

BESSIE HEAD'S "A QUESTION OF POWER": THE NOVEL OF SOUL-JOURNEY

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Abstract

This paper proposes to examine the nature of the myths which Bessie Head uses in special and unique way to establish a special signification for her novel, *A Question of Power* and the relation the myths hold to the universal question of Good and Evil. Bessie Head amalgamates myth and religion. Two aspects of her attitude is highlighted. One is, myths express the evolutionary nature of man's psyche and the other is, myths ought to be set aside in context in which their efficacy to man is not their function. The heroine of the novel, Elizabeth proves it. The beauty of the desert landscapes happens to be a harmonious background for the folk who belong to it by birth. The people of Motabeng rouse a positive response in Elizabeth. Elizabeth alternating between mental breakdowns and intervals of lucidity develops the basic tenants of her humanism.

Keywords: Antithesis, cesspit, egotism, gestures, homosexuality, humanism, Lucidity, Motabeng, myth, protagonist, retrospective and vignettes.

Introduction

Bessie Head is rated as one of the most distinguished women writers Africa has produced. Her Scottish mother, Bessie Amelia Emery (nicknamed, Toby) belonging to a wealthy family fall in love with an African groom and was shortly sent to an asylum by her family because she was judged insane. Bessie Head named after her unfortunate mother, was born in the asylum's hospital. The child whom no one owned was raised in a mission orphanage until the age of thirteen. After finishing her high school education, she underwent training to be a teacher. She worked as a teacher and then as a journalist for African magazine, 'Drum'. She married Harold Head but the marriage ended in divorce in 1963, and Bessie Head was left to raise her only child, a son, as a single parent. Her son provided no joy and comfort to her. After her marriage broke up, she left South Africa on an exist permit and went to Serowe in Botswana and took up teaching post there. She lived here as a stateless person until her tragic death in April, 1986 with

Hepatitis infection. In Botswana, she remained in ‘refugee’ status for fifteen years before gaining citizenship. It was a punishment on her involvement with Pan-African politics. Her personal background and her experience as a stateless person informs her work making it strikingly autobiographical and personal. Her fiction draws significantly upon experience of being a non-white in South Africa. It would not be inappropriate to say that her work is a retrospective of her lonely and tragic life. It is the outpouring of an unhappy soul groping for stability on shifting sands. By reminiscing about her unhappy past, Head seeks to make her present meaningful. She wrote three novels-*When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973). The three novels are imbued with an anxious pre-occupation with contemporary Socio-Political problems of Southern African Societies- Black, Bushman, the coloured as well as the White and their interaction with each other. The canvas against which Bessie Head writes her novels is a highly sophisticated one. Her extensive and eclectic reading is evident on every page she writes. The first two novels, *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru* are positioned this side of complexity. The problems of the underprivileged receive fictional landscape reflect actual village environment in Botswana. That the environment continues to be the same for *A Question of Power* also. The location is Motabeng perched on the edges of the Kalahari Desert. It is powerfully overlaid with a series of mythic vignettes that illuminates the narrative with this strange power. Bessie Head describes her novel *A Question of Power* as “my only truly autobiographical work”. In this paper, I propose to examine *A Question of Power* as the Soul-Journey of Elizabeth, the main protagonist as a coloured in Botswana.

The Story of the Novel

Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* is a novel on two levels: On the literal level, it is the story of the woman, Elizabeth who has come to Botswana with her small son as an exile from South Africa. Elizabeth first teaches school and later becomes involved in a cooperative farming venture designed to boost the economy of the village of Motabeng and to instill some pride in the Botswana. On this level, the story has little action and few emotional hills and valleys. On another level, however, the novel is a record of Elizabeth’s mental breakdown and of her wavering in and out of the terrifying world of insanity. The daytime world of Elizabeth’s mundane chores and her routine work at the school and later in the gardens contrasts sharply with the night times world that eventually takes over and leads to her mental collapse.

Within three months of her arrival in Botswana, the normal and the abnormal start to blur for Elizabeth. She starts to hallucinate, and in the fantasy world created by her disturbed mind, she is obsessed with questions about the soul and the nature of good and evil. Good and evil take human shape in her fantasies, staring when she awakens one night to imagine a man sitting in the chair by her bed.

For three years, Sello, the man beside her bed, inhabits her fantasy world. The real Sello is a prominent farmer of Motabeng, but the Sello of Elizabeth’s nightmare world has little in common with his flesh-and-blood counterpart. The shadowy Sello of Elizabeth’s nightmares is a good like entity that seems to have existed in all places and in all ages since the beginning of time. He is associated in her distorted thoughts with the prophets of the world, and he sees linked to Elizabeth herself by their mutual concern for things of the soul. He is threatened, however, in Elizabeth fantasies in the first part of the novel, by a Medusa-like adversary and, in the second part, by the Satanic Dan Molomo, a character also based on a living man from the village but represented in Elizabeth’s madness as the epitome of evil. Woman not only has to confront masculine aggression as a symbol of oppression but also to fight her obsession to this

power in her own psyche. Lloyd W. Brown highlights this point, “Her hallucinations center upon two male figures, Sello and Dan, who remind her of two men she knows vaguely in Motabeng. In her fantasies, they are really important as images-her images of male roles and sexual power which compete with each other for control of her personality. Their struggle, between Sello, the symbol of love and compassion and Dan the epitome of destructive male egotism, is developed in the form of morality play”. (p.175)

It is true that Dan and Sello are the bad and good angels who battle for the control of Elizabeth soul, but it is incorrect to say that they represent two people, she “knew vaguely”. On the contrary, the predominant roles they play in Elizabeth’s hallucinations prove that the two men were closely involved in her life. Probably Dan was her promiscuous husband and Sello a confidant and friend.

Bessie Head’s description of male-female relations especially sexual passion is deeply coloured by her personal experience. She invariably saw sex as a cesspit- a centre of depravity. The revolting sexual imagery in the novel, Dan’s obscene gestures and vulgar descriptions of his one night with seventy one women confirm the view that Head’s experiences with her sexuality and with the opposite sex were not pleasant. Elizabeth correlates sex with filth, frustration, molestation, incest and homosexuality. She is obsessed with sex right from her childhood. Her promiscuous husband only confirms her distaste for sex. Dan represents a negative and self-centred masculinity which preys on gullible woman. In contrast to Dan, Sello represents the positive image of masculinity. He is the direct antithesis of Dan. As an image of love, he represents a selfless individual growth and universal harmony. He is her guiding spirit because she is attracted to his deals of humanism and brotherhood. The gospel of love as preached by Sello appeals to Elizabeth because it is so different from Dan’s selfish and egoistical display of sexuality. Sello wishes to protect Elizabeth’s psyche from Dan’s evil influence. Medusa is an extension of Dan. They are savage beasts, Vulturous in behaviour. She is Sello’s wife but he is dominated by her. Medusa is the tormenting voice within Elizabeth’s soul/spirit. Bessie Head associates the image of Medusa to that of Mahamaya in India who is a weaver of illusions. Like Mahamaya, Medusa is capable of trapping men with her passions. She symbolises the evil incarnate. She is the symbol of exploitation. She is the alter ego of Elizabeth. In contrast to Dan and Medusa, Sello represents the positive image of masculinity. Thus, the strength between Sello, Dan and Medusa takes the shape of a morality play inculcating a moral lesson.

The images of Dan, Sello and Medusa negate the philosophy of humanism because they represent questions of power which seek to cripple Elizabeth. Her liberation from all three images is a final step towards confident self-hood. Hence, Dan and Sello are the extremes of single moral awareness experienced by Elizabeth.

After Elizabeth loses control of herself and shouts obscenities at a store clerk, she is told to produce a certificate of sanity or lose her teaching post. She chooses to turn her back on the job. She seeks help from Eugene, a fellow exile, who gives her work to do in the garden of the cooperative farm that he has helped establish in order to develop home industry among the Botswana and to take advantage of the region’s natural resources. Elizabeth’s life, on the surface, again takes on semblance of order, but inside, the battle between good and evil still rages. She breaks down once again and this time finds herself, like her mother, in a mental institution. Elizabeth, however, is not destined to die there by her own hand, as did her mother under similar circumstances.

Elizabeth suffers not only social isolation but intellectual deprivation. One of the few people with whom she can converse as an intellectual equal is the American Peace Corps

volunteer, Tom, who acknowledges that men don't really discuss the deep metaphysical profundities with women. During the four years in which Elizabeth is plagued by tribal suspiciousness, terrifying dreams, economic hardships, and two hospitalizations for mental breakdown, it is Tom, and her own love for and obligation to her son, Shorty, that help her to survive this ordeal. Elizabeth's mother role enables her to regain a measure of sanity.

Critique

A Question of Power is a very subjective novel because the entire narrative is filtered through the disturbed consciousness of Elizabeth and the relationship between the internal events and the outside world is analysed. Her nightmares are a microcosm of Botswana. Her journey is an art of madness leaves her with a clearer view of the nature of God and man, and this heightened insight helps her to answer some crucial questions about the plight of the African people. Man's inhumanity to man, as evidenced by the rigid caste system of South Africa, for example, is possible only because of man's inability to see the godlike in all men. Elizabeth perceives her purpose in life to be to proclaim the equality of all human souls. Elizabeth does not advocate a display of power as the way to shape the future of Africa. Instead, she encourages her people to be ordinary, not great, for in power-worship lies the roots of destruction.

It must be remembered that this novel is a romantic return to rural ways, the discovery of the worth of simple rural people, a Wordsworthian dream of the efficacy of the philosophy of back-to-nature. The people of Motabeng rouse a positive response in Elizabeth. "A Question of Power" is the final apotheosis of the female bildungsroman. Elizabeth stands proud, defiant and alone on the land which has reclaimed her as one of its own.

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