CONFRONTING THE ABSURD: AN ANALYSIS OF BESSIE HEAD’S A QUESTION POWER

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Abstract
Bessie Head’s novels embrace many issues and preoccupations, and they are open to a myriad interpretation. The aim of this article is to explore the inner quest of the protagonist as she battles with the existential absurdities of life and aims for the necessary mental balance in order to find happiness. She has to face the difficulty of adaptation in a foreign community and her own mental turmoil resulting from traumatic pasts and repressed feelings. The study adopts the critical research design. The data collected through the critical reading of the work is coded according to the thematic concerns, the manner of characterization and the vision of the writer. The reading, analysis and interpretation of the selected text are done from the psychoanalytic theory. The findings reveal that the writer uses the protagonist’s exile to model the absurdities of apartheid’s national governance; a character that like the author is cast in the in-between space. Head situated her writing in a paradoxical space where, although she was not allowed to survive, she nevertheless asserted her right to continue to do so. However, this dream is encumbered with a lot of challenges thus reflecting the difficulty of erasing the absurd in life.

Keywords: Protagonist, Absurdities, Psychoanalytic Theory, Apartheid, and National Government

Introduction
In philosophy, “the Absurd” refers according to Silentio Johannes to “the conflict between (1) the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and (2) the human inability to find any” (17). As a philosophy, absurdist furthermore explores the fundamental nature of the Absurd and how individuals, once becoming conscious of the Absurd, should respond to it. The absurdist philosopher Albert Camus stated in The Myth of Sisyphus that, “individuals should embrace the absurd condition of human existence while also defiantly continuing to explore and search for meaning” (40). The absurd has its origin in the work of the 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who chose to confront the crisis that humans face with the absurd by proffering a solution in which one believes in the existence of a reality that is beyond the Absurd, and, as such, has meaning. However, Camus regarded this solution as a “philosophical suicide” rejecting both this and physical suicide. He gave a solution in which one accepts the Absurd and continues to live in spite of it, believing that by accepting the Absurd, one can achieve absolute freedom from Fear and Trembling. He also proffered that by recognizing no religious or other moral constraints and by revolting against the Absurd while simultaneously accepting it as unstoppable, one could possibly be content from the personal meaning constructed in the process. According to Camus, one’s freedom - and the opportunity to give life meaning - lies in the recognition of absurdity.

The paper problem
The absurd experience is truly the realization that the universe is fundamentally devoid of absolutes, then we as individuals are truly free. “To live without appeal”, (41) as he puts it, is a philosophical move to define absolutes and universals subjectively, rather than objectively. The freedom of humans is thus established in
a human’s natural ability and opportunity to create their own meaning and purpose; to decide (or think) for him- or herself. The individual becomes the most precious unit of existence, representing a set of unique ideals that can be characterized as an entire universe in its own right.

In acknowledging the absurdity of seeking any inherent meaning, but continuing this search regardless, one can be happy, gradually developing meaning from the search alone. Head’s protagonist has her inner being disturbed and shattered by different causes: difficulty of adaptation, racial and class prejudices, traumatic memories, repressed feelings and unconventional philosophical or religious beliefs. The aim of her protagonist is to lessen her inner alienation as she revolts against the hostile environment of her existence. A good mental balance brings the characters to a healthier and happier existence.

Various scholars have studied Bessie Head works with particular focus on the concept of identity, social and political leanings. Most critical responses focused on her third novel A Question Power, believing it to be the most significant work in her oeuvre. Craig Mackenzie is convinced that the novel is “pivotal to any examination of her life and work” (xi). Lloyd Brown suggests that “A Question of Power represents a touché in Head’s literary achievement” (175). Huma Ibrahim regards the novel as the most important work in the novelist’s attempt to navigate the troubled waters of transnational identities and her exilic consciousness which he calls “Head’s point of engagement” (125). Adding to the debate Ikenna Dieke argues that “Head’s Maru more than A Question of Power distils the very essence of her creative enterprise laced with an overriding concern for an investigation into the enigma of human prejudice” (1). He points out that although A Question of Power can be said to be an important site for unravelling the strands of her anguished life story with instances of immense suffering, privation and a crippling alienation, Maru on the other hand, provides the fertile site for mounting a literary resistance to the mistaken ideology which give rise to the anguished life story. Sarvan, P among numerous critics, calls A Question of Power “a strongly autobiographical work” (439). This suggests that much of the novels subject matter mirrors Head’s external situation. It verbalizes her feeling of otherness, of being an outsider. Marguard, Jean said it “occupies a unique position in the cannon of African fiction because it is perhaps the first metaphysical novel on the subject of nation and national unity to come out of Southern Africa” (61). No work in the corpus of African literature dealing with the theme of madness, for example Achebe's Arrow of God, Kofi Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother, or Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments, captures the complexity and intensity of the insane mind as does Bessie Head's A Question of Power (Adetokunbo Pearse). Bessie Head's thrust into the insane mind and her ability to speak according to Pearse “the highly symbolic language of madness” (81) derives, it seems, from a combination of the painful personal experience of mental aberration and an interest in psychoanalytical theories. The present study closely relates to Pearse in that it too revolves around the effects of a hostile legislation on the psyche of individuals inhabiting the same environment. However, it differs with the sole fact that it examines A Question of Power in the overriding absurdist philosophy which dramatizes in psycho-existentialist manner that any attempt to deny the efficacy of evil forces in life, albeit unacceptable, is to falsify the human experience. Confronting the absurd is the term employed throughout this study because it suggests a battle of a displaced, marginalised woman as she struggles to put together all the shattered pieces of her soul into a harmonious whole.

In A Question of Power, Bessie Head uses the psychoanalysts’ delimitation of the human mind into the conscious, the sub-conscious, and the un-conscious articulated by Freud to portray the totality of her protagonist’s experience. According to Freud, opined Gay Peter, “childhood traumas and past experiences are at the origin of many psychological disorders” (117-8). Therefore, the past has to be replayed and analysed. The novel is concerned with, not so much Motabeng where the bulk of the action takes place, but with the protagonist’s mental retention of her South African experience. In Bessie Head’s novel, her protagonist has painful memories she must accept and cope with. Apartheid, racism and the experience of being a source of social shame and evidence of sexual depravity are some of the recurrent memories which disturb the mental equilibrium her major character. The problems surrounding the half-caste child begin even before conception. To compound Bessie’s protagonist, she is predisposed to madness supposedly inherited from a mother believed to be insane, and who committed the insane crime of suicide in a mental institution. Bessie Head’s protagonist undermines this assertion of hereditary insanity by exposing the society’s prejudicial treatment of Elizabeth, and by emphasizing the social background to Elizabeth’s mother’s supposed insanity. Sexuality and repression, as enunciated by Freud (Gay 569), Freud’s interest in neuroses and hysteria is also very pertinent for this study because according to Gay, “Elizabeth’s behaviour is characterized by the symptoms of such illnesses” (255). Finally, Freud draws an interesting analogy from Gay, “between the author’s creations and his/her dreams and fantasies” (440-43). In this novel, Bessie Head explores via her protagonist her own psyche, and in so doing her dreams and fantasies.
Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* is all the more interesting because the quest she gave to her protagonist has been; Eilersen posits “in some respects her own quest” (149). For this reason her writings are closely interrelated: they are inspired by the different phases of psychological growth Head went through as she confronts the absurd realities of her life. Eilersen writes that “Bessie is ... reworking her own experiences in her three novels which have been progressively intensified. Seen together they constitute a trilogy; an untraditional trilogy in that the movement is inward rather than forward. In the novel, Elizabeth’s quest as she confronts the absurd requires two essential steps: one, a complete disintegration, through which Elizabeth must get rid of truths she considered as absolutes; and two, a reconstruction, which will reintegrate her fragmented self and give her a new vision of herself and the world. Elizabeth is shattered by the concepts of good and evil. Her psyche wrongly divides these two notions by projecting two hallucinatory characters, Sello and Dan. Elizabeth is also shattered by a bitter past which still haunts her, an uncertain birth origin, a traumatic experience of apartheid in a coloured community in South Africa and an unsuccessful marriage. She is also torn by her wish to believe in an individual philosophy, which is in opposition to the principles of the Christian religion in which she has been brought up. Elizabeth’s present and future are also maddening because they do not provide a satisfactory answer to her problem of identity and to her family situation.

Beginning with the novel’s epigraph from D. H. Lawrence’s poem, “God,” Head warns the reader of the danger of “disintegrative knowledge” which pulls one away from “God” and towards “the abyss.” This is the fundamental polarity on which the narrative rests and which, moreover, Head will use to dismantle the myth of polarity itself. In allegorical fashion, Sello the monk and Dan seem to represent the extremes of goodness and evil in this anatomy of a nervous breakdown and journey through the underworld. Such neat categories, however, are illusory, as Elizabeth learns, in particular, in her relationship with Sello the monk. Both Sello and Dan drive her to the brink of psychological disintegration, but with different ends. Dan would annihilate her; Sello would destroy her illusions. Nevertheless, each would strip her of something, as the poor in the beginning of the novel “turned to Elizabeth and permanently stripped her of any vesture garments she might have acquired” (32). That is a mimic foreshadowing of the “katabolism” to which Lawrence refers in “God.” Sello the monk, as Elizabeth realizes retrospectively could have warned her:

> here I am, about to strip myself of my spectacular array of vesture garments as they said I ought to, and to show you my own abyss. There are so many terrible lessons you have to learn this time; that the title God, in its absolute all-powerful form, is a disaster to its holder, the all-seeing eye is the greatest temptation. It turns a man into a wild debaucher, a maddened and wilful persecutor of his fellow men (36-7).

But he does not. He cannot. Even at this point in the narrative, we are unsure as to what it is Sello’s statements might refer. It is essential to the efficacy of the whole experience that Elizabeth and we do not understand. Elizabeth must be gradually denuded of any absolutes she holds. These are the illusions to which Sello will address himself. It is the absolutes themselves which comprise the dangerous “disintegrative knowledge” about which we are initially warned. The fundamental absolute to be dismantled, of course, is the myth of polarity.

The novel attempts to explore in the words of Jane Grant “the sources of evil, to expose its true face, and to show the misery and suffering it inflicts on human life” (25-6). Through the character Elizabeth we see how naked evil, when it invades an individual’s total being, can be the cause of psychic disorder and personality disintegration. During the monumental battle which takes place in her mind, Elizabeth tries to dispel the belief current in South Africa that might is right. She tries to instil in her psyche the Buddhist belief in the righteousness of the meek and lowly. The ensuing psychological battle involves her whole being and in the end transforms her into a new personality.

Bessie Head structures Elizabeth’s madness along the lines of basic Existential Psychoanalysis. The characters Sello, Medusa, and Dan are not the real human characters of conventional literature; rather they are aspects of Elizabeth’s mind, concretized in her fertile imagination. These ghoulish characters, visible only to Elizabeth, are the personified equivalent of her inner being; the subconscious, and the unconscious. The character Elizabeth who is critical of the evils of South African life is the conscious self. ‘Sello the monk’ is her subconscious, close to her and sharing her belief in goodness. ‘Dan’ is her unconscious
reflecting the South African collective unconscious pervaded by the forces of evil. ‘Sello in the brown suit’ and ‘Medusa’ are according to Pearse “the derivatives of her subconscious” (88).

Elizabeth’s nightmarish ‘journeys into the soul’ begin with a dialogue with her subconscious ‘Sello the monk’. ‘Sello’ encourages her to proceed on her inquiry with the argument that “Everything was evil until I broke down and cried. It is when you cry, in the blackest hour of despair, that you stumble on a source of goodness” (34). Sello’s positive influence, with the figure of the Buddha playing a prominent role, does not last long, however, before the negative derivatives of the subconscious, ‘Sello in the brown suit’, take over her subconscious. The images of evil and corruption which these present in Elizabeth’s mind are only surpassed by ‘Dan’; Elizabeth’s unconscious who may be called the anti-Christ figure in the novel. The ‘wild-eyed Medusa’ is boastful, aggressive, depraved and power-drunk. Like the power maniacs of South Africa, ‘Medusa’ and ‘Sello in the brown suit’ are narrow-minded dictators who feel insecure in a flexible universe. No one is good or right but themselves. They are all powerful and all-knowing - everyone else is insignificant. In their attempt to negate Elizabeth, ‘Sello in the brown suit’ and ‘Medusa’ accuse Elizabeth of sexual inadequacy. They tell her ‘she hadn’t a vagina’, and they identify her with the sexual perversion of homosexuality. The aspect of their assault which Elizabeth finds most disturbing is their attack on her social inadequacy. To Elizabeth, man’s relationship to man is the core of human spirituality. This accusation of social failure therefore constitutes an accusation of spiritual insufficiency. Her accusers ‘played on her experiences in South Africa’ where there is permanent tension between the people of differing races. There people are compartmentalized. It is in this spirit of segregation that ‘Medusa’ identifies Elizabeth rigidly with the coloured homosexual men, and accuses her of hating Africans. By ‘Medusa’ rigid classification of people, a coloured person cannot survive in Africa, cannot know Africa, and cannot love, or be loved by Africans. Such a prospect would destroy Elizabeth’s soul, for her search is for a universal brotherhood of man.

While ‘Sello in the brown suit’ and ‘Medusa’ are openly hostile to Elizabeth, and openly declare their lust for power, ‘Dan’ uses subtler methods to achieve the same ends. ‘Dan’ promises to love and protect Elizabeth. He feigns humility and tries to win her trust by it. ‘Dan’’s declared innocence proves to be a deception. His method of perpetrating evil is similar to that of the mythical trickster god who appears to men in a medley of forms setting people against one another and leaving death and destruction in his trail. ‘Dan’’s appeal for trust is designed to unarm her, so that her consciousness may be more easily assailed with ‘a ruthless concentration on the obscene’. ‘Dan’’s assault takes the form of flagrant images of corrupting, of child molestation and rape, of homosexuality, bestiality, incest and death.

Being Elizabeth’s unconscious, ‘Dan’’s power over Elizabeth is more profound than that of ‘Sello in the brown suit’ and ‘Medusa’, both aspects of the subconscious. ‘Dan’ goes to the roots of her being, and it is from this fundamental level that he launches his attack. ‘Dan’’s strategy is to destroy any sense of love or respect Elizabeth may have for herself, and thereby destroy her love and respect for others. A great debaucher, ‘Dan’ is symbolized by a giant phallus. The terrible orgiastic scenes he orchestrates with a gallery of seventy-one women illustrate that exploitative power. This “king of sex” (168) and “king of women” (149) enacts his copulative dramas in front of Elizabeth as a way of asserting her inferiority both as a woman and as a Coloured South African. ‘Dan’ operates a metaphoric phonograph and a cinema which strive to reinforce inferiority in Elizabeth’s own mind. His final assault is an attempt to coax her into psycho-sexual self-destruction and physical suicide. His “was not a creative function. It was death” (19).

But Head’s tale is not a simple one. To begin with, ‘Sello’ is a composite made up of several parts; ‘Sello’ has numerous avatars. In addition to ‘Sello’ the monk and the numerous other holy manifestations of ‘Sello’, there is “the living man” (27) who is “a crop farmer and cattle breeder” (28) and “wonderful family man” (29). This ‘Sello’ is an actual resident of Motabeng; from the novel’s beginning to its end, however, the reader cannot be sure whether or not Elizabeth ever has any real contact with this ‘Sello’. The reader’s ability to really test the accuracy of Elizabeth’s perception of the Motabeng crop farmer is severely limited by the fact that the narrator is undergoing a nervous breakdown. In the book, “her so-called analytic mind was being shattered to pieces” (52). Elizabeth “was not sure if she were awake or asleep”; “often after that the dividing line between dream perceptions and waking reality was to become confused” (22). But there is yet another side to ‘Sello’. This one is a “replica” of the monk “except that the man was clothed in a brown suit” (37). Elizabeth muses on the duality of Sello’s character during an early hospitalization for her breakdown. Shortly after the nurse administers a shot, ‘Sello’ again visits Elizabeth. He takes her to “a deep cesspit ... filled almost to the brim with excreta” (53). After that, “He caught hold of her roughly behind the neck and pushed her face near the stench. It was so high, so powerful, that her neck nearly snapped off her head at the encounter. She whimpered in fright. She heard him say fiercely: “She made it. I’m cleaning it..."
up. Come, I’ll show you what you made’’ (53). Then ‘Sello’ transforms himself into “an enormous skybird” while Elizabeth asks herself and us “was there ever a man whose heights and depths were so extreme they were totally disassociated from each other? ...” (53).

‘Sello’ is not alone, however, in possessing contradictory avatars. ‘Dan’, the “power-maniac,” is likewise composed of other selves. To some degree, he and ‘Sello’ are twin-souls. There seems to be little difference between the brown-suited ‘Sello’’s treatment of Elizabeth and the attacks aimed at her by ‘Dan’. A few pages earlier than the scene described above, ‘Dan’ had announced to Elizabeth that he and ‘Sello’ were “friends who shared everything, including visions ...” (46). Part Two of the novel is, in many ways, a re-enactment of the visions of Part One, interpreted the second time through ‘Dan’’s perspective. In that respect, ‘Dan’ and ‘Sello’ share the fundamental material. At one point, ‘Dan’ illustrates this dramatically. “Dan was clothed in a soft, white cloth, resembling the one ‘Sello’ wore. He had on a pair of sandals. . . . He folded his hands softly in front of him, his face wore a sad, still expression: ‘You see,’ it said, ‘That’s the essence of me. In my soul I am the monk ...’” (115). Part of the reason behind ‘Dan’’s recreation of visions earlier presented by ‘Sello’ is “to show how deeply he had been involved all along in ‘Sello’’s activities” (119). The two supernatural souls are not, in fact, completely distinct from one another.

‘Sello’ and ‘Dan’ are involved in an allegorical battle and Elizabeth is in the centre of the power struggle. At the same time, however, Head is not writing a tale about the conflict between an absolute good and evil. In fact, it is Elizabeth’s perception of ‘Sello’ and ‘Dan’ in absolute terms that contributes most to her confusion and pain. Goodness and evil are interspersed throughout. That is the significance behind the allusions in the narrative to King David, the psalmist-adulterer-murderer and to the Christian Ku Klux Klan. Both ‘Sello’ and ‘Dan’ lead Elizabeth into an abyss. Thus, they share a common bond in their roles as destroyers. ‘Sello’’s call to Elizabeth, however, has death as its means, but not its end. ‘Dan’ inadvertently helps Elizabeth to understand the whole by teaching her the lesson of opposites. Elizabeth said of him: “he was one of the greatest teachers she’d worked with, but he taught by default-he taught iron and steel self-control through sheer, wild, abandoned debauchery ...” (202). ‘Sello’’s target is the illusion of absolutes-and the positing of ‘Dan’ and ‘Sello’ as strictly polar entities is one example of that illusion.

Part of Elizabeth’s soul-evolution can be measured by her movement away from compartmentalized, polar definitions. Her definition of God is an important indicator of that development. Very early in the novel, “out of the shifting patterns of tenderness and cooperation before her gaze” she observes: “God is the totality of all great souls and their achievements; the achievements are not that of one single, individual soul, but of many souls who all worked to make up the soul of God, and this might be called God, or the Gods” (54). When “Sello in the brown suit” makes his next appearance to Elizabeth, she recognizes that “his initial presentation of constructive goodness in images and pictures had been a put-together whole of observations and tentative feelers ...” (62). Medusa is there to balance out the picture. If Elizabeth “accepted as true the small chunks of the past thrown at her by ‘Sello’, then the meditations under the Bodhi tree were as precarious and uncertain as any venture in life. God was no security for the soul” (65).

Elizabeth’s involvement shortly thereafter in the Motabeng Secondary School’s agricultural project is not, as it first seems, a disconnected tangential thesis on crop rotation in Botswana. The methods of transplantation according to Michela Borzaga that Elizabeth learns throughout the narrative is “symbolic of man’s necessity to excogitate always new expedients to keep his garden going” (32). This is the fertile ground where an alternate to Elizabeth’s polar vision can be worked through. This is the place where Elizabeth comes “into contact with the wonderful strangeness of human nature” (72). These are the ‘power people’ like Camilla. Camilla is egocentric and aggressive. She is always determined to impress on all around her a sense of her own superiority. Camilla seems obsessed with the need to negate the Africans. She declares with her accustomed air of self-importance, “I don’t understand these people. They don’t know anything at all, and they’re so lazy” (78). She relishes in contrasting this alleged ignorance of the Africans with the heightened culture of her own Danish society. Elizabeth draws a polarity between Camilla’s ‘scatter-brained assertion of self-importance’ and ‘small-boys’ air of quiet, authoritative manly calm’, Her encounter with the Danish “Rattle-tongue,” Camilla, is at first, only a continuation of absolute definitions. “Elizabeth looked at her with anguish. Human relationships with her were starkly black and white. She hated in a final way and loved in a final way. She had spent all her life running away from the type of white person like Camilla” (77). She veers back and forth about her attitude toward the Dane: “one minute she really loved the half-mad woman, the next, she loathed her ...” (79). Elizabeth is not yet freed from a need to define in absolute terms. “She was to ...come to an odd conclusion about Danes-they were either very, very bad or so impossibly God-like that they out-stripped the rest of mankind in humanity” (80). This is still the hyperbolic valuation that we see in Elizabeth’s definition of God, above. Such polar perspectives account to a large extent for the
pain of Elizabeth’s disintegrative experience. She stretches herself between extremes and is therefore very vulnerable to the question asked by one of Dan’s recordings: “What sort of gymnast was she supposed to be, so overstrained between concepts of good and evil?” (109). Elizabeth’s salvational encounter with the human and mystical Birgette is the beginning of the revision of her thinking. She tells the young agricultural volunteer:

> God isn’t a magical formula for me.... God isn’t a switched-on, mysterious, unknown current I can turn to and, by doing so, feel secure in my own nobility. It’s you I feel secure about, strangely, as though we will encounter each other again in some other life and nothing would have shaken your nobility. But mine, my destiny is full of doubt, full of doom. I am being dragged down, without my willing, into a whirlpool of horrors. I prefer nobility and goodness but a preference isn’t enough; there are forces who make a mockery of my preferences (85).

Although not as well entrenched as the forces of evil in South Africa, the racialist oppressors have their counterparts in Motabeng. An example is Camilla. With Camilla's arrival, the vegetable garden is turned from a heaven to ‘the most miserable place on earth’. Small boys’ presence, on the other hand, radiates peaceful growth.

The novel itself is structured along similar lines of polarity as discussed above. The episodes which present Elizabeth’s inner life are characterized by images of darkness, of death and destruction. Those that deal with her outer life show her in the life-creating process of farming; where community involvement is used as therapy to come back into the rhythm of the normal world. Elizabeth’s association with vegetable gardening brings her in contact with ‘the wonderful strangeness of human nature’, with the life force of the bright green leaves. Her involvement with Eugène’s local industries workgroup contributes to this creative aspect of her life. We also learn that, unlike in the torment of her inner life where ‘Dan’ debases everything and everyone, among the Setswana, ‘people are kings and queens to each other’, and there is spirituality in everything. Through her inner torment in the hands of ‘Medusa’, ‘Sello in the brown suite’, ‘Dan’, and her working experiences with the vegetable garden and various community self-help projects, Elizabeth finds a necessary contrast between the forces of evil and those of good. She is aware of the differences between the initial ‘Sello’, that part of her consciousness that believes in the essential goodness of all men, and the later ‘Sello’, and other negative derivatives of the subconscious and unconscious, such as ‘Dan’ and ‘Medusa’ who treat all of life with derision. In her life experiences, she draws a line between the insensitive and mechanical approach to life of characters like Camilla, and the unassuming attitude of characters, like Small-boy and Birgette; between the simplicity of the latter, and the former’s tendency to regard complexity and incomprehensibility as the height of good taste.

In the narrative, Head devotes much space to the discussion of crop rotation and irrigation. We encounter, in effect, a short treatise on vegetable gardening. All of this is, however, part of Elizabeth’s metaphysical education. It all works toward “the total de-mystifying of all illusions” (86). The dismantling of those illusions and the literal and symbolic disintegration of Elizabeth’s psyche are all preparations for theredemptive role she will play. As the Virgin crushed the head of the serpant, Elizabeth’s ordinariness will defeat the power-maniac who has wed his own absolutism to his “will to evil” (199). It is because of her mystical gifts and her own special calling that ‘Sello the monk’ initially selected Elizabeth to do battle with the diabolical power maniac. ‘Sello’ explains that special vocation:

> there are a set of people in my age-group and a set of people in your age-group. The first group brought about dark times. We had to dream a nobler dream, and the people of that dream belong to your age-group. Everything was wrong. Everything was evil until I broke down and cried. It is when you cry, in the blackest hour of despair, that you stumble on a source of goodness. There were a few of us who cried like that. Then we said: ‘Send us perfection.’ They sent you. Then we asked: ‘What is perfection?’ And they said: ‘Love’ (34).

Elizabeth is a new messianic figure. To the degree that she and ‘Sello the monk’ share a divinity of soul, they are indeed soul-mates as she perceived earlier. ‘Dan’ is her potential soul-mate. (In one of her nightmare experiences in Part Two, Elizabeth notes of her torturer: “The person wasn’t asserting evil. He was saying he had the potential to be evil ... ’(116) ‘Dan’ is what Elizabeth could become if she retained her beliefs in absolutes. That is why ‘Sello’ thought Elizabeth “needed the insight into absolute evil” (200). That is the reason, too, behind “Sello”s decision not to let Elizabeth see the incredible power she does possess.
“If the things of the soul are really a question of power, then anyone in possession of power of the spirit could be Lucifer,” he explains to her (199). In fact, it is the overwhelming power of love and of Elizabeth’s simplicity that defeats ‘Dan’’s arrogance. The combat itself, however, has necessitated a systemic inner breakdown for Elizabeth. The literal nervous breakdown for which she is hospitalized is accompanied by a deliberate disintegrative process throughout. That is the cost of the redemption Elizabeth brings. Elizabeth experiences the death that is an intrinsic part of the mystery of salvation. In one of her early encounters with the “vast company of [holy] people”(31), she recognizes that common bond between them. “They had still, sad, fire-washed faces. The meaning of the stillness, sadness and intensity of expression did not reach her till some time later, when ‘Sello’ exposed a detail of his past. It was death. It was the expression of people who had been killed and killed again in one cause after another for the liberation of mankind. She thought at that time: “why, an absolute title has been shared. There are several hundred thousand people who are ‘God’” (31). The death-to-life cycle is reinforced over and over again in this novel. That, indeed, is the mystery at the heart of the Osiris-Isis-Horus myth to which the narrative so often alludes. At the heart of the disintegrative process is the seed for Elizabeth’s soul-evolution. She is dying in order to become God and the prophet of God.

Conclusion

Bessie Head’s intention in A Question of Power is didactic. She preaches against racial discrimination and social segregation. She preaches against a life obsessed with the pursuit of material wealth and power. She condemns human oppression and exploitation in all its facets. In the opinion of Grant: “She wishes for a multi-racial society which utilises the workable aspects of both white and black cultures for the mutual good of all” (25-6). The alliance between Eugene, Crunner, Kenosi, Tom, Woody and Elizabeth herself on various self-help projects exemplifies this. Through her epic battle with the inner forces of evil the character Elizabeth comes into the possession of certain life-sustaining truths. Through this spiritual enlightenment akin to Buddhist philosophy, Elizabeth becomes convinced that the power maniac is really a fickle-minded individual; his pursuit of power being a smoke-screen for a deeply seated sense of insecurity. The victim on the other hand is flexible and free. He is not afraid of losing since his position already constitutes his loss. Only through humility and sacrifice can one aspire to love. Love is giving, not taking, nor expecting to be given in return. God is not a great unknown, but an everyman who does good for the betterment of man. And heaven is not a remote unseen, but a world society inspired by man’s great ideals such as freedom of thought and expression, democracy and human rights. By this philosophy, religion is a function in which all of mankind participates, for man is God, and God, man. The God-head is achieved through humility and love of man, through contribution to the maintenance of love and peace within society. By this token, the ‘thunderbolt-wielding’ gods who drive people to religion through fear are nullified. These gods, the all-knowing, all-powerful gods who jealously guard what they believe is their monopoly of power and wisdom are the avaricious precursors of society’s power maniacs. . Through the choice of this doubly exiled South African, Head destroyed yet another compartmentalized. She does this when she dismises ‘Dan’ and his morbid accusation of not being black towards the end of the novel:

I’ve got my concentration elsewhere... It’s in mankind in general, and black people fit in there, not as special freaks and oddities outside the scheme of things, with labels like Black Power or any other rubbish of that kind... Any heaven, like a Black-Power heaven, that existed for a few individuals alone was pointless and useless (133).

Elizabeth looks beyond the fragment to the whole. That whole comprises not only the “demon” and the “goddess” (43), but also the several trinities: Father, Son, Holy Spirit; the Hindu Trimurti; Sello, Dan and Elizabeth

Findings/conclusion

In the opinion of Camus there is no negating the absurd in the lives of mortals; but it can be surmounted by the individual’s action. The atmosphere of South Africa creates perpetual tension in the society. To the sensitive and concerned individual especially, the conflicts and evils of life within the system can lead to a dissociation of the psyche. It is this destructive tendency of apartheid that leads to Eugene’s disturbing but valid observation that “South Africans usually suffered from some form of mental aberration” (58). The reading of Bessie Head’s narrative reveals the researcher’s stand about the unstopability of the absurd which is exemplified in the conclusion that although her protagonist survives the pangs of madness and attains wholeness, the chain of evil is not broken. When at the end of the story we are told of the protagonist: “As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging” (206), it would appear that she has made her peace with Motabeng. But viewed from the philosophy of the absurd,
for Elizabeth as an individual, Motabeng serves as a soothing counter-force to the depressive environment of South Africa. Using Motabeng, which is not the scene of the cause of her aberration as that of the cure, suggests that the real causes of anxiety and tension are still quite intact. The pervading tone of the narrative echoes strongly Bessie Head’s fear that most of what one clearly despises has the power to control the world and inflict suffering. Head’s narrative is more than anything else a damning indictment of apartheid, dramatized in psycho-existentialist terms, its power to threaten human sanity and disrupt social peace and balance.

**Recommendation**

The paper recommends with head, searching for meaning on the personal level as a way of tackling the odds in our existence.

**Works Cited**


