cape Gooseberry which is used for making jam. Kenosi and Elizabeth later sell the jam to the local industries shop and teachers' wives at Motabeng Secondary School. Kenosi and Elizabeth also open a shop where they sell cabbages, green beans, carrots, the Cape Gooseberry jam, floor mats, pottery and so forth. The two women become bosom friends, swapping experiences of joy, sorrow and disillusionment. Thus Elizabeth later regards Kenosi's 'sudden appearance as one of the miracles ... that saved her life' (p. 89) because every time Elizabeth falls prey to her demons, Kenosi is there to get her life back on an even keel. Thus the healing qualities of human solidarity are not based on hegemonic power structures.

Another person who helps Elizabeth recover is Tom, a white youth development worker with whom Elizabeth discusses 'the depth, breadth and height of the universe' (p. 170). Put simply, the two spend time pondering philosophical questions together. Like Kenosi, Tom becomes Elizabeth's regular caller. It is Tom's affability with everyone and his 'deep wisdom' (p. 22), which contribute towards Elizabeth's recovery. For instance, Tom is able to see that Elizabeth has problems whose solution lies not in brooding on them but in working on the Motabeng farm. Again, like Eugene, Tom makes Elizabeth aware of the need to 'support, morally, Mao Tse-tung, Castro and Nyerere' (p. 132) – social godfathers who were purveyors of socialism for fast and equitable economic development, (which fact has been discredited in the light of subsequent histories). Even after Elizabeth has come out of hospital, Tom pays her regular

visits, cooks for her, before leaving her some life-lines (of love and generosity) which buoy her up and save her from committing suicide. She tells Tom that

[t]he first thing I've always done is to act on wild impulse. My temperament was unequal to what I've lived 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 (p. 190).

And certainly Tom is one of the 'lights' upon whom, in a symbolical way, Elizabeth depends on for her recuperation to sanity. The fact that Tom is white implies that racism, that has plagued her in the past, is overcome.

There are other workers on the Motabeng farm project who help Elizabeth regain her sanity. Birgette is a uniquely different (compared to other Danes) and sensitive Danish worker who is able to empathise with Elizabeth. Mrs Jones, who is once struck by Elizabeth during one of her weird mood swings, and therefore was obviously a source of vexation, comes to see Elizabeth on her return from hospital. Mrs Jones actually cooks and prays for Elizabeth. On her part, Elizabeth apologises for hitting her. Also, Elizabeth admires the 'humility and humanity' (p. 123) of Gunner, a 'class instructor' (p. 75) who 'loves people' (p. 80). Implicitly, strength and solidarity can be found in the most ordinary of people (not only exceptional ones like Tom and Birgette) – and white as well. Thus the redemptive vision has a wide basis.

Equally importantly, Elizabeth's son, Shorty, also helps Elizabeth to recover from her illness in a myriad ways. He certainly intuitively understands his mother's problem, and even though he cannot understand it consciously, he stands by her throughout her suffering. In other words, he knows that something is wrong with her mother but he does not know exactly what it is. He witnesses his mother's journey through madness and her struggle with the demons from beginning to end. Shorty had taken 'all his moods from her' (p. 49) and copies her behaviour in every way often repeating whatever she says about him. When his mother is mortally sick, Shorty is destabilised and affected by it but he is not emotionally damaged by the experience. In fact, he appears almost unperturbed by his mother's illness. This allows Elizabeth to discover and learn about Shorty's 'cunning about his survival' (p. 172), and this realisation becomes significant for her own survival and recovery. For example, when Shorty asks his mother why she often talks to herself and shouts at night as if under attack 'all the time' (p. 174), he is evidently conscious of something that is going on in his mother's life. Accordingly, Shorty knows that his mother is buffeted by some cruel and trying experiences whose cause he does not know. But it is Shorty's amazing presence of mind that constantly allows his mother to bounce back to the hard reality of keeping alive, even in adversity.

There are several things that Shorty says and does which keep his mother on the margins of sanity. For example, he is preoccupied in his life, making paper aeroplanes, boats and cars, having been taught how at the nursery school. When his mother suffers total nervous breakdown and is in mental hospital six hundred miles from Motabeng, Shorty writes her a letter assuring that she will recover

and come back home. This news gives Elizabeth better therapy than the medicine she is given in the hospital. Also, Shorty is clear that he does not 'like to die' (p. 179), that he likes playing football, and that he wants to write poetry like his mother. Thus Elizabeth decides that she will not continue this battle against hell and death because Shorty has 'been pulled out of it' (p. 179). It is the young man's trust, confidence and resilience to live which deflects Elizabeth's mind away from killing him as well as herself. She decides that she cannot continue to put the young man through this experience. The process of recovery is accelerated by the presence of the young man because she realises she has a responsibility over him. Therefore, Elizabeth does not just give up the struggle against the demons; she transcends it. Thus even children can offer a way to be liberated from hegemonic power relations.

Before reeling blissfully into her new prescription-free life, Elizabeth throws away the tablets that were prescribed for her by the doctor as the cure for her mental breakdown (p. 13, p. 203). And the pain in her ebbs away, before a feeling of tranquil peace overwhelms her. Elizabeth then, realises that Sello's former size is so tremendously reduced that his monk's apparel flap about his body 'like a scarecrow's rags' (p. 96). Sello is no longer the beast in his lair, but a mere scarecrow figure. Also Elizabeth discovers that Sello is drenched in light; the cesspit that he had regularly employed to torment her is now empty, clear and full of light. In addition, Sello shows Elizabeth a bag full of shining light which is 'the message of the brotherhood of man' (p. 201). At this point, the two strike up friendship, Sello apologises to Elizabeth for all he has made her go through and finally confesses that 'God is people. There is nothing up there. It is

all down here' (p. 109). This knowledge has come about because it is now evident to both Elizabeth and Sello that the concept of God is no longer based on proscriptive power structures. Thus Elizabeth undergoes prescription while Sello loses his power because she has deconstructed him.

In like manner, Dan's efforts to continue oppressing Elizabeth fall flat because Elizabeth has demystified all the power structures which he embodied. For example, gyrating his penis before her does not work. Now fully aware that Elizabeth has recuperated, Dan tries to tell her that he has changed, but she will not listen to him. Instead she falls into rhapsodies of joy, greeting every passer-by. Elizabeth remembers the biblical David's song about having been 'through the valley of death ...' (p. 202). This song from the famous psalm does not at all imply that Elizabeth now believes in God or that religion has played a part in her prescription. Rather, Elizabeth no longer believes in the traditional God - the God she has deconstructed - because He is based on power structures that proscribe. At the same time a 'D. H. Lawrence poem - *Song Of A Man Who Has Come Through*' (p. 204) - keeps welling up in her. Clearly this is the apotheosis of Elizabeth's experiences of recuperation.

Now that Elizabeth is able to take charge of her own life, having identified the source of and got over her illness, the journey from fragmentation to wholeness is complete. The belief that 'the human soul is alone in the battle of life' (p. 86) no longer holds water because, as Lorenz argues, it is 'the realisation of the full potential of one's soul and its interdependence with the souls around it that

makes one free' (Lorenz 1996: 603). The interdependence is embodied in Elizabeth's relations with Kenosi, Tom, Birgette, Mrs Jones, and Elizabeth's son (Shorty) – a truly wide and representative range of people. It is this realisation that gives Elizabeth full healing.

Finally Elizabeth begins to 'jot down fragmentary notes as a shipwrecked sailor might make on a warm sandy beach as he stared back at the stormy sea that had nearly taken his life' (p. 204). The actuality of the notes constitute the pages of A Question of Power. In other words, it is after Bessie Head has partially recovered from her own nervous breakdown that she sits down and creates the literary Elizabeth including Sello, Dan and other characters. It is possible to speculate that the jottings are a glimpse of Bessie Head's reflections about writing A Question of Power centred on Elizabeth. She fictionalises her real madness because she represents an ideal that she could not embody in her own life. From now onwards, Elizabeth is the prophet of mankind, but not a proscriptive prophet, with Sello and Dan fading into the dark mists of mythology. As Tucker says,

Elizabeth jumps out of Dan's and Sello's picture to form another time Elizabeth's new "time" is empowered by the community, not by some authoritative abstraction of history (Tucker 1988: 181).

In other words, the resolution of Elizabeth's madness is finally attained.

Campbell adds that 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, more powerful than all the demons that have plagued her (Campbell 1993: 12).

CHAPTER FOUR

POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITIES

Identity, a notion which is 'allied with sameness, unity, oneness' (Fuss 1988: 98), and often lodged within the matrix of essentialism, becomes disjunctional in the light of postcoloniality. Postcolonial identities are persistently ambivalent due to the disabling ambivalence surrounding the notion of postcoloniality itself. Scholars of postcoloniality find the notion of postcoloniality problematic to fix determinately because it 'designates far too many things, all at the same time' (Ahmed : 1995, echoing Dirlik : 9). Postcoloniality's heterogeneous nature has been characterised by Linda Hutcheon who argues that at different times, the concept yields meanings that are historical, ahistorical, political, and apolitical, even. Hutcheon sharply observes that there are 'different, even opposing positions on the meaning of postcolonial' (Hutcheon 1995: 11), with the notion accruing meanings such as 'after' 'because of' or 'inclusive of' colonialism, on the one hand. On the other hand, meanings such as 'anticolonial' and 'against anything colonial' adhere to the concept. Also the postcolonial reality is constituted by hybrid cultures which fuse those of the colonizer and colonized.

This shifting constitution of postcoloniality causes any postcolonial text to yield identities that are anything but unitary and organic. A Question of Power, for instance, is exceedingly ambivalent, particularly with respect to its articulation of identity. Identities proliferate as Sello and Dan arrogate to themselves multiple sexualities, embodiments and subjectivities, leaving Elizabeth who is the 'other' with a stable, if negative identity. Bessie Head rejects the perception

of identity – be it racial, political, cultural, national, gender or otherwise – in this fixed, monolithic way. In the wake of prescription Elizabeth deconstructs the exclusive identity paradigms of herself as presented to her by Sello and Dan.

In typical postmodernist fashion, Elizabeth arrives at the conviction that identity is a male prerogative that translates into acts of domination and that it is constituted in and sustained through patriarchal power with its biased, essentialist tendencies of understanding knowledge. But both processes of proscription and prescription make her look at identity as a discursive notion that is clearly constructed in culture and is therefore not stable.

Thus Elizabeth, the geographically dislocated, the culturally colonised, the linguistically marginalised in Botswana, the subject of racial as well as gendered or sexual oppression, tries to find a way of perceiving and redefining ‘received’ history in order to explode all mythology associated with the essentialist analysis of history and identity. Her madness, which is clearly an enactment of the struggle of the symbolic order of patriarchy, becomes a mirror through which she is able to see society’s skewed articulation of identity and other forms of reference. Elizabeth is clear that Sello and Dan have created distortions of meanings in such words as God, race, heterosexuality, to mention a few, to the extent that the words have specifically constituted referents. And since she finds this logic rather strained, Elizabeth uses the female body which experiences suffering, as a tool of resistance to forms of proscriptive powers. Thus she adopts a constructivist, anti-essentialist mode of understanding identity.

Elizabeth's adoption of an essentialist way of understanding identity is further corroborated by the lifestyles of Sello and Dan. These two people not only pander to heterosexual whims, but also do at the same time make forays into other sexualities. Sello is stable and his family is an institution which is dominated by constricting, heterosexual and patriarchal order, but he makes occasional excursions into homosexual life. In addition, he has a mistress, besides being a paedophile. Bessie Head seems to show that the lusts of the dominant, hallucinatory Sello are to be found beneath the living Sello's apparently upright life.

Similarly, apart from his harem of women, Dan is often seen with Asian men clinging to his arm. In fact Mr Ghanzi is his homosexual partner (p. 138). Thus Dan tries to impress on Elizabeth that homosexuality is a 'universal phenomenon' (p. 138). This state of affairs convinces Elizabeth that men's predilection for multiple sexualities and embodiments within the trammels of patriarchal order makes the entire notion of heterosexuality a farce. Therefore Elizabeth is able to place her own sexuality outside the realms of patriarchal hierarchies of power and control.

Elizabeth's constructivist notion of identity is further clarified in her discussion with Tom about homosexuals. Tom suggests that homosexuals are perverts because '(m)en just sleep with women, and that's all there is to it' (p. 161). However, it is when Elizabeth enquires what Tom would do if he were both God

and Satan that he realises how blurred the line is between good and evil, right and wrong, the natural and the construct. Once she has blurred the boundaries between these seemingly diametrically opposed categories, Elizabeth seems to be clear about possibilities for multiple identities and shifting meanings in one thing or person. Identity is not therefore based on essentialism but on materially lived experience. In other words, there is a further modification of Elizabeth's perception of self.

At one point, during Elizabeth's encounters with the illusory Sello and Dan who in their differing guises embody multiple identities and subjectivities, she reflects deeply on class and destiny. Why Sello, for instance, should be associated with notions of God, the caste system, Buddha, at the same time, clearly suggests that society has created the idea of class for purposes of power. This is done at the expense of the individuality of identity. Elizabeth realises that in fact 'every nation or society had a background in mythology, looming monstrous personalities they called 'the Gods' (p. 40). These 'formed the bases of ... attitudes to royalty and class ... (p. 40). For Elizabeth, Biology and culture do not matter 'in the strenuous turmoil of destiny' (p. 63). Bessie Head seems to have an abiding conviction that the notion of class is a myth. Thus, she is saying that identity is a social construct; meaning is provisional.

Following her healing, Elizabeth makes axiomatic assumptions underlying notions of identity. These are as follows: '(b)e ordinary' (p. 39), 'I am just anyone' (p. 1), 'love was freedom of heart' (p. 11), and that '(l)ove is two

people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the soul of the other like ghoul' (p. 13). Elizabeth realises that this profound understanding of identity is at the heart of power relations in societies as shown by Sello and Dan. In other words, virtues such as love and freedom rise above hegemonic power. Thus, identity, meaning and subjectivities should not be aligned with power and oppression (as in the relationship of Elizabeth and Sello on the one hand, and Elizabeth and Dan on the other). Rather, notions of identity should entail liberation of mind and heart from the encumbrances of culture and tradition which are largely dominated by proscription. This explains why Elizabeth would like to be treated simply like 'a human being with a personality' (p. 44). In fact the reason why Elizabeth 'adores Sello' (p. 25) after prescription is because he has given up his power games and become secular. It is this secular identity which paves the way for Dan, Sello and Elizabeth to integrate into society.

The process of prescription enables Elizabeth to begin to see identity and the complex issues surrounding the question of identity more clearly. For example, she begins to see that 'the people Sello referred to as "the Gods" turned about on observation to be ordinary' (p. 31), that 'there is no God like ordinary people' (p. 197), and therefore that 'Christianity and God were courteous formalities people had learned to enjoy with mental and emotional detachment' (p. 66). Here Elizabeth is deconstructing the notions of God and religion which she sees as products of culture and tradition, the notions which do not have any intrinsic transcendence. This realisation makes her assert that '(t)here is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet' (p. 206). In other words, man is a mere cultural and secular animal even though he aspires to the

unknowable. Thus, Elizabeth clearly adopts a mundane, secular identity, which is materialist in its fluidity and self-reflexivity. In other words her idea of identity crystallises into a critique of culture whereby she rejects essentialism and begins to conceptualise the idea of the subject as discursively produced.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of perennial loneliness, mental turmoil, adversity and suffering, Bessie Head (through Elizabeth) turns inwards, in order to demonstrate how the human soul is able to rise above the parochial boundaries of its individuality and fixed identity, and accept mankind. Elizabeth's spirit is exiled from her physical body so that she is able to understand the workings of human society. The society Elizabeth investigates in and beyond the boundaries of Motabeng is clearly diseased.

Elizabeth proceeds from an acute awareness of her condition of multiple marginality and colonisation occasioned by such social totalities as race, culture, patriarchy, class, God and religion. As she investigates and makes an informed appraisal of these positions, she finds them problematic and provisional. In fact, none of the notions she examines in her spiritual journey is a categorical imperative or a transcendental paradigm for defining and understanding identity.

At the end of A Question of Power, Elizabeth has deconstructed and demystified all the discourse that caused her condition of insanity over the three to four year period. A belief that this becomes a transcendent, once-and-for all solution to her problems is simplistic. What is vitally important is the fact that Bessie Head's axioms that she constructs for herself are so broad and profound that they cannot constitute another prison for the human spirit. In other words, the axioms free the human spirit from its prison of oppression. And this realisation becomes so immensely liberating and spiritually enriching that it dissipates her madness, before she goes on to integrate into the Motabeng community. My argument in this dissertation is that A Question of

Power embodies a direct challenge to all patriarchal structures and, in the process of deconstruction, a tortured female victim overcomes these tyrannies, and enters larger spheres of being in which individual and community harmoniously endorse each other.

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