Reading Psychological Trauma in Bessie Head’s A Question of Power

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Abstract

Bessie Head’s A Question of Power depicts the trauma of South-African activists exiled in Botswana. In the text, apartheid regime is portrayed as a racist dictatorship which privileges the white minority to the detriment of the large majority of Africans. The heroine Elizabeth is described as a character suffering from a psychological trauma. Her trauma is revealed in the text in different ways: depression, sexual abuse, alcoholism and madness. Furthermore, the village of Motabeng is seen as the starting point of Elizabeth’s mental instability. She cannot solve the internal conflict which opposes her to her superego. The flashbacks and the memories of apartheid’s torture and bestiality force Elizabeth to use her sex as a remedy against anguish and trauma. In the fictitious South-African society people are judged and classified on the basis of their color. Consequently, Europeans and Africans do not have the same rights and duties.

Keywords: anguish, apartheid, depression, madness, trauma.
Résumé

A Question of Power de Bessie Head dépeint le traumatisme des activistes sud-africains exilés au Botswana. Dans le récit, le régime apartheid est caricaturé comme un pouvoir dictatorial et raciste qui privilégie la minorité Blanche au détriment de la majorité des Africains. L’héroïne Elizabeth est représentée comme un personnage souffrant d’un traumatisme psychologique. Son traumatisme se manifeste de diverses manières dans le texte : la dépression, l’abus sexuel, l’alcoolisme et la folie. Par ailleurs, le village de Motabeng se dévoile comme le lieu de mise en crise de l’héroïne Elizabeth. Elle n’arrive pas à régler le conflit interne qui oppose son moi à son sur-moi. Les flash-backs et les souvenirs de la torture et la bestialité du régime apartheid poussent Elizabeth à se servir de son sexe comme un remède contre l’angoisse et le traumatisme. Dans l’Afrique du Sud référentielle du texte, les hommes sont jugés et catégorisés selon la couleur de la peau. Par conséquent, les Blancs et les Noirs n’ont pas les même droits et devoirs.

Mots-clés: angoisse, apartheid, dépression, folie, traumatisme.
Introduction

In the book entitled La Poétique (1975), Aristotle borrows the notion of “mimesis” from Plato and he considers art as an imitation or a representation of social realities. Plato explains in the book X of La République that the work of art is a mere imitation of what is already known or what already exists. As such, art is the copy of another copy. The artist simply imitates an object produced by the craftsman or nature. “The literary text is not a natural object. It is a place of meeting of heterogeneous practices” (Pierre Kuentz, 1979, p. 208). In this view, Bessie Head’s A Question of Power (1974) appears as a true portrayal of horror, crimes and inhuman ill-treatment Africans and the colored endured under the joke of Apartheid system. Bessie Head also satirizes and castigates the bestiality, the injustice and the racial discrimination which corrodes apartheid South Africa.

To better understand the quintessence of our topic, it is important to decipher the term “psychological trauma”. In the past, the Greek word “trauma” was used to refer to a wound or any damage inflicted on the body. Today, the term "psychic trauma" is used in reference to the condition in which someone experienced sad events which corrode his mind. Social harassment and madness’ stigmatization are the main causes of the heroine’s metamorphosis into a “problematic character” who cherishes social values different from the ones accepted by the apartheid system. Why does Bessie Head write South African evil? To what extent can we consider the stigmatization of the heroine madness as a dangerous weapon used by white men against Africans? Is self-writing a form of psychological liberation? This paper intends to analyze trauma as a wound or an incurable evil through the behavior and the actions of the heroine Elizabeth. As such, the analysis deals with three points: the origin of a chronic trauma, the manifestations of Elizabeth’s trauma and art as a remedy of trauma. Psycho-criticism and sociological criticism will be used to conduct this work.

1-Racial discrimination as a source of mental insanity

This part deals with racial discrimination as a root of the protagonists’ mental insanity. As such, the analysis focuses on two points: the abasement of Africans and the stigmatization of Elizabeth as a prospect mad woman.

1-1-The Abasement of Africans: Sello and Dan

Bessie Head’s A Question of Power (1974) is a writing of trauma. In this view, the narrative starts by the words of a neurotic character known as Sello who puts into questions the meaning of his life in xenophobia and tribal South Africa which deprives him from his cultural identity. This adulterated and alienated character, Sello regards himself as the laughing stock of his community. People curse him and say bad things about him: “Sello, after all, is just a fool, and he looks like a monkey” (p. 48). This passage reveals his discontent with apartheid South Africa:

It seemed almost incidental that he was African. So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment. And yet, as an African, he seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements: ‘I am just anyone.’[…] A man might laugh at intense suffering only if the evil which tortured him became irrelevant and if obsessive love, which was also one of his evils, became irrelevant too. Had it? […] I might have died
before I found this freedom of heart.’ That was another perfect statement; to him-love was freedom of heart. (p.11)

Here, Sello is seen as an activist of the fight against apartheid who finds asylum in Botswana. The freedom of speech and movement which he finds in exile enable him to better understand the physical and moral suffering of Africans under the yoke of apartheid. “In South Africa [he] has been rigidly classified Coloured. There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality. There wasn’t any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. They were races, not people” (p. 44). Bessie Head depicts apartheid system as a dictatorship or a racist power which privileged the white minority to the detriment of the large majority of Africans. White people symbolize human beings whereas black people stand for evil: “Dogs, filth, the Africans will eat you to death. Dog, filth, the Africans will you to death” (p. 46). This phrase seen as a curse is used by Europeans as a song to alienate the Africans. Beyond this sad song, white men force Africans to accept their social position of slaves or downtrodden as a will of God. This negation of Africans enables Sello and Dan to become friends. Both protagonists are in quest of peace of mind and wholeness which can heal them from their psychological trauma. In creating Sello’s hallucination, Bessie Head creates herself a master that she never found in normal life. In this respect, Sello can be considered as an advocate of Bessie Head’s ideology in the text. He acts and speaks on her behalf.

Furthermore, the first appearance of Sello epitomizes the beginning of Elizabeth’s mental disturbance. As such, Sello is described as a ghost that precipitates Elisabeth’s inner disorder or disintegration. “The form of a man totally filled the large horizon in front of her. He was sitting sideways. He had an almighty air of calm and assurance about him. […] A sort of terror gripped her chest. The words were almost jerked out of her mouth” (p. 22). Elizabeth’s hallucinatory figures, Sello and Dan, are inspired by two living men of the village of Motabeng. Elizabeth does not know very well the two characters and she has never talked to them. She merely knows that “Sello was a crop farmer and cattle breeder” (p. 28). In allegorical fashion, Sello and Dan are ambivalent characters. They embody two contradictory social realities: good and evil. In other words, Sello and Dan represent the extremes of good and evil in the anatomy of a nervous breakdown and journey through the underworld. Both characters partake in the psychological disintegration of the heroine Elizabeth, but with different ends. For instance, Dan wants to annihilate her while Sello wants to destroy her illusions. Moreover, the prohibition of union between Europeans and Africans is the tangible symbol of the hatred against Africans. An interracial marriage is perceived as dreadful violation of the law of marriage promulgated by apartheid system: “South Africa’s Immorality Amendment Act of 1957” (Edward Roux, 1966). Any South African who acts in a way different from the one proposed by apartheid system is regarded as a social deviant and he or she is treated as a dangerous enemy of the nation. In this view, Elizabeth’s stigmatization as a prospect mad woman will be analyzed in the next point of our paper.

2-2- The Stigmatization of Elizabeth as a Mad Woman to Be

Elizabeth is the fruit of an unwanted union because she is born of a white woman and a black man. Her parents are depicted as the fools who plainly defy the ruling system.
Consequently, they are rejected from the community in order to spare their compatriots from their mental illness. The prison where they sojourn is also portrayed as a government institution. It is a specific place where dissidents and social outcasts are sent to learn how to become good citizens. The ill-fated Elizabeth suffers because of her belonging to two opposed social classes. In the narrative, Europeans and Africans are in quest or re-conquest of political power. As such, Elizabeth’s parents symbolize evil because they disapprove the worldview of the apartheid system. The protagonist Elizabeth pays for the crimes of her parents. The white ruling class thinks that Elizabeth’s mother is mad because she befriends with an African. In so doing, she undermines the importance of her social class incarnated by Europeans in the novel.

Additionally, the hard words of the principal of the mission school where Elizabeth is allowed to have modern education permit the reader to see how people represent Elizabeth in their mind. As revealed in the underneath passage, Elizabeth is a character suffering from congenital madness:

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.’ Elizabeth started to cry, through sheer nervous shock. The details of life and oppression in South Africa had hardly taken from in her mind. She had always thought of herself as the child of the woman who had been paid to care for her. Seeing her tears, the gaunt missionary unbent a little, in her version of tenderness. (p.16)

The above passage highlights the contempt of the principal of the mission school vis-à-vis Elizabeth. In effect, this contempt translates the malice of the director of the school against the downtrodden of the community. The principal laughs and traumatizes the small orphan Elizabeth when she publicly declares that Elizabeth is born in a psychiatric hospital of an insane woman. The “hidden symbolic meaning” (Zima, p.186) of the remembrance of the circumstances which occurred before the unorthodox birth of Elizabeth is meant to destroy her mental stability. Obviously, it is the ruling system apparatus anticipating and, subsequently, jeopardizing the heroine life with the permanent fear of possible insanity. She then fears to be jailed and die in the same poor conditions like her mother. This traumatic occurrence is unbearable and so shocking that Elizabeth continues to feel the pain during the rest of her life. She bursts into tears when she comes to know about her parentage for the first time and her birth in a bizarre place: “Elizabeth started to cry, through sheer nervous shock” (p.16). The attitude of the principal of the mission school is shocking and revolting because Elizabeth as a teenager does not want to know the misfortune of her parents. She then understands her status of orphan which turns her into the laughing stock of South Africans. In this respect, Elizabeth is rejected and stigmatized as a potential insane baby-girl. The principal of the mission school often puts Elizabeth in quarantine fearing that she can harm or infect her classmates. The schoolboys and schoolgirls are warned to avoid playing with her on the playground:

Once Elizabeth struck a child during a quarrel, and the missionary ordered: ‘Isolate her from the other children for a week’. The other children soon noticed something unusual about Elizabeth’s isolation periods. They could fight and scratch and bite each other, but if she did likewise she was locked up. They took to kicking at her with deliberate malice as she sat in a corner reading a book. None of the prefects would listen to her side of the story. ‘Come on,’ they said. ‘The principal said you must be locked up’. At the time, she had merely hated the principal with a black, deep bitter rage. (p.17)
Here, Elizabeth is portrayed as a victim of racial segregation. She is shattered by a bitter colonial past which haunts her and the trauma she experienced under the reign of apartheid. The mission school which epitomizes the propaganda institution of the segregationist ideology is corrupted like the fictitious South African society. Behind the marginalization or exclusion of Elizabeth from her classmates, the reader can see the shadow of a social balkanization. Elizabeth is considered as a fool without any tangible medical evidence testifying her so-called insanity. In this regard, the mission school becomes a place of alienation or rather a tool of social stratification. The school principal begrudges malice against Elizabeth. The bad behavior of the principal compels the heroine to play a significant part in her self-depersonalization.

The self of the baby-girl then activates another mechanism which turns against self the hatred which so far was mainly directed toward the interior. The baby-girl tortures and blames herself. She even regards herself as an inferior being. During her childhood, her adolescence and even her adulthood, she uses every means to disadvantage herself, to do harm to herself and her personal interests usually come after the ones of the others. (Anna Freud, 1978, p.44)\(^1\)

The soliloquy the heroine Elizabeth has with her unconsciousness forces her to hate her mother and the white oppressor. She is then in quest of truth and identity. When Elizabeth becomes a schoolmistress, she pays a visit to her foster mother and questions her about the story of her private life. As the reader can notice, the story about the heroine’s childhood is so pathetic and touching. This explains in a certain way, why her foster mother bursts into tears when she starts telling the gloom story of Elizabeth’s birth and childhood:

‘It’s such a sad story,’ she said. ‘It caused so much trouble and the family was frightened by the behavior of the grand-mother. 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. The next thing was, the family came down in a car from Johannesburg on their way to the racecourse in Durban. He was very angry and said: “We want to wash our hands of this business. We want to forget it, but the old lady insists on seeing the child. We had to please her. We are going to leave her here for a while and pick her up later”. The old lady came down every time they entered horses in the races. She was the only one who wanted to see your mother and you. When you were six years old we heard that your mother had suddenly killed herself in the mental house. The grandmother brought all her toys and dolls to you’. (p.17)

This passage sheds light on the malice of the head of the mission school against Elizabeth. The report made by Elizabeth’s foster mother confirms the words of the principal. Frankly speaking, she is born in a psychiatric hospital. The implicit of the text shows that Elizabeth’s mother was not suffering from any mental breakdown. She was in good health like the other women of the community. However, her love affair with an African is perceived as the root of her mental disturbance. As such, she is put in quarantine in a psychiatric hospital. Her madness is a mere machination of the Establishment of apartheid regime. This

\(^1\) - Le moi de la fillette déclenche maintenant un autre mécanisme en retournant contre soi la haine qui jusqu’alors s’adressait exclusivement à l’intérieur. L’enfant se torture elle-même en se faisant de cuisants reproches, en éprouvant des sentiments d’infériorité. Au cours de son enfance, de son adolescence, et jusque dans l’âge adulte, elle met tout en œuvre pour se désavantager, pour se nuire et ses propres intérêts passent toujours après ceux d’autrui. (Anna Freud, 1978, pp. 44)
revelation of truth enables the protagonist Elizabeth to better understand her exclusion from the society. She considers herself as a daughter of evil who is doomed to everlasting suffering. Her uncles secretly throw her in an orphanage to avoid punishment and force labor: “We want to wash our hands of this business” (p.17). Elisabeth’s grandmother is the only member of her family who expresses her love to the colored baby-girl. This grandmother used to pay visit to the unwanted baby in the orphanage at night. Elizabeth eventually accepts her stigmatization of a daughter born in a psychiatric hospital. She then decides to go and see her birth place.

The last thing Elizabeth did in that small town where she had been born was to walk to the mental hospital and stare at it. There was a very high wall surrounding the building, and the atmosphere was so silent there hardly seemed to be people alive behind it. People had named the building the Red House because its roof was painted red. (pp.17-18)

This visit of the psychiatric hospital recalls Elizabeth the souvenirs of her childhood. During her childhood, Elizabeth used to pass by this hospital known as the “Red House” whenever she tries to join her playmates on the other side of the quarter. However, she has never imagined that her personal life and the one of the Red House or psychiatric hospital are linked. This revelation of truth is a turning point of the heroine’s private life. To cope with humiliation and sorrow, Elizabeth rejoins ANC in the fight against apartheid in order to restore the dignity of Africans. Her political activism brings about her arrest and her sojourn in prison. When she is released, Elizabeth cannot recover from the trauma she has endured in jail. She cannot accept her condition of a downtrodden and stigmatized woman. Elizabeth flees from South Africa to settle down in Botswana which she considers as a paradise. During her exile, the prophecy of apartheid system becomes a reality. Elizabeth cannot forget the ill-treatment and tribalism of the Africans in her home country. She is then plunged in depression which finally turns into madness. In this perspective, the second part of our work deals with the manifestations of Elizabeth’s trauma.

2-The Manifestations of Elizabeth’s Trauma.

In the narrative, trauma is seen in different ways. The mental insanity of every character is revealed through his words and his deeds. In this view, social deviance can be read through the abuse of sex, alcohol and homosexuality.

2-1- Sex and Alcohol as Means of Expression

The heroine Elizabeth is depicted as a character who suffers from insanity. Her mental illness is seen through depression, alcohol and sexual abuse. The disorder one can see in the text is the replica of the disturbed life of the heroine. Elizabeth is a social deviant who violates the rules established by apartheid system. Her relationship with two sex addicts: Sello and Dan Molomo is the visible sign of her mental insanity. The heroine has sexual intercourses with her allies Sello and Dan. To express her love, she dedicates her novel to her two lovers. As the text reveals, her novel A Question of Power comprises two parts. The first part is entitled Sello and the second one Dan. The three characters or friends: Elizabeth, Sello and Dan use sex as a toy or a means of resistance and self-affirmation. The overuse of sex as a form of insanity is clearly seen in the following paragraph:

He had been standing in front of her, his pants down, as usual, flaying his powerful penis in the air and saying: ‘Look, I’m going to show you how I sleep with B…She has a womb I can’t forget. When I go
with a woman I go for one hour. You can’t do that. You haven’t got a vagina...’ He was going on like that when she had landed, after four four years of it, on unvolcanic ground. She was shaking her head slowly, befuddled by the tablets prescribed for a mental breakdown, when suddenly Sello said: ‘Love isn’t like that. Love is two people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the soul of the other, like a ghoul’. (pp.12-13)

Here, the village of Motabeng appears as a place of self-questioning for the heroine. As such, Elizabeth cannot solve the internal conflict which opposes her consciousness to her unconsciousness. The flash-backs and the sad souvenirs of torture under apartheid force Elizabeth to use her sex as a remedy against sorrow and trauma. At this step, sex is metaphorically a fighting tool which allows refugees to resist and appease their pain. Elizabeth is a neurotic and sex addict who only understands the “language” of sex. In this view, Dan brandishes his penis in public in order to attract Elizabeth’s attention to his manhood. Dan then laughs at the heroine when he says she has no vagina. He goes on saying that his penis remains erected over one hour when he has sex with a woman. In other words, Elizabeth who has no vagina cannot bear the fury of his sexual machine: “Look, I’m going to show you how I go with B...She has a womb I can’t forget. When I go with a woman I go for one hour. You can’t do that. You haven’t got a vagina...” (p. 13). This statement of Dan puts into question the femininity of Elizabeth. Elizabeth is then portrayed as an “intra-textual symbol” (Todorov, 1978, p. 61) of trans-genders who turn themselves into evil forces to heal evil. In the plot, the trans-genders are the women who have adopted men ways of living without changing their sex. Sello also asserts that he uses his penis as a weapon to “kill” the women he loves. In this sense, the narrator argues that “Sello said some strange things about his penis...” (p.27). Through the novel, the reader realizes that the three friends or characters are alienated by sex. The sexual disorder one can see is the visible aspect of the psychological chaos which compels the three characters to take the route of deviance. Sello is trigger-happy like a traumatized soldier. He unsheathes and fires at women at any moment. The sexual abuse of Sello is implicit in the following extract:

‘I want to tell you something about Sello,’ then he’d look over his shoulder. ‘I come from the same place as you, and they want to us we can’t fight their people. I don’t care. If I find a man in bed with my wife, I’ll fight him. If you want to know some things about the people here, I’ll tell you.’ She disliked the heavy suggestiveness in his eyes, but was later very astonished when Sello referred to the matter himself: ‘It’s quite true. He found me in bed with his wife. I felt sorry for the man but I had to kill his wife. She was like a raging beast. She’s quite harmless now.’ (p. 28)

This passage describes the bestiality of Sello who likes a lion does not spare his prey (the woman) from “death”. Despite the sudden appearance of the man, he is committed in satisfying his sexual appetite. He clearly knows that the husband of his prey is completely disturbed but he has no choice because he must go with her (“kill”) in the face of her husband. Here, to “kill” a woman simply means to have sexual intercourse with her. Metaphorically, the penis is the best weapon of Sello. In the text, homosexuality is revealed as a sexual practice which is well spread in the social class of mulattoes.

2-2-Homosexuality as a form of Salvation

The mulattoes fears childbirth because they do not want their children to be stigmatized as “sons of evil” or “unwanted children”. Furthermore, the kids of mulattoes who have a mixture blood are considered as outcasts. Their belonging to two social categories
turns them into “hybrid children” who finally do not belong to one these two social classes. The colored or people of mixed blood change themselves into trans-genders to satisfy their sexual appetite. Homosexuality is the only way through which the mulattoes can enjoy themselves. As such, the ruling system treats as political criminals when they go with black or white women. The homosexuals depicted in Bessie Head’s text are not “boys” as the apartheid system asserts (Pearse, 1983). In effect, the so “boys” are all the adults who become gays in order to survive.

In South Africa she had been rigidly classified Coloured. There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality. There wasn’t any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. They were races, not people. She had lived for a time in a part of South Africa where nearly all the Coloured men were homosexuals and openly paraded down the street dressed in women’s clothes. They tied turbans round their heads, were 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. (p. 45)

In the referential South African society, people are judged and categorized according to the color of their skin. Consequently, Africans and Europeans do not have the same social status. The mulattoes who constitute the bridge between the two races or communities are seen as social outcasts: “You are inferior. You are filth” (p. 47). Their social exclusion can explain the adhesion of the heroine Elizabeth to the club of homosexuals. As shown in the text, trans-genders freely scroll through areas of South Africa. This social anomy enables apartheid system to promote colonial ideology and Europeans’ supremacy. In this view, the African, whatever his age and his qualification is treated as a “boy” who needs the protection and the assistance of his “elders brothers”. This vulgar underrating denies the maturity and the virility of Africans.

An African man gave her the most reasonable explanation: ‘How can a man be a man when he when he is called boy? I can barely retain my manhood. I was walking down the road the other day with my girl, and the Boer policeman said to me: “Hey, boy, where your pass?” Am I a man to my girl or a boy? Another man addresses me as boy. How do you think I feel? Suddenly 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 […]. (p. 45)

In the above passage, we notice that Africans have no dignity in the face of Europeans. By implication, they are deprived from their freedom of movement and association. To move, Africans are forced to carry everywhere a big book known under the name of “pass”. In reality, this “pass” is a permit which authorizes them to freely move one ghetto to another one. Apartheid regime creates this “pass” to control the different movements of the freedom fighters and dissidents. In addition, we realize that the heroine Elizabeth is also a carrier of other vices like alcohol and drug. The narrator highlights Elizabeth’s mental breakdown when he argues:

She swallowed six bottles of beer and six sleeping tablets to induce a blackout. She had a clear sensation of living right inside a stinking toilet; she was so broken, so shattered; she hadn’t even the energy to raise one hand. How had she fallen in there? How had she fallen so low? It was a state below animal, below living and so dark and forlorn no loneliness and misery could be equivalent […]. (p. 14)

This passage depicts Elizabeth as a character who is completely destroyed by alcohol and drug. To cope with her trauma, she lives a life of debauchery and total depravity. In the
narrative, Elizabeth uses alcohol and drug as a panacea to her inner pain and suffering. In this perspective, she gets drunk and takes drugs before sleeping every night: “She swallowed six bottles of beer and six sleeping tablets to a blackout” (p.14). The “six bottles of beer” and the “six sleeping tablets” shed light on the mental deterioration of the heroine. The figure « six » expresses an exaggeration, an overdose and a loss of memory. Elizabeth is then represented as a psychological alienated character who finds the sweetness of life through drinking and drugs. The abuse of alcohol and drug exposes the protagonist to rape, insanity and suicide. As one can realize, whenever Elizabeth is drunk and dosed, she cannot control herself and every man can go with her. The implicit of the text reveals that Elizabeth’s mind is no more working properly. Her life of debauchery is the forerunner signs of the mental illness which probably can bring about her suicide. Mental processes develop through attitudes which one finds in the nervous system, and they constitute ideas, that is to say the domain where the control of the current behavior takes place in connection with its consequences and its future behavior (Mead, 1963, p. 100). Moreover, the internal conflict which opposes the heroine’s consciousness to her unconsciousness is turned into a crisis. The narrator refers to Elizabeth’s insanity when he asserts:

Next, she threw the tablets out of the widow. In the early morning, she sped down a dusty road, greeting any passer-by with an exuberant shout of joy. So infectious was her happiness that they responded with spontaneous smiles. The panic-stricken Dan pulled up his pants too late. He said: ‘Look, I’m uplifted, I’m changed.’ She no longer heard. (p. 13)

The summoning of drugs in the text has a double meaning. In this regard, the drugs thrown through the window are the ones Elizabeth uses to prevent and to heal her mental breakdown. However, the drugs can be the cocaine she consumes in order to fight against stress, loneliness and insomnia. In the above paragraph, Elizabeth’s madness disturbs the community as a whole. Her beloved one, Dan is chocked and overwhelmed by her psychological breakdown. Talking about South African refugees of Motabeng, the narrator declares that the main cause of their suffering is linked to the ill-treatment they experienced under the yoke of apartheid:

So many people ran away from South Africa to forget it or throw it off. It seemed impossible then, the recurring, monotonous song in her head: ‘Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death…’ It broke her instantly. She could not help but identify with the weak, homosexual coloured men who were dying before her eyes. One day of it set her nervous system screaming. A week of it reduced her to total wreck. She lay on the bed trapped in misery. There was nothing she could think of, to counter it: ‘I’m not like that. I’ve never been racialist. Of course I admit I’m a Coloured. I’m not denying it. I’m not denying anything. Maybe people who are Coloureds are quite nice too, just like Africans….’ ‘You are inferior. You are fifth’. (p. 47)

Here, the psychological trauma of the protagonists is linked to the fragmentation of the fictitious South African society. As such, Insanity is revealed as an important aftereffect of the bestiality of apartheid system. In the text, Africans are portrayed as the beasts which feed themselves with the meat of dogs and the white man’s waste. Furthermore, the mulattoes are not allowed to have normal sexual intercourses like Europeans. This situation explains their rejection from society. The outcasts then create a “micro-society” of homosexuals to affirm their identity. The implicit of the text also shows that Elizabeth suffers and cries with her likes or the Colored. This can explain her collaboration with homosexuals: gays and lesbians which represent the people of her social class. As Mendras (2002; p. 107) asserts, “The place that a
specific society grants to the fools is symptomatic of the illness of this society”. In other terms, madness can be considered a product of South African community. The “social void” in which homosexuals live, explains the crisis and it does not show its main cause. Mendras also proposes a therapy that uses groups relationships centered on aggressive rapport vis-à-vis therapists. Here, again we note that pathologic helps to better understand the normal. The contrast between the two entities is defined by every society. In general, the same thing happens with illness and the attitude one needs to adopt in the face of illness. Regarding the above mentioning, art as a therapy for trauma will be analyzed in the last part of our paper.

3- Art as a Therapy for Trauma

Here, art appears as a good remedy which permits the female writer Bessie Head to heal her inner wounds. She also uses her writing to answer back the white oppressor. In this view, this part will analyze writing as a remedy and writing as a weapon to shed light on Bessie Head’s writing of trauma.

3-1-Writing as a Remedy

In *A Question of Power*, the writing of evil is revealed as a form of psychological liberation and healing. Bessie Head writes Elizabeth’s journey into her soul. Elizabeth’s quest allows her to cope with several psychological problems and alienating aspects of herself. In so doing, Bessie Head examines the issue of alienation and mental balance from different perspectives because the story she records and analyzes is about her own quest. Her writing is in a certain way a fictionalized representation of her daily predicaments. She writes the misfortune and sorrow of Elizabeth to better understand herself and her environment. The study reveals that Bessie Head suffers from neurosis. She also realizes that people around her are not the only ones to be blamed for her misfortune. She then centers her being on herself and explores her own psyche. She examined her consciousness and the repressed memories wishes hidden in her unconscious. Beyond the disintegration of Elizabeth, one can see the mental breakdown of Elizabeth. As such, her novel can be read as an autobiographical novel because the life of the heroine Elizabeth is strictly linked to the intimate life of the novelist. The stigmatization of the heroine’s insanity shows the malice of the apartheid regime against Africans. The text then retraces the route of Bessie Head’s life experience. By implication, the text becomes a kind of mirror which enables her to clearly organize the anarchic fluctuations of her unconsciousness. It is no more a writing that is built under the pressure of hazard but under the control of what is already done or achieved. (Miraux, 2007: 35). Bessie Head uses the text as a pretext to reveal herself to the general public. The exposition or revelation of the novelist to the general public through writing is in a certain way a form of confession. Bessie Head confesses herself in order to forget the torture and the bestiality of apartheid. Vulgar language, obscenity and social deviance become social norms. These social wounds permit the reader to see the ugliness of apartheid. Beyond the satire of South African’s evil, the novelist satirizes and denounces the social cancer which corrodes modern Africa. The image of the fractured and corrupt African society is seen in this passage:

‘Africa is troubled waters, you know. I’m a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You’ll only drown here. You’re not linked up to the people. You don’t know any African languages’ […] In South Africa she had been rigidly classified Coloured. There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being with a personality. There wasn’t any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. They were races, not people.
This passage shows that Bessie Head’s text is a satire of South Africa under the reign of apartheid. Here, Africa is depicted as a set of countries facing political instability. This African society in crisis is compared to a jungle where the strongest animals feed themselves on the flesh and blood of the weakest ones. The stigmatization of mulattoes in the plot as damned souls plays a significant role in their social and political exclusion. In the fictitious South Africa, the merit of every man is determined by the color of his skin. Consequently, the Whites symbolize the children of God whereas the Blacks stand for the offspring of evil. Apartheid is then propaganda and justification machine of the segregationist ideology. As such, Europeans regard Africans as rubbish. The repetition of “Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death” (p. 45) reveals the depersonalization or rather the metamorphosis of Africans. The implicit of the text shows that Africans are doomed to failure. For this reason, they are forced live on dogs and man’s waste forever. It is dog eat dog in this world. The ill-treatment endured by Africans compels the German woman to establish a parallel between apartheid and the Nazism of Hitler.

The German woman she had lived with in South Africa had told her of how Jewish people awoke one morning to a nightmare like that. Prior to Hitler’s propaganda they had just been like any other German citizens, with family lives and occupations. She came home one evening and remarked on an incident that had taken place in the office where she worked as a typist: ‘I thought I was back in Hitler’s Germany this morning.’ (p. 46)

Bessie Head’s work is dedicated to the revelation of the burning issues of her community. For her, writing always had a cathartic effect and after each one of her breakdowns, she would produce a significant piece of writing. The voyage into her inner part compels her to confront each of the alienating elements of her life, from her past to Botswana loneliness. Although her protagonists regain her psychic wholeness, her mental stability is still fragile and the process of writing novels offers a way out. Bessie Head also considers writing as a kind of weapon.

3-2- Writing as a weapon

Bessie Head’s uses psychological trauma as a tool to fight against apartheid. Elizabeth is then portrayed as a symbolic character. Her words are mainly philosophical and challenging. Through her insanity, one can see Bessie Head’s cunning. In this sense, the narrator argues “If she is mad why then her mind struggles with questions” (Head, 1974, p. 173). Bessie Head uses the writing of trauma to awoken the consciousness of African leaders. She urges African ruling class to have mercy on the oppressed people. Bessie Head also believes that interdependence is the essence of social life. In this view, Brotherhood, solidarity, mutual respect and forgiveness are the key ingredients for a true reconciliation and a re-building of post-apartheid South African society. Through her writing, she appears as a “liberator-heroine”. The commitment of Bessie Head to change women’s squalor into happiness is seen in the daily actions of the heroine Elizabeth. As explained in the narrative, Elizabeth is duty bound to lead the women of Motabeng in their fight against apartheid and patriarchal society. In effect, Elizabeth is a committed activist of the fight against apartheid. She finds asylum is a small village of Botswana known as Motabeng. She finds Botswanans to be very polite and sociable in their greetings. In South Africa, she had been used to open
animosity. Bessie Head believes in parapsychological powers such as telepathy or clairvoyance. She admitted that, with a mysterious lover, she “once even experienced a form of telepathic communication with him (Eilerson, 1995, p.76). Regarding the aforesaid, we notice that writing is a dangerous weapons colonialism and neocolonialism.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, we can say that Bessie Head thanks to her talent of experienced writer has succeeded in turning the ugliness of trauma into a pleasant and enjoyable trauma in the mind of the reader. She uses a hybrid language which combines seriousness and comic to reveal the evil of apartheid. Writing appears as a remedy which permits to Man to recover from his mental instability. Bessie Head’s text is in way a representation of her personal life. She then gives herself the pseudonym Elizabeth to hide her true identity and to share her life experiences with the future generations. The social rejection of the heroine Elizabeth symbolizes the exclusion of mulattoes from South African society. Beyond the castigation of the crimes of apartheid, Bessie Head promotes the emergence of a democratic and united African society where Europeans and Africans will have the same rights and duties. Writing appears as a means of fighting and affirmation of cultural identity. Personal liberty is not a property of culture (Freud, 2010: 89). As such, what vanishes in human community as instinct of liberty can be regarded as an upheaval against a prevailing injustice and it can bring about a change of culture.
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