Physical and Psychological Factors in Bessie’s *A Question of Power*

“It is possible to translate physical factors into psychic.”
(Jacobi, 1955).

Abstract

Bessie Head’s style of writing appeals to psychological issues. In *A Question of Power*, she delves into the realm of abnormal psychology, thus making the work relevant to an interdisciplinary study. In the novel, the problematic situation of a child produced by the South African society in the days of apartheid is portrayed. The child is rejected by social institutions because though her mother was White, she herself does not look White. Her mother’s family disowns her. She does not really know her mother. In adulthood, she has a bizarre marriage and eventually decides to migrate to Botswana. She faces discrimination, isolation and culture conflict and begins to exhibit abnormal behaviour. The novel, though coming from an era of apartheid, which has been abolished, makes some universal and enduring statements about human societies. One sees that under traumatizing social and political situations, children and women suffer acutely and in a special way.

Keywords: Bessie Head, Apartheid, Trauma, Psychosis, Freud, Literature

Introduction

Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis represents a landmark in the treatment of psychosis. His technique of psychoanalysis is based on the theory that: “Symptoms vanish when their unconscious antecedents have been made conscious” (Freud, 1960). This Freudian method is an empirical treatment that involves: “slow progression into the core of experience.” The patient is made to systematically shed light on all areas of past life to make the psychoanalytic aware of them so as to be able to determine whether or not they could have led to a psychotic patient’s functional disorder.

Just as the Freudian psychoanalytic method has been in use in the field of psychology, especially in the treatment of psychotic cases, the psychoanalytic theory has been applied to research and practice in other fields, particularly in creative writing. Novels like James Joyce’s *A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, William Faulkner’s *The Sound and The Fury*, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful ones are not yet Born*, *Why are we so Blest?* owe much to Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. The novel presents a story of the beginning and experience of neurotic problems in the life of the female
protagonist, Elizabeth. Divided into two parts titled, Sello and Dan, the novel in the Sello section gives us the background to, and the beginning of, Elizabeth’s neurosis. Like a psychoanalyst to whom the patient’s history is important, the novelist gives us, in the Sello section, aspects of Elizabeth’s life history that could have caused mental tension and breakdown.

The Sello section also pictures the degeneration of Elizabeth’s mental health to a very incoherent level before her recovery of sound mental health, which ends the novel. This makes the novel a Freudian psychoanalytical classic. It is our aim in this essay to use the Freudian model by discussing the story of the female protagonist and showing how the events of her life lead to psychological problems. We will also discuss her psychological problems to show how Elizabeth’s story proves that: “It is possible to translate physical factors into psychic.” (Jacobi, 1955).

### Childhood Experiences

Bessie Head presents Elizabeth’s life as one fraught with problems. These problems stem mainly from personal and social relationships. Right from childhood, Elizabeth is shown to have familial problems. She grows up with the impression that her foster parents are her real parents. However, she discovers in her teenage years, her true relationship with her foster parents. The manner of discovery is in itself shocking. Elizabeth has just been sent from the place she knows to be her home to school. She has not yet settled down when the principal sends for her and tells her that:

> 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 (Head, 1981:16).

This is Elizabeth’s introduction to her mother. However, she keeps this information in her mind for seven years and only asks her foster mother about her real mother when she graduates from high school. Her foster mother confirms to her that her mother is abnormal and has been isolated in an asylum. On the family level, Elizabeth learns that she is the daughter of a stable boy and for this her mother’s family regards her more as an embarrassment than as a child or a relation. Elizabeth’s uncle says this about the child’s situation: “We want to wash our hands off this business. We want to forget it.” If the family that can by relationship bring her up throws her away in this way, the society is the next to take care of her. The stepmother shows us how the society treats baby Elizabeth:
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 Boer family. A week later you were returned. The women 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 (Head, 1981: 17).

This shows how Elizabeth is rejected by institutions, groups and individuals across the society until it becomes difficult to reject her any further. She hears as a teenager that the mother she thinks is hers adopted her because nobody else would. She is told that as a baby, no one, no institution accepted her as a child to be loved. If the manner of Elizabeth’s adoption is important, equally seminal are the child’s experiences with the woman and family she takes to be her own. We are told pretty little about life in this family but the little we are told needs to be examined.

In Elizabeth’s foster family, the situation hardly facilitates bringing a child up with love and care. The husband of Elizabeth’s foster mother dies and the foster mother turns the house to a beer bar. This trade leads to a deterioration of conditions in the home. The situation gets so bad in the home that it attracts this comment:

She was secretly relieved to be taken away from the beer-house and sent to a mission school, as hours and 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, no one to think about children (Head, 1981:15-16).

In the foster home, Elizabeth is made to waste away hours of her childhood attended by pangs of hunger and tears of misery. These experiences constitute a coalition of traumatic experiences signifying a kind of childhood that knows little love.

**Adulthood Experiences**

Elizabeth’s adulthood experiences are traumatic in ways that are comparable with her childhood experiences. The novelist shows that most of her associations in adulthood put Elizabeth through relationships that fall far short of her expectations but relationships, which are by nature bizarre. There is the marriage she has. She meets an ex-convict who sounds remorseful and tame. The man hints that he has purged himself of his criminal inclinations and has developed interest in Buddhism. There is a common ground here as Elizabeth too has interest in Buddhism and oriental religions generally. The pre-marital romance lasts a week; they get married thereafter.

After marriage, Elizabeth’s husband reveals more facts about himself. He gets involved in unrestrained sexual dealings with several willing women while he abuses those who are unwilling. Elizabeth’s husband becomes an embarrassment, as it seems
Elizabeth cannot keep her husband. A month after her marriage, a neighbour says to Elizabeth:

You have a strange husband. Sussie was standing outside the door and called to him. He walked straight in and they went to bed. He’s been doing this nearly everyday now with Sussie. I also once greeted him and he said: ‘How about a kiss?’ And I said: ‘Bugger off.’ What made you marry that thing? (Head, 1981:18-19).

Just as there are personal experiences, which are traumatic for Elizabeth, there are also social events directed at social groups which cause Elizabeth personal trauma. There is the social experience of Apartheid in South Africa: “She hated the country. In spite of her inability to like or understand political ideologies, she had also lived the back-breaking life of all black people in South African” (Head, 1981). Although, her mother is White, Elizabeth is discriminated against because she is not White but coloured. She is then regarded and treated as a person who is socially and naturally inferior to Whites.

Homosexuality is another social problem that causes Elizabeth mental agony and is linked to Apartheid which involves a denigration of a group by the mere assertion of another group. This (self)-denigration leads to conceptual barrenness, compromise of values and loss of power to resist evil in its many forms. Men see themselves as not really masculine but are inclined to perform perverse roles that conflict with societal role expectations for them. In this sense, men play women:

They tied turbans round their heads, wore lipstick, fluttered their eyes and hands and talked in high falsetto voices. It was so widespread, so common to so many men in this town that they felt no shame at all. No one commented at these strange men dressed in women’s clothes (Head, 1981: 45).

Under Apartheid – a perversion of social relations – other social perversions and vices are bred and nurtured. For someone like Elizabeth who stands aside and watches social currents, she sees the event as the emasculation of coloured men, the men of her race; this causes her mental torment:

The nights became torture. As she closed her eyes all these coloured men lay down on their backs, their penes in the air, and began to die slowly. Some of them who could not endure these slow deaths simply toppled over into rivers and drowned (Head, 1981:45).

This is the picture of the symbolic death of coloured men at the hands of the whites. Elizabeth’s psyche cannot accept the fate of the coloured men with equanimity; it replays the symbolic nature of this denigration at a time when the conscious mind should be at rest and turns Elizabeth’s nights to torture periods. With the unwholesome personal and social relations in South Africa causing Elizabeth personal trauma, she decides to take an exit visa to Botswana.
This decision is taken to escape the South African situation, which she sees as the cause of her bizarre experiences. She hopes that in Botswana she would live in a society where she would be accepted on the simple term of being human. However, as she is to discover, cultural and cognitive differences would make her different from the average Botswana person.

**Life in Exile**

The physical features of Botswana, the land that is supposed to facilitate Elizabeth’s emancipation, is important for consideration. Elizabeth chooses to live in a Botswana village called Motabeng. Motabeng is a village in which the nights are pitch-dark. This is a contrast to what Elizabeth is used to in South Africa where the streets are well lit and “at first, she found the pitch-dark darkness of the Motabeng night terrifying” (Head, 1981: 21). After some time, she starts living with it.

A level of cultural difference exists between the Botswana and the South African situation. Botswana does not run an Apartheid system, so the Botswana people for this and other reasons are culturally different from South Africans. There is the difference at the level of self-esteem and personal ambition. It is an aberration for a non-white South African to aspire to be important. “People there had an unwritten law They hated any black person among them who was ‘important’” (Head, 1981: 26). So, when Elizabeth is asked in Botswana if she wants to be important, she gives what she considers to be socially acceptable response by saying that she does not want to be important. However, with the cultural conditions in Botswana, Elizabeth’s response should be different.

The differences between the Botswana and the South African cultural situations make Elizabeth’s experiences in Botswana a point of dissonance. She experiences racism in South Africa. In Botswana, she does not escape another form of discrimination. Elizabeth stands out from the local populace and cannot discuss freely with them because she does not share the same cultural background with the Botswana people. Elizabeth’s language, her way of life, and her pre-occupations on a daily basis are quite different from the average Botswana citizen’s pre-occupations. She can be said to be experiencing racialism and alienation in Botswana: “Definitely, as far as Botswana society was concerned, she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be in on their things” (Head, 1981: 26).

In her alienation and isolation, she iterates her physical, emotional, cultural and psychological position and preference thus: “I like the general atmosphere because I don’t care whether people like me or not. I am used to isolation” (Head, 1981: 56). Elizabeth’s isolation and alienation cannot be said to be due to cultural factors only. She sometimes exhibits behaviour which the society considers as actions that break the moral and social conventions of the society. For these actions, she is dealt with by the society as a strange kind of person who in social configurations deserves no place and few rights, an outcast.

There is a dialectic here which bears pointing out. Elizabeth performs actions, which are out of tune with social conventions because she is undergoing nervous tension caused by her unwholesome personal and social experiences. However, her actions further worsen her situation because they justify the society’s treatment of her as an
outcast. One incident that illustrates the above analysis is Elizabeth’s verbal outburst at the radio store, shouting at a shop attendant: “oh, you bloody bastard Batswana! Oh you bloody bastard Batswana! Then she simply opened her mouth in one long, high piercing scream” (Head, 1981: 51). With this scream, she faints and is taken to the hospital.

The remote cause of this outburst is the mental torture she has been having, she keeps hearing, “Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death. A week of it reduced her to a wreck”. (Head, 1981: 47). Her outburst is then a desperate reaction to her nervous tension and the social factors that stimulate this tension. It is not a reaction aimed at the shop attendant per se. Nobody notices this; what the society sees is not Elizabeth’s psychic condition; it sees her physical reactions and judge her by them, a judgment in which they feel justified not only to isolate Elizabeth but to treat her as an outcast.

However, Elizabeth can only take very little rough treatment. After three months in Botswana, she appears to have had a little too much. Her South African and Botswana experiences combine to introduce strange developments to her psychic health. One of these developments is hallucination. Newman and Newman assert that:

Hallucinations are visions, sounds and feelings that are created by the people. People having hallucinations may hear voices or other sounds, feel things touching them, or see things that are not there. Hallucinations often persist over time. They are strong evidence of the failure of reality testing mechanisms (1981: 409).

Elizabeth suddenly starts feeling that someone comes into her hut regularly, anytime she is about to fall asleep. Her first experience goes this way:

She had just blown out the light when she had the sudden feeling that someone had entered the room…There was a swift flow of air through the room, and whatever it was moved and sat down on the chair. The chair creaked slightly. Alarm, she swung around and lit the candle. The chair was empty. (Head, 1981: 22).

This type of event in which, Elizabeth feels someone is around her while no actual person would be found, continues for many nights. She also has countless and extensive dreams. Much of the material of the novel comes from the preconscious level. Two beings that Elizabeth encounters continuously at the preconscious level are Sello and Dan. These beings are the directors of the bizarre enactments going on in Elizabeth’s head. The enactments they closely direct are in the two sections of the novel. Elizabeth’s affairs with these men are telepathic, not physical. Sello and Dan are real and alive in Motabeng. Elizabeth does not have any relationship with the life and blood men; she knows very little about them. It is said of Sello that: “Very little reaches her about Sello, the living man. Now and again his name crops up in general conversation” (Head, 1981: 28).

The scanty information Elizabeth has on these men notwithstanding, she fantasizes about them in preconsciousness. Apart from hallucinations and dreams, there is also phantasm in Elizabeth’s private world. Phantasm is: “A subjective visual presentation of forms or absent persons, or what is taken for a disembodied spirit”
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(Drenver, 1976). Phantasm becomes an issue when we seek to analyse the content of the enactments in Elizabeth’s mind. In these enactments, we see a world where absent persons like Sello, Dan and Mrs. Jones are presented as being with Elizabeth in her room, sleeping on her bed and speaking with her. Also, we see a world of disembodied spirits whom she calls names like Soul personalities, Master of Psychology and demons. There are also Buddha, Medusa, the Father and the Mystical Madonna. These beings are shown discussing and even making love in these enactments.

Elizabeth has a phantasmal belief that she has love relationships with Sello and Dan. Rather than prove that she has relationships with these beings however, the enactments that produce her conclusions point to the fact that her subconscious mind is straining under the burden of experiential factors and pain, re-enacting her past experiences as a form of psychic malfunctioning in the present.

There is the sexual content of these mind dramas. In them, Sello and Dan are regarded as Elizabeth’s lovers. Also, both beings are shown to be involved in sex and homosexuality with unbridled passion. Dan has dealings with seventy-one girl friends and boyfriends. The behaviour of Dan and Sello in these mind dramas replay the facts of Elizabeth’s marriage. As Elizabeth’s husband is reckless with sexual partners, Sello and Dan who show up in Elizabeth’s subconscious are sexually promiscuous.

Also, the display of human suffering in the parade of the poor, destitute and the oppressed appear to have its roots in Elizabeth’s South African experience where she lived with poverty, deprivation and human suffering. Though this treatment of human suffering and poverty has a universal note, these issues arise from Elizabeth’s private life and experiences. Elizabeth says for many of the events in the novel, her tormentors “played on her experiences in South Africa” (Head, 1981: 44). And at the height of her psychosis, she shows that it is not only her South African experiences that are played on but also her everyday life. They “pick on people she met in daily life, always introducing a vivid, indelible fact about their sex lives, so abruptly, so unexpectedly” (Head, 1981: 160).

Conclusion

A Question of Power is the story of Elizabeth’s life. It is the story of a life lived in neglect, alienation, isolation and deprivation. It is the story of a woman that is produced by the South African Apartheid society but is alienated and rejected by her society. The society put her through social and personal oppression on many grounds. As a South African black, as a woman and as an idealist living in a world where ideals have no value; Elizabeth is made to suffer personally and socially. She experiences nervous breakdown because of her South African experience and racialism, which she experiences as a Botswana emigrant. With the social forces ranged against Elizabeth, she is forced to recede to her last ground of defense, herself. Here too there is no refuge because in this, another type of horror commences. It is as if the social forces have oppressed her so much that she already has a second nature by the time she wants to rely solely on herself to combat the evils of oppression external to her. She discovers that her mind is no longer her ally, rather, her mind keeps replaying at a psychic level, the
oppression and evils she has been through. It is then a situation of fighting enemies without and enemies within.

Given the universal tenor of the depiction of issues in *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth typifies the contemporary woman battling social forces, which ultimately have bizarre dimensions. She typifies the contemporary woman confronting contemporary social problems and in her case, the problems of apartheid in South Africa and that of discrimination in Botswana. Her story shows the dimensions of the experiences of a typical woman under the apartheid system, which operated in South Africa. While apartheid may have been abolished, her experiences in Botswana show that even between Africans there is need for greater accommodation and understanding at a practical level.

Elizabeth’s predicament equally iterates the fact that where social rights are denied, women and children ultimately feel the pinch in an intense way. It shows the vulnerability of women who along with general social suffering, suffer through unhappy and unstable marriages, social stigmatization and even the suffering of children who grow up under unstable and loveless home environment. Showing that in situations of social oppression, the family usually gets into a crisis and where the family suffers, children and women suffer a great proportion of the effects of such social disjunctions and malaise.
References