

Spring 5-12-2011

"Madness" in Exile Literature: Insanity as a Byproduct of Subjugation and Manipulation in Bessie Head's A Question of Power

Jacqueline McDaniel
Seton Hall University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations>

 Part of the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McDaniel, Jacqueline, "'Madness' in Exile Literature: Insanity as a Byproduct of Subjugation and Manipulation in Bessie Head's A Question of Power" (2011). *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*. 10.
<http://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/10>

"Madness" in Exile Literature: Insanity as a Byproduct of
Subjugation and Manipulation in Bessie Head's *A Question of
Power*

Jacqueline McDaniel

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English

Seton Hall University

May 12, 2011

Simone James Alexander
First Reader, Dr. Simone A. James Alexander

Martha C. Carpentier
Second Reader, Dr. Martha C. Carpentier

ABSTRACT

“Madness” in Exile Literature: Insanity as a Byproduct of Subjugation and Manipulation in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*

Bessie Head’s novels allow for a detailed analysis of postcolonial theory. In her novel *A Question of Power* Head’s protagonist confronts gender, race, and class structures in post-apartheid South Africa. Elizabeth’s decision to leave South Africa conveys her desire to no longer live life as a subservient coloured woman. While in Botswana, she has the first of many hallucinatory episodes; she frequently dialogues with Medusa, Dan, and Sello supernatural beings that represent the power structure Elizabeth opposes. Dan and Sello are symbols of the patriarchal society and Medusa represents Mother Africa. Dan and Sello demonstrating the power struggle that exists, often verbally and sexually abuse Medusa. There is a direct correlation between the hallucinatory episodes and Elizabeth’s emotional state. Her dreams, imagines, and hallucinations elucidate the things that torment Elizabeth (whose last name is never provided).

Merriam Webster defines insanity: “as such unsoundness of mind or lack of understanding. It prevents one from having the mental capacity required by law to enter into a particular relationship, status, or transaction.” This definition is essential to the exploration of whether Elizabeth’s madness is a product of her environment. As a woman in patriarchal society, Elizabeth is marginalized.

This essay argues that madness is a manifestation of female subjugation and manipulation. Additionally, madness is another device to intensify Elizabeth’s marginalization.

Additional critical analysis, including that of Caroline Brown, Jacqueline Rose, and Huma Ibrahim will assist in deconstructing the concept of madness in Head's *A Question of Power*.

Jacqueline McDaniel

Dr. Simone Alexander

ENGL 7010

12 May 2011

“Madness” in Exile Literature: Insanity as a Byproduct of Subjugation
and Manipulation in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*

To be deemed mad is to be placed in a position of penultimate alterity, slipping from the category of human to subhuman, from the locus of reason to that of the irrational.

(Caroline Brown, 93-108).

This essay will explore madness as a strategic device for arguing that in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth’s supposed insanity is a byproduct of subjugation.

A brief examination of African writing provides additional insight on Elizabeth’s “madness.” H. Nigel Thomas contends: “African writers use language to construct verbal laboratories with which to probe chaos and discover its implications” (94). Therefore, Elizabeth is a case study and her actions, which clearly violate African tradition, produce the assumed madness. Further Augustine H. Asaah argues that African writers remove the negative connotation of the word insanity:

Insanity in African Literature is often stripped of its negative connotations for satirical purpose. Here, the mad person, indeed, has the trappings of a hero, a prophet, a sage, the custodian of communal morality, the irrepressible conscience of the community or a martyr. Madness in this case becomes less of a taboo than a valorized metaphor and a positive symbol (502).

Asaah recasts Elizabeth's declaration at the end of *A Question Of Power*: "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (206). Hence, madness is the fictional construct whereby Elizabeth conveys her inner frustrations with patriarchal society. As stated earlier he assumed madness is a device used to articulate Elizabeth's estrangement.

Caroline Brown suggests that gender and race play a major role in modern theorization of madness. Quoting fellow feminist critics Elaine Showalter and Hershini Bhana Young, Brown argues that class, sexuality, ethnicity and transgression permit the construction of the "mad" other (93). Brown defines *other* as a "metaphor, a symbolic space of negation that permits the establishing of the parameters of normalcy through the articulation of its opposition" (94). An emotionally damaged protagonist, Elizabeth is the "other" in post-apartheid South Africa. Rather than being "other" Elizabeth chooses voluntary exile migrating from South Africa to Botswana. Her self-imposed exile pronounces independence as it forces her to connect her inner struggles with real life experiences. Ibrahim quotes Edward Said's claim that: "exile is a natural part of the human experience as it relates to the twentieth century...a severe contemporary political punishment... rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (12). Elizabeth will never forget the pain she experienced as a woman in South Africa, but by embracing Botswana she initiates the difficult process of resisting the patriarchy: "as she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging" (206). For the first time Elizabeth experiences community.

Leonard Thompson claims apartheid, which means "apartness," emerged from a political slogan to a social system, deemed the most "notorious" form of racial and gender domination

known to the world (190). Apartness is also connected to exile; hence, Elizabeth lived an exilic existence before migrating to Botswana. Therefore, madness according to Brown provides insight on the political, mental, and physical abuse of female South African subjects. Elizabeth's "madness" is arguably a result of female subjugation. Elaborating on this argument, Felman categorizes madness two-fold: madness of inclusion and exclusion. Whereas she defines madness of *Inclusion* as the norm, madness of *exclusion*, otherwise referred to as social madness, creates the mad outsider (13). Elizabeth's madness therefore fits the category of exclusion because she is an "outsider" on several levels. She is a woman, and she is not native to Botswana, the place of her voluntary exile. In this regard, Elizabeth's "madness" makes her a social outsider; subsequently, her exclusion is magnified tenfold by her exilic existence.

In an attempt to explain Elizabeth's hallucinatory episodes, Brown suggests that the seamless way Elizabeth transitions in and out of a state of permanence appear to be "divine insights" rather than disillusionment. She further argues that Elizabeth's madness is not an unjust "foreign construct" but it is naturalized, making it appear more normal than not (95). In this case Elizabeth is using madness as a strategic device to subvert patriarchal power. The following quote from *A Question of Power* underscores the underpinnings of male power structures:

The wild-eyed Medusa was expressing the surface reality of African Society. It was shut in and exclusive. It had a strong theme of power-worship running through it and power people needed small, narrow shut-in worlds. They never felt secure in the big, wide flexible universe where there were too many cross-currents of opposing thought (44).

Thus, the above passage speaks about the exclusiveness of power, exclusive to men and the patriarchal society that supports men's uninhibited access to power. Nevertheless, in order for these "power people" to maintain control they need to manipulate and subjugate those they

deem their subordinates. Elizabeth's opposition to patriarchal power poses a threat that arguably exposes the false assumption and insecurities of the "power people." Furthermore, she is fighting against hegemony and cannot install hegemonic relations establishing herself as greater than others: "Any assumption of greatness leads to a dog-eat-dog fight and incurs massive suffering" (39). Elizabeth is poised to suffer the assumed madness for her freedom.

Dan and Sello are the supernatural beings that represent the power structure Elizabeth opposes. The language of male dominance employed by Dan and Sello is sometimes sexual, sometimes aggressive, and often manipulative, designed to keep Elizabeth in a position of subservience. However, she is not deceived by either Dan or Sello. Offering a valuable contextualization of Sello and Dan, Virginia Ola contends:

Sello is a symbol of love and compassion, elevated to the role of a god or goddess, and one who for four years has been 'a ghostly, persistent commentator on all her thoughts, perceptions, and experiences...he appears as a man-like apparition or hallucination sitting in Elizabeth's room at night, constantly revealing to her spiritual truths... Sello therefore stands for perfection, for the God-like in man (68-69).

Shoshana Felman's argument that: "The title of madness gets its authority only from the dreams and fantasy" (92)"ostensibly repudiates Ola's assertion that Sello is "perfection." Thus, Sello's authority is only significant in Elizabeth's hallucinatory episodes; it is a false sense of divinity used as a subversive tool. He is neither god nor goddess but a representation of the power that marginalizes women.

With regard to Dan's character, Ola argues: "Dan on the other hand epitomizes

destructive male egoism and all that is vile, personally debasing and obscene...the heroine's greatest source of torture arises from Dan's ability to violate her mind with his practiced, depraved obscenities" (69). Dan's speech and his actions are unrestrained. He represents the sexual and emotional abuse experienced by South African women as he attempts to lure Elizabeth into accepting a role of subservience. In this regard he understands the mechanics of power: "From his gestures, he clearly thought he had a wilting puppet in his hand" (13). Notwithstanding, Elizabeth is aware as well of the mechanics of patriarchal power that she constantly resists. Her resistance speaks therefore to her desire not to remain silent.

As stated earlier, Elizabeth's "madness" is a result of female subjugation which causes her to oppose all male-dominated structures. Her friend Tom is a white American male who espouses Black Nationalist views. He questions Elizabeth on her opposition to the Black Power Movement: "Why do you have to go opposite of everyone else? Why do you have to sound different" (133)? In a male-dominated structure the term "everyone" denotes male only; thus, Tom questions Elizabeth's resistance to the patriarchal order. Seeing as Elizabeth is cognizant of the rubrics of patriarchy; hence, her opposition is essentially an assertion for autonomy. The following quote magnifies Elizabeth's contemplations on self-sufficiency and its relation to mankind:

I've got my concentration elsewhere...it's on 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 (133).

The Black Power Movement's primary objective was to promote male power and since Elizabeth is not an advocate of the movement's views. She is disillusioned with the Black Power

Movement's objective, which is to advocate male power. Tom then upholds similar male centric values espoused by patriarchal society.

Jacqueline Rose suggests that understanding Elizabeth involves listening and speaking: "by the fact that if it is madness we are talking about, then communication in its most obviously understood sense- I listen, you speak- is exactly what we cannot take for granted or assume" (403). Interaction is deficient because Elizabeth as a marginalized individual is limited in her articulation and her "madness" is a pretext to silence her disdain for patriarchal society. Rose further argues that the madness and questions about communication serve to: "expose or lay bare the delusional component behind any uncritical belief that text or speaker simply speak" (403). Accordingly, Elizabeth's supposed madness expresses her resistance of the patriarchal system and does not validate the claim of insanity. Incidentally, Megan Vaughn asserts, (quoted in Rose's article), that African women: "were said not to have reached the level of self-awareness required to go mad. They lacked 'interiority' twice over, as African and as women" (404). Women were so trivialized they were not even seen to have the ability to go mad. Vaughn's argument illuminates the callousness of the Apartheid system as well; it explicates Elizabeth's "madness." Her resistance is a device used to dispute assertions of female inferiority; it also serves to expose the manipulation and subjugation produced by patriarchal society.

Despite restrictions of the patriarchal system, Elizabeth is very aware of self and this self-awareness is evident throughout the novel. For example, Elizabeth leaves her husband refusing to tolerate his extra marital affairs: "After a year she picked up the small boy and walked out of the house, never to return" (19). Considering the present norms, it seemed an unprecedented decision on Elizabeth's part to leave her marriage. However, by leaving she voices protest,

refusing to be subjugated; thereby rejecting the label of “other.” Elizabeth makes two critical but courageous decisions in the novel: Her voluntary departure from South Africa and her choice to articulate disapproval of patriarchal norms. Quoting from Trinh T. Minh-ha, Huma Ibrahim addresses identity and power relations:

To raise the question of identity is to reopen again the discussion on the self/other relationship in its enactment of power relations. Identity as understood in the context of a certain ideology of dominance has long been a notion that relies on the concept of an essential authentic core that remains hidden to one’s consciousness and that requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self, that is to say, non-I other (124).

While Elizabeth is a part of the current patriarchal system, she does not subscribe to the patriarchal ideas of womanhood. She wants women to be recognized as humans not objects of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Over the years, Elizabeth silently experienced the negative effects of discrimination, now she has decided to articulate those inequities at all cost: “When had she not faced all the sorrows of life alone? There had never been anyone near when she had stood alone on street corners of South Africa and stared forlornly at a life without love” (58). Elizabeth’s loneliness and subsequent “madness” is attributed to the treatment she received as a woman in South Africa. As stated in the beginning of this essay, her migration to Botswana was vital to her female identity. Further, in addressing subjugation Elizabeth draws an analogy with the past as a means to underscore subjugation and assumed inferiority. In the above quote, her loneliness symbolizes her “outsider” existence in patriarchal society, which suggests her gender contributed to the absence of acceptance.

Elizabeth desires freedom from patriarchal laws. Her voluntary exile offers her the opportunity for gender liberation. In a dialogue with Elizabeth, Tom interjects his analysis of her current state of mind:

Why don't you find a husband, Elizabeth? It would be a defense. You're attacked because you are too alone. It's not a part of my calculations, Tom, she said, I seem to have been born for this experience. I had tremendous stamina. Someone weighed up my soul and set the seal of doom on it. I'm opposing him because I think I ought to live too, like everyone else. I don't care to be shoved out of the scheme of things. I want to live the way I am without anyone dictating to me. Maybe in another life I'll just be a woman cooking food and having babies... (192).

Men are constructed as protectors; thus, Tom is voicing Elizabeth's need of the male-dominated structure while Elizabeth's response insinuates a refusal of the male role; hence, Tom's comments only increase her disdain for the patriarchal system. Elizabeth's goal is to exist in a society free of patriarchal constraints; therefore, consensus would contradict her opposition. Ibrahim argues that *A Question Of Power* explores: "power relationships, as they inform and are informed by exiled identities who seek to subvert the social and individual institutions of the nation"(3). While freedom from subjugation comes at a price, for Elizabeth it is a price worth paying. According to Gagiano, Elizabeth can emerge from this experience embodying a "female-self." Her independence is vital to her pronounced resistance. While Tom's sentiments are sincere he is a proponent of the patriarchal system and so does not fully comprehend the passion she demonstrates for her objective.

Elizabeth's opposition to subservience subverts the male-dominated structure. Rose

writes that the woman in *A Question Of Power* is: “the place where the hidden and invisible of history accumulates; she is the depot for the return of the historical repressed. From loss of infinity: to the precise extent that history has been robbed or diminished it starts to expand infinitely in the mind” (411). Elizabeth’s refusal to remain in her homeland insinuates patriarchal power, while restrictive is not absolute; therefore, Rose’s description of woman as a “depot for the return of the historical repressed” further suggests that Elizabeth will not be deterred by history. She remains diligent in her quest for autonomy; thus, she is the repository for hope. Her persistence in contesting subjugation is viewed by Dan and Sello as unstableness but in the deep recesses of her mind she holds on to the power of self.

How is Elizabeth’s supposed madness linked to her voluntary exile in Botswana? Edward Said, (quoted in Adam’s book), argues: “madness is the fruitless exile between sanity and insanity” (160). By migrating from South Africa, Elizabeth exhibits self-empowerment because she removes herself from the chaotic social structure there. Initially, she struggles with being in exile but she eventually adjusts and finds true friends in Kenosi and Tom. Elizabeth is also in relationship with Eugene but on a different level. Bazin suggests that Elizabeth’s relationship with Kenosi plays a major role in her recovery. Kenosi is a black Botswanan woman who works alongside Elizabeth in the garden project. This project involved the two women planting a garden to increase the economy of the Motabeng village. Their relationship demonstrates female solidarity: “As far as Elizabeth was concerned she was to look back on this strange week and the Kenosi woman’s sudden appearance as one of the miracles or accidents that saved her life” (89). In Kenosi, Elizabeth finds a tangible connection to Botswana and she draws on the strength of her friend to survive the subjugation. Bazin suggests: “It is Kenosi who enables Elizabeth to

maintain her belief that egalitarian relationships are possible” (55). Prior to meeting Kenosi, Elizabeth did not associate with other women in her village. The only women she interacted with were the ones in her hallucinations and they were all Dan’s women, who were overtly sexual. Kenosi’s poised demeanor and her independence attracted Elizabeth to her; for this reason, their relationship is a lesson in the importance of female unanimity. Their working together in the garden is also significant in this discussion of female solidarity because it validates the power of women. Elizabeth belongs to the land of Botswana and she has personally prepared it for new growth.

As previously stated, Elizabeth’s additional Botswanan relationships are with Eugene and Tom. Eugene is a teacher in the Motabeng village. He too is an exile from South Africa and while he does assist with her transition he views her through the regulations of patriarchal society. He is important to this analysis for reasons of comparing him with Tom. Elizabeth and Tom’s relationship is different because Tom listens and is genuinely interested in her as a person. Tom and Eugene represent the dichotomy of man. While Eugene displays familiar qualities of the dominant male, Tom represents a gentile interpretation of masculinity:

She looked at his bent head and thought silently: I’m going to make use of him.

I’m going to take him as the symbol of male nobility and compare his every word against my inner chaos. Why, just the other night I said God and no one answered me, not the way I like to be answered with an assurance of compassion and tenderness...The laughing village women had said... Tom! Come here and help us. Why not I too?...She turned to him and said: Tom, you like to take care of people. Will you take care of me the way you care for others (136)?

This passage is evidence that Elizabeth trusts Tom. She is equating him to a symbol of male nobility in a world of self-serving, oppressive men. Reconciliation is manifest in his bent head for he is making amends for the strong, male patriarchal system. Women are allowed to express their emotions around Tom because he is compassionate. He helps Elizabeth navigate this male-dominated world, as he is the only man she has encountered that does not sexualize her. For Elizabeth, Tom's behavior is especially interesting considering his lineage. Even when she rejects him, Tom does not leave her: "You can call me any damn thing you like – bastard, member of the Ku Klux Klan – I don't care" (187). He refuses to leave her alone because he is sincerely concerned about her well-being and his reference to another male-dominant power appears to demonstrate the strength of his assertions. Hence, Botswana is where Elizabeth embarks on the path to achieving wholeness; the friendships of Tom and Kenosi are the impetus to her becoming a model of hope and progress.

While Elizabeth's progression is evident there are still remnants of social repression. Gustave Flaubert, (quoted in Felman's book), suggests that the memory of manipulation and subjugation causes the "unresolvable tension," (81). Dan continuously reminds Elizabeth of life as a subservient female. The following quote is her response to Dan's declaration that he is the personification of the African male:

Oh, this filthy environment, where men sleep with the little girls they fathered, and other horrific evils. It was the power of his projection of his own personality as African. It began to make all things African vile and obscene. The social defects of Africa are, first, the African man's loose, carefree sexuality; it hasn't the stopgaps of love and tenderness and personal romantic treasuring of women. The second social defect is a form of cruelty,

really spite... (137).

Elizabeth is repulsed that Dan replicates the cruelties of South African society. She emphasizes the environment, as it is the cause of her frustration and the reason for her subjugation. It is dirty, grimy, and immoral because it is filled with the stench of Apartheid. Dan is the symbol of this “carefree sexuality” he spends the majority of the novel vaunting patriarchal power; and so, his sexual escapades serve as a constant reminder to Elizabeth that women are to remain subjugated. For example, the women he touted all exhibited a subservient nature their names indicate their submission to patriarchal society: “Miss Body Beautiful” (146), “Miss Madame Loose Bottom,” “Miss Madame-Make-Love-On-The-Floor,” and “The Sugar Plum Fairy” (148). Dan is a seducer, and so displays false affection for the purpose of conquest; hence, the power of male-oriented structures can be seen in sexual relationships.

In further exploration of sexuality and its connection to power, the following quote denotes women as body parts:

He seemed to be desperately attached to that thing Medusa had which no other woman had. And even this was a mockery. It was abnormally constructed, like seven thousand vaginas in one. It was turned on and operating at white heat. And an atmosphere of brutal desire pervaded everything, stagnated everything, and the wrenching, miserable battle of fierce tug-of-war stretched on and on with no end in sight (64).

As described earlier Medusa represents Mother Africa; therefore, she also symbolizes female sexuality in relation to male dominance, two pervading themes in the novel. Though the quote cites an attachment to the “thing,” it also alludes to the attachment being a “mockery;” therefore, in patriarchal society women have no distinct qualities metaphorically, women are seen as

vaginas and Elizabeth rejects that notion, which brings on the “tug-of-war” between her, Sello, and Dan. Elizabeth is forced to observe Dan perpetrate obscene acts on women and young girls; she could not escape the subjugation: “I go with all these women because you are inferior. You cannot make it up to my level because we are not made the same way” (147). Dan reinforces the patriarchal view that women are subservient to men. Men, he believes, are inherently superior because they possess power to rule and women are subject to the male structure. Elizabeth does not yield to his power even when he implies: “You are supposed to feel jealous” (147). When examining Elizabeth’s rejection of patriarchal norms within this quote, it appears Dan is implying that she is categorically denying herself freedom by not complying with his male perversion. In a broader analysis, it appears he is attempting to manipulate her into believing that she will be a permanent “outsider” unless she conforms to patriarchal rule. Ibrahim argues that sexuality is tied to Elizabeth’s exilic identity:

Elizabeth constantly undermines and refuses to recognize its importance, sexuality is tied to her exilic identity and keeps cropping up in different forms...The problem of sexuality is never resolved through acceptance of subversiveness but rather through Elizabeth’s rejection of the self which manifests sexuality (134)

Ibrahim’s analysis appears to confirm Elizabeth’s resistance to subjugation as the answer to her identity, the “self” of whom Ibrahim writes in this passage appears to be the one Elizabeth discovers in Botswana. Her past environment presented a perverted view of sexuality; thus, Elizabeth’s choice to reject the current norm is freeing both sexually and mentally.

A brief examination of Dan’s power extends beyond sexual as he is an important component in manipulating Elizabeth:

Once you stared the important power –maniac in the face you saw that he never saw people, humanity, compassion, tenderness. It was as though he had a total blank spot and only saw his own power, his influence, his self (19).

Dan embodies the “power-maniac” and his sole objective is to ensure the patriarchal system remains under the control of men; therefore, he intends to keep women under subjection.

Elizabeth is his nemeses because she too understands the mechanics of power since she has confronted him on countless occasions. Further, patriarchal society consists of “power people” who are not concerned with the well- being of women, so the concept of acceptance for women does not exist. A closer examination of the above quote also elucidates the selfishness of the male power structure that is exclusive.

Throughout the novel Elizabeth experiences pressures associated with the rejection of subjugation not only is she being tormented by Dan and Sello but she is also adjusting to a new homeland. Nonetheless, the tensions appear to elevate her desire for freedom from prescribed social restraints. Brown suggests Elizabeth is confronting: “the bodily tension between erasure and the claiming of subjectivity, between a black, female body that exists, incomplete, in the isolation of silence and self-censorship and a tongue that demands self-expression” (108). For this reason, Elizabeth is struggling to restructure her fractured mind while simultaneously attempting to establish female agency. As stated earlier, she discovers the balance in Botswana because her migration extends beyond a physical departure:

It was in Botswana where, mentally, the normal and the abnormal blended completely in

Elizabeth’s mind. It was manageable to a certain point because of Elizabeth’s background and the freedom and flexibility with which she had brought herself up (15).

Elizabeth manages to establish a normalcy in Botswana that she did not have in South Africa and her ability to cope with her inner struggles is seen as a step towards change. She soon realizes that change is not necessarily contingent on vastness but in certain circumstances, like hers, little progress is viewed as considerable. Further, she does not allow her background to limit her progression but concentrates on a life with no patriarchal constraints. The “flexibility” in this quote speaks to her ability to adjust, as well as to her independence because it would be virtually impossible to be flexible if she were to subscribe to a restrictive patriarchal system. Elaborating further, the word “manageable” used here to describe her state of mind seems the correct term considering the turmoil she has endured to arrive at a place of mental balance. The concept of change increases Elizabeth’s perseverance in opposition to subjugation though her tormentors, Dan and Sello, persist in their daily interrogations. In some respect Elizabeth’s resolve is similar to that of a man:

Somewhere at the back of her mind Elizabeth, though a woman lived by the general’s code. She formulated her own broad definition of it. Never wage war on an inferior. He is a rat who pulls too many dirty tricks. He starts a war he never intends ending (103).

Here, Elizabeth compares herself to a warrior, which seems apropos considering she is fighting against subjugation. Her composition of a female power structure speaks to her independence and her belief that women are capable of performing the same duties exclusive to men. She follows the General’s codes as do the male soldiers; therefore, Elizabeth, as a woman, is competent and strong. The first quoted phrase indicates that the concept is in the back of her mind, which suggests she is developing a strategy to free herself of societal restraints. The rat is

arguably the social power system because of the negative connotation it carries, specifically when the passage speaks of a war against inferiors. However, in Elizabeth's case, and since she is comparing herself to the men of the power structure, the rat is likewise Elizabeth. In order to resist the patriarchal structure there must be a working knowledge of its purposes; therefore, Elizabeth's flexibility allows her to transform from a silent woman to an individual capable of opposing subjugation and manipulation. She is waging a never-ending war because she will not cease until she is victorious, and for this reason she continues to deny patriarchal powers that are constructed to execute her demise.

Elizabeth's continuous fight for freedom from patriarchy places her in the category of an activist. In the following passage she remembers the voices of other oppressed individuals and is overwhelmed by the effect it has on her:

People cried out so often in agony against racial hatreds and oppressions of all kinds. All their tears seemed to be piling up on her, and the source or roots from which they had sprung were being exposed with a vehement violence (53).

The voices are in her mind but their tears seem to "pile up on her." This particular statement echoes an earlier assertion that relates Elizabeth to being a repository for the repressed.

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi further elaborates on this argument by suggesting: "Elizabeth, the activist, stands in for an Africa resisting under siege, manifested in her schizophrenia, outsider status, poverty, and gender" (9). She is in the mental hospital at the time of this occurrence therefore implying that her "madness" exposes subjugation. Elizabeth's life continues to demonstrate her ability to resist patriarchal society. Regardless of the literal or the fantastical she is consistent in her declaration of social opposition. Further, Elizabeth does not reject the cries

but emphasizes their meaning. They are cries of suffering and torture against the current oppressions. The intensity of the words validates their significance to Elizabeth's resistance and is imperative that they are expressed strongly so the source from which the pain derives is exposed. Referring back to Elizabeth "madness" it is agony, boisterous and opposing, which is necessary when defying subjugation and manipulation. The adjective used to describe the violence is "vehement," which conjures up thoughts of fervency and passion and this is the violence Elizabeth is resisting. This vivid description of the power of subjugation again validates the strength of Elizabeth as a woman who opposes the patriarchal society.

There are moments when Elizabeth seems depleted of her strength, like the one illustrated in the following quote, but she manages to regain her composure and continue in her quest for social independence:

Her soul-death was really over in that instant, though she did not realize it. He seemed to have, in an intangible way, seen her sitting inside that coffin, reached down and pulled her out. The rest she did herself. She was poised from that moment to make the great leap out of hell (188).

This quote explains the extremity of Elizabeth's hallucinations and how the power of patriarchal society is relentless in its attempts to keep women in a subjugated role. Her "soul-death" was over, which indicates that her opposition to the male structure resurrected her soul from an emotional grave. Also, Tom shares his love for her and she is suddenly in the initial stage of tension relief. It is fitting that Tom is the one who offers her assistance because he is male and her friend. Further examination of this quote reveals the power of Elizabeth: "The rest she did herself." The narrator is strategic in stressing her role in the recovery process because it speaks to

her power of redemption and her ability to move forward. Again, her rejection is rewarded by a “rebirth,” and she is now in a position to redefine her womanhood because she resisted the diabolical power of subjugation and manipulation. Further, Elizabeth emerged from the experience with a revelation of self.

Understanding the importance of love to Elizabeth is important to this essay as it is the reason she is prepared to release her inner demons. Sello mentions it twice in the novel: “Love is two people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the other, like a ghoul” (13, 197). For Elizabeth those were the first words that: “sank into her pain-torn consciousness...” (13). Prior to arriving in Botswana, Elizabeth had no reference point for love at least not of the magnitude she experienced with Tom and Kenosi. Mutual affections were empowering, which explains why the words of Tom and her love of the land were a welcome phenomenon: “To rediscover that love was like suddenly being transported to a super-state of life” (202). Formerly, Elizabeth’s view of love had been narrow but now she was capable of extending it beyond self. As stated earlier, she is interested in liberation of mankind. The ‘ghoul’ in Sello’s quote on love represents patriarchal power, and how it feeds on the souls of women who are desperate for love and affection because they embrace the role of subservient women. The notion of love is not new to Elizabeth because she has always desired it, and now adopts it as a theme for her new life. She has aspirations that others will embrace its power as she has and thus embrace gender liberation.

Power or misuse of it is the quintessence of Elizabeth’s struggle because Dan is an important symbol of patriarchal society; thus, Elizabeth needs to reject the idealism engrained by South African society to live free of internal pain and tension. As stated earlier Dan is the “power-maniac” and towards the end of the novel he determines he wants full control of the

hallucinatory episodes, denoting Sello's demise was imminent. Although they were both hallucinations Dan possesses the power to destroy Sello. Dan knew Elizabeth would ascertain the truth regarding her own power and he was not content with allowing her entrance into the power realm, for power was reserved for men only: "I hated you,' he said. 'I'm going to pursue you until I destroy you" (198). Sello on the other hand, takes a different approach and explains to Elizabeth the inequities of power for if she does not handle it properly, she will be the female equivalent of Dan:

It wasn't power that was my doom. It was women; in particular a special woman who formed a creative complement to me, much like the relationship you and I have had for some time. She was captivating and dazzling...I could never accept a rejection. I was too important. I tried to break her. She broke free and unleashed centuries of suffering and darkness. Nothing stood in the way of her prestige and self-esteem (199).

The woman is culpable because of her desire for power and independence; hence, it appears Sello is espousing the views of the patriarchal system in yet another attempt to persuade Elizabeth not to resist subjugation. He endeavors to keep her imprisoned by explaining the effects of power on women, for the qualities of the woman he describes are grossly altered by power. Further, his confession of a dislike of rejection speaks again to the desire for women to remain in the restrictive and manipulative male power structure, which Elizabeth opposes. Hence, female autonomy is not accepted or recommended but Sello realizes Elizabeth, like the woman, will not cease until she obtains agency, and freedom from the patriarchal system.

Once Elizabeth embraces the power of self she is then able to reflect on her time spent with Dan and recollect life lessons taught during her hallucinatory episodes, so while Dan is the

symbol of her emotional upheaval he is also responsible for imparting the mechanics of patriarchal power. Subjugation and manipulation are components of that power and in the following passage Elizabeth describes the torture she endured for social liberation, further explaining how subordination exposed her to the vile powers of the patriarchal system:

But Dan had blasted her to a height far above Buddha; he had deepened and intensified all her qualities. He was one of the greatest teachers she'd worked with, he taught iron and steel self-control through sheer, wild, abandoned debauchery; he taught the extremes of love and tenderness through extreme hate; he taught alertness for falsehoods within, because he had used any means at his disposal to destroy Sello. And from the degradation and destruction of her life had arisen a still, lofty serenity of soul nothing could shake (202).

The most important lesson taught by Dan seems to be one of self-control for Elizabeth needed to learn how to restrain her impulses and not publicly castigate the patriarchy, for each time she does in the novel she is admitted: "we thought you might be ill and arranged for you to be admitted to the hospital" (176). Therefore, once she learned to control her emotions she was on her way to recovery. Hence, Dan and Sello's plan to destroy her was not successful and she continued her refusal of patriarchal norms and though there are instances when her resolve weakens she discovers determination to continue. As a reminder, her "madness" was the result of the rules established by the patriarchal power; thus, Elizabeth contradicts the absolutism espoused by Dan and Sello while their devices were designed to imprison and she escapes manipulation. Consequently, it seems Head's protagonist seeks female autonomy at all cost for she makes a declaration of resistance and she never dissipates. Next, Elizabeth depicts the

established norms as false and hateful as she realizes there was no validity to the claim that she was inferior to men. As stated in the beginning of this essay hallucinatory episodes are a direct correlation to her assumed madness and the “power people” attempted to isolate her so that she would not connect to the community around her. In order to succeed they needed to preserve her status as “outsider” because they believed it would force her to discontinue resisting but Elizabeth would not accept subservience. As seen in the above quote, Elizabeth realizes that the male structure is a false concept created by men for men and there is no legitimacy in their claims that she is not a female self. Further, Elizabeth alludes to Dan’s destruction of Sello to prove the false allegations of male solidarity, since Sello was his partner in this male structure. Dan’s actions appear to indicate that the male power structure is a selfish one, for there is no loyalty in it as both Sello and Medusa are destroyed by Dan. Therefore, it that celebrates competition, not allegiance and Elizabeth concludes it was prudent she opposed for now she rises from her degradation with confidence, and an assurance of self.

Elizabeth’s liberation is likewise attributed to divine intervention because religious undertones are seen throughout the novel but magnified towards the end as Elizabeth moves closer to recovery from her assumed madness. According to Bazin, Elizabeth escapes her “madness” by adopting a belief system that was separate from that of Dan and Sello, and by a dissimilar view of God. Here, we see Elizabeth’s resistance again being the central component to her fight against subjugation and manipulation. Bazin further suggests Elizabeth’s rejection of the God in the sky brings holiness down to the people. She believes gods are those who:

killed and 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 it seemed to her as though all suffering gave people and nations a powerful voice for the future and a common meeting-ground, because the types of people Sello referred to as 'the Gods' turned out on observation to be ordinary, practical, sane people... (31).

It is apparent that Elizabeth has observed the religious practices of those in power both in South Africa and Botswana thus concluding that if there were more than one god, unity of mankind would prevail. Further, the notion of many gods would coincide with Elizabeth's desire for unity, for if she were a god it is supposed that man would accept her and not subjugate and manipulate her. Bazin continues this argument by inferring that the God in the sky was created specifically for men (55) and Bazin's theory seems appropriate considering Elizabeth's experiences with patriarchal society. She deduces that worshipping a God that seemingly does not support independence for women is difficult and since God did not deliver her from the wickedness of Apartheid, and the subjugation it produced, why should she be compelled to worship him: "She felt this because the basic error seemed to be a relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky" (205). However, Elizabeth insinuates that when god exists in common man he becomes approachable, and able to comprehend the heart of both men and women; thus, Elizabeth determines she will now worship the god within as opposed to the God in the sky. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi further elaborates on this argument by suggesting that Head is: "presenting the recuperating Elizabeth as a new type of pan-Africanist prophet, the bearer of the gospel of an assuaged, humanized Africa" (9). Ogunyemi's argument relates to Elizabeth's exit from South Africa to Botswana because she is able to recover from the pains and hatred of subjugation; therefore, when she does realize her female self she is seen as having recuperated

from the manipulation. Also, this quote relates to Elizabeth's garden project, as stated earlier when she assists in rebuilding a new Botswana with her friends Tom and Kenosi. At the beginning of the essay Assah's explanation of African writing was quoted and discussed to show how African writers "transform madness." Here, this quotation from Ogunyemi returns to my opening statement that Elizabeth's "madness" is a byproduct of subjugation and manipulation. In the end, the protagonist is stronger because she resists the patriarchal norms. Hence, viewing Elizabeth's final state of mind from an African writer's perspective is to call her a heroine or a prophet.

Works Cited

Asaah, Augustine H. "To Speak or Not to Speak With the Whole Mouth: Textualization of Taboo Subjects in Europhone African Literature." Journal of Black Studies. 36.4(2006): 497-514. Print.

Abrahams, Cecil. The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in Southern Africa. Trenton: Africa World P, 1990. Print.

Bazin, Nancy Topping. "Madness, Mysticism, and Fantasy: Shifting Perspectives in the Novels of Doris Lessing, Bessie Head, and Nadine Gordimer." Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy 33.1 (1992): 73-87. Print.

Brown, Caroline. "A Divine Madness: The Secret Language of Trauma in the Novels of Bessie Head and Calixthe Beyala." Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 28.1 (2008): 93-108. Print.

Felman, Shoshana. Writing and Madness: Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis. Translator: Martha Evans. Stanford University Press, 2003. Print.

Gagiano, Annie. Achebe, Head, Marechera: On Power and Change in Africa. US:University of Sellenbosch 2000. Print.

Head, Bessie. A Question of Power. Johannesburg, SA: Heinemann Educational Publishers. 1974.

Ibrahim, Huma. Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile. Virginia: U of Virginia P, 1996. Print.

Lionnet, Françoise. "Geographies of Pain: Captive Bodies and Violent Acts in the Fictions of Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Gayl Jones, and Bessie Head." Callaloo. 16.1 (1993): 132-152. Print.

Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo, and Tuzyline Jita Allan. *Twelve Best Books by African Women: Critical Readings: "Twelve Telling Tales by African Women."* Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2009. Print.

Rose, Jacqueline, "On the 'Universality' of Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*." The University of Chicago. (1994): 401-417. Print.

Thompson, Leonard, A History of South Africa. 3rd ed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 2000. Print.