

The Modes of Power and Being in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

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Abstract

This article aims to explore how power and being are interpreted and conceptualised in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974). In the novel, the life of a young woman, Elizabeth, is interrogated as she journeys through personal traumas of alienation, the struggle for self-autonomy, and power dynamics in her life. The novel is set in the context of apartheid rule in South Africa, which presents itself as a critical cause of Elizabeth's existential crisis. This article examines the life of Elizabeth in conjunction with how power is exercised through what Agamben terms the "apparatus." The concept of the apparatus is read alongside a Foucauldian lens in order to get a nuanced understanding of the elements that make up an apparatus. In addition, the manner in which Agamben conceptualises the apparatus is cross-referenced with how Foucault conceptualises the dispositif. This article explores Elizabeth's struggle with alienation and self-autonomy and indicates how her agency is applied as a protagonist that is able to exercise power over others. In the narrative, Elizabeth is depicted as an "apparatus," and this occurs not by intention and obvious representation but rather as a result of circumstances that surround her life. Essentially, the discussion unpacks how power becomes a commodity that is given or taken away at will and how power dynamics and relations can influence who and how we become.

Keywords: apartheid; apparatus; alienation; being; Bessie Head; dispositifs; power

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Introduction

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974) unravels various themes, which include power relations, oppression and suppression, being bounded by race, and class relations. The protagonist, Elizabeth, experiences inescapable rejection in her filial and societal life. This rejection devastates her life and creates an ongoing identity crisis that distorts how she views herself and her place in the world as a woman born of a white mother and a black father. Elizabeth endures a lifelong struggle as a result of which she feels a sense of inferiority due to her "inferior" black gene, yet she is not superior enough even though she has a "superior" white gene. She develops an ambivalent attitude to both the black and white race (Pearse 1983). Ultimately, she endures a struggle between who she is and what she can become.

This article aims to explore how power and being are interpreted and conceptualised in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974). In the novel, the life of a young woman, Elizabeth, is interrogated as she journeys through personal traumas of alienation, the struggle for self-autonomy, and power dynamics in her life. The novel is set in the context of apartheid rule in South Africa, which presents itself as a critical cause of Elizabeth's existential crisis. Thus, this article examines the life of Elizabeth in conjunction with how power is exercised through what Agamben (2009, 2) terms the apparatus: "The apparatus is precisely this: a set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge." In this article, the notion of the apparatus as understood by Agamben is utilised as a lens to examine power dynamics and relations as key indicators of how they forge and influence individuals. Specifically, this article will explore how Elizabeth's struggle with alienation and self-autonomy indicates that her agency is somewhat threatened by a particular "apparatus." Essentially, the discussion unpacks how power becomes a commodity that is given or taken away at will, and how power dynamics and relations can influence who and how we become. Power dynamics and relations form a critical part in understanding the notion of being since it is a dynamic process in philosophical ontology that explains a threshold or a journey in an individual's life.

The first section of the article provides a background to the novel *A Question of Power* (1974) by Bessie Head and a context of its relevance and significance to the discussion. The second section explains Agamben's phenomenon of the apparatus in reference to power and being, as well as reviews other key literature on power and being. The third section analyses and interprets Elizabeth's narrative in relation to power and being. The final section provides concluding remarks.

Reading *A Question of Power*

The central theme in the novel revolves around the struggle for personal identity and mental stability in the face of inner and external oppression. At its core, the novel follows Elizabeth, a mixed-race woman living in Botswana, who suffers from severe mental illness, trauma, and identity conflict. Through her experiences, Head explores:

power and oppression—both personal (Elizabeth’s mental breakdowns, hallucinations, and confrontations with figures like Sello and Dan who symbolise different forms of power and control) and societal (colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and alienation); the psychological effects of colonial and racial trauma—Elizabeth’s mixed heritage and exile reflect the dislocation experienced by many in postcolonial Africa; the possibility of healing and self-liberation—despite her intense psychological battles, Elizabeth’s journey shows that reclaiming personal power and embracing one’s identity can lead to healing.

Head’s style of writing and intention in *A Question of Power* are not easily grasped; the novel can easily confuse the reader at first glance. It takes many pages to make sense of how she introduces Elizabeth’s subconscious and unconscious state of mind through the characters of Sello, Medusa, and Dan. The novel utilises a psychoanalytical approach in interpreting Elizabeth’s life experience. Elizabeth’s childhood played a significant role in her mental health and emotional status. In the novel she experiences physiological malfunction, which Head eloquently portrays as the reason that led to Elizabeth’s mental illness and her overall mental imbalance as a protagonist in the narrative (Pearse 1983).

The novel is set in Motabeng, a remote inland village in Botswana, but Elizabeth’s narrative begins in South Africa. She left South Africa in the hope of escaping her inability to have a stable life. From a young age, she was rejected by society, because she had a white mother (who committed suicide while in a mental institution) and a black father. She was born during a period of political upheaval and tensions in the country where races were separated based on racist laws that governed the country. Head does not explicitly reveal the reasons why Elizabeth’s mother killed herself, but other characters allude to her insanity and mental instability. Her foster mother reveals to Elizabeth part of her story and upbringing when Elizabeth decides to return to the small town where she once lived. Her foster mother told her how she was received by a child welfare committee from a mental hospital, sent to a nursing home, and then returned to the child welfare centre because she did not look white enough. She was then taken in by a Boer family that also returned her a week later. Her foster mother explained that it was her husband who worked at the centre who convinced her to take in Elizabeth. Elizabeth’s maternal family came from Johannesburg to visit. Her mother’s brother said to her foster mother, “We want to wash our hands of this business. We want to forget about 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” (Head [1974] 2018, 8–13). It became evident that her family was rejecting her; only her grandmother wanted to keep filial ties. Her grandmother wanted to defy and resist the racial boundaries that were created by apartheid laws. When Elizabeth turned six years old, her foster family was notified of her mother’s death. The only person alive who deeply cared for Elizabeth was her grandmother.

Elizabeth loved her foster mother. It was only after the death of her husband that her foster mother resorted to selling beer as a means of survival, and Elizabeth suffered neglect. She was relieved to be taken to a missionary school. But when she arrived at the school, the principal called her aside and said, “We have a full docket of 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 locked her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native” (Head [1974] 2018, 9). At a young age, Elizabeth was met with the cruelty and harshness of what apartheid represented. Her mother was labelled insane because she was breaking the law. As a white woman you were deemed insane for sleeping with a black person. Her sanity was questioned because it was believed that no white person would engage in sexual intercourse or any mutual relation with a black person if they were sane. The apartheid laws in South Africa prohibited black and white race relations of any kind. Even friendship was prohibited. What Elizabeth’s mother did contravened the Immorality Amendment Act of 1957.¹ Hence, her grandmother could not openly demonstrate her maternal bond to her grandchild. Elizabeth’s family openly dissociated themselves from her, not only to avoid breaking the law, but also to denounce any linkage to blackness because blackness implied inferiority. The apartheid system was founded on the notion of black people as inferior; therefore, they could not engage with white people on a mutual and reciprocal level. Hence, they had to openly defy Elizabeth’s mother’s association with a black person, which could contaminate their social status (Pearse 1983, 88).

The context of the novel is the peak of racialisation in South Africa—an ongoing permanent organising principle meant to be an imposition of a particular meaning based on one’s skin colour (Sithole 2023). Essentially, it implies colour has a meaning. The designation of colour therefore becomes a point to focus on, something that is a visual and a literal marker of difference. Elizabeth was marked as different by her family; she had the mark of having a black father. Her mother had the mark of insanity because it was said that no sane white woman would engage in sexual activity with a black man. Instead, Elizabeth’s mother’s relationship with a black man was seen as sexual lust, because black people were seen as sexually potent, while white people were said to have brain power. Thus, Elizabeth’s mother’s intellectual capacity had to be compromised for her to engage in sexual activity with a black man, according to the apartheid Immorality Act of 1957.

As a child, she was rejected by her family, and later she was rejected at school. However, through this series of rejections, she was not aware of the details of where oppression

1 South Africa’s Immorality Amendment Act of 1957 is an extension of the Immorality Act of 1927 and its amendment of 1950, which forbade extra-marital intercourse between whites and non-whites. It made it an offence for a white person to have intercourse with a black person. It was also an offence to entice, solicit, or importune another to commit any of these acts or to attempt to do so or to conspire with another to commit such acts. The maximum penalty for this offence was seven years’ imprisonment (O’Malley n.d.).

and rejection came from. The information given to her by the principal remained meaningless until she learned through her experiences at the school of being isolated and being shunned by other children. Growing up in apartheid South Africa, her conception—the coming together of her parents—was an illegal act. She was therefore an illegal by-product. She personified a mixture of colour—neither black nor white. She was neither white enough to be accepted as white nor black enough to be accepted as black (Pearse 1983).

For years, she lived with various families: She learned about Indian culture and its philosophies, and she lived with a German woman for some time who taught her about Hitler and the Jews. She joined a political party, which was banned two days after she joined, after which a state of emergency was declared. She was among the thousands of people who were searched, and she was arrested for having a letter about the banned party in her handbag. Elizabeth's life in South Africa was riddled with decisions and consequences that led to her being isolated and rejected. Although many decisions were not her own, she felt the consequences. She married a gangster immediately after he was released from prison. The marriage did not last long, because her husband was known for having a promiscuous lifestyle and often engaging in extramarital affairs. After a year, she took her son and left her husband. She had read in the newspapers about the need for teachers in Botswana. "She was forced to take an exit permit, which like her marriage, held the never *return clause*" (Head [1974] 2018, 11–12).

When Elizabeth makes the decision to leave South Africa, it presupposes her inclination to accept the rejection and social shame she has experienced. But it also allows her to enter into a new space of consciousness, subconsciousness, and unconsciousness as articulated in the novel. For Elizabeth, leaving South Africa had two essential outcomes: First, she had to accept the disintegration of her life, which meant removing some of the absolute "truths" with which she had been provided, such as the insanity of her mother, the social shame and ultimate rejection by her family, and second, she had to reconstruct herself—assembling all the fragments and developing a new version of herself and her world (Ezebuilo and Ojiakor 2016). Motabeng village was the place where all this could happen.

The manner in which the novel is narrated makes it difficult to determine whether Elizabeth is experiencing life through her consciousness or subconsciousness. "She was not sure if she were awake or asleep, and often that the dividing line between dream perceptions and waking reality was to become confused" (Head [1974] 2018, 16). This passage explains that Elizabeth's basic existential perception of her consciousness and subconsciousness drifts, and the reader does not always know whether she is dreaming or experiencing reality. But through the analysis of Pearse (1983) and Ezebuilo and Ojiakor (2016), the reader comes to understand Elizabeth's psychological position. The intention of the narrative by Head ([1974] 2018) is clear: The author obliterates racial oppression and social segregation. She is against the obsession with the pursuit of power. Head conveys this message through the protagonist Elizabeth who is confronted

by an overwhelming sense of existing in a racially divided society. Head's intention in the novel is to transcend the divisions that apartheid and colonialism inscribed on identity. She does this not by denying their reality, but by psychologically and spiritually dismantling their power over the individual through Elizabeth's inner journey. She manages to confront the discrimination through a mental disintegration that is both intentional and unintentional in various instances. Using Motabeng village as a scene of power and being, the narrative reveals how Elizabeth becomes a tool, an object and an apparatus of defining her own existence.

A discussion of the context of *A Question of Power* is important because it situates the novel within broader academic debates, interpretive traditions, and historical contexts. This novel manipulates the realist narrative conventions, which are the techniques and features that writers use to create the effect of realism—that is, making a story feel believable, authentic, and reflective of ordinary life (Watt 2005). The review allows scholars to trace how the novel has been read across disciplines—literary studies, political science, gender studies, postcolonial studies, and psychology—highlighting its multidimensional impact. It also identifies recurring themes such as colonialism's psychological legacy, the intersections of race, class, and gender, and the struggles of exile and identity in postcolonial Africa. The novel mixes realism with surrealism, autobiography with fiction, and narrative with visionary sequences. Analysing it highlights how Head challenges traditional realist conventions, offering a unique African modernist voice. It expands our understanding of how African literature experiments with form to express trauma and resistance. Despite its darkness, the novel ends with the possibility of love, community, and human dignity. Analysing it shows how Head ([1974] 2018) searches for alternatives to oppression—visions of healing and communal solidarity. Ajayi (2009) emphasises that the novel functions as a psychological case study as well as a political allegory. Elizabeth's madness mirrors the broader dislocation of postcolonial identity, particularly for black women who must navigate both patriarchal and colonial systems of domination. The physical setting of Motabeng village, with its harsh climate and poverty, is not merely a backdrop but a metaphor for psychological struggle—it shapes Elizabeth's mental deterioration and, later, her recovery.

But a central focus in this article is the use of Agamben's concept of an apparatus. Scholarly engagement with Head's *A Question of Power* has consistently highlighted the novel's complex negotiation of power, identity, and psychological struggle within postcolonial and gendered contexts. Early readings, such as the one provided by Johnson (1985), explore the text's reliance on metaphor, myth, and symbolic meaning to represent Elizabeth's inner conflict as a broader struggle against oppression. Lorenz (1991) extends this analysis by focusing on colonisation and the feminine, arguing that Elizabeth's experiences reflect the gendered dimensions of colonial domination. Similarly, Rose (1994) interrogates the universality of madness, suggesting that Elizabeth's breakdown can be read not simply as pathology but as a critique of social and political structures. Counihan (2011) develops this perspective by analysing how

desire and utopia shape Elizabeth's narrative identity, framing her struggle as an attempt to envision alternative modes of belonging and community. More recently, Cappelli (2017) situates the novel within decolonial feminist discourse, showing how Elizabeth's consciousness becomes a site of resistance against intertwined systems of racial and patriarchal oppression. Taken together, these studies reveal the novel's richness as a text that defies singular interpretation, instead inviting readings that move between the psychological, political, feminist, and mythic dimensions of African postcolonial life.

An Agambenian Approach as a Conceptual Tool

Elizabeth has to create alternative modes of power and being to survive her day-to-day living conditions. She escapes her oppressed position and alienation by moving to Motabeng. She creates alternative realities whereby she is caught between two commanding male powers that occupy her nocturnal space as well as another figure who dominates her psychological stability. She exists between two polarities of "power"—one is characterised by domination and is masculine and the other is characterised by being dominated and inferior. These two polarities co-exist in a continuous power struggle of good and evil and are personified by the characters she creates and brings to life. These characters are Sello, Dan, and Medusa—they are representations that are interpreted in detail.

There is an Agambenian dichotomy that is worth exploring to understand Elizabeth's position and her psychological instability. In this section, the focus is on Agamben's work *What Is an Apparatus?*, which serves as a tool of analysis in understanding the critical role that Elizabeth portrays in her ability to move between her conscious and her subconscious mind. As the protagonist in the novel, she is able to intercept and move between her reality and perception. Agamben (2009) explains that an apparatus exists firstly as virtually anything that is linguistic or non-linguistic; it can be philosophical propositions. Essentially, it is a network between these elements. Secondly, an apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always in the position of power. Lastly, an apparatus often presents itself at the intersection of power relations (Agamben 2009). Elizabeth is an apparatus, according to Foucault (1980, 196), who describes an apparatus as "precisely this; a set of strategies of relations of forces supporting and supported by certain types of knowledge." For Foucault, an apparatus takes a position with respect to a decisive problem and considers the relationship between living beings and historical elements. Historical elements are a set of institutions, processes of subjectification, and rules in which power relations become concrete. Essentially, what Foucault regards as important is the modes in which an apparatus can use its power (Agamben 2009). Agamben built his definition of an apparatus upon Foucault's conception of "positivity." Although Foucault never provides a complete definition, in an interview from 1977 he describes an apparatus as "a kind of formation, so to speak, that at a given historical moment has as its major function the response to an urgency. The apparatus therefore has a dominant strategic function" (Foucault 1980, 195). For Foucault, an apparatus can be established between a network of elements; he does not

categorise these elements, but they exist as a police measure, a technology of power—in essence, it has the ability to control. For Foucault, dispositifs are never total; there is always room for resistance. Dispositifs form subjects, but subjects are not totally determined by them. There is a possibility of “counter-conduct,” ethical or aesthetic self-creation, that works within or in relation to the dispositifs. Resistance for Foucault is “transcendent” in the sense that individuals can refer to standards, norms, or practices beyond current power relations to resist them, or can create new forms of subjectivity and truth that reconfigure the relations of power. However, Frost (2019) notes that Foucault is cautious about conflating resistance with liberation. Liberation (escaping or overthrowing power) can often reproduce new forms of power. Resistance is not simply a mirror image of power but rather a dynamic that both depends on and contests power.

When analysing other existing definitions of the word “apparatus,” there is a common thread, identified as a tool or a part of a mechanism, a plan, a process or organisation. Agamben (2009) provides three meanings of an apparatus in three different contexts. In a juridical sense, an apparatus is “the part of a judgement that contains the decision separate from the opinion” (Agamben 2009, 7). In a technological sense, an apparatus “is the way in which the parts of a machine or of a mechanism and, by extension, the mechanism itself are arranged” (Agamben 2009, 7). Lastly, Agamben (2009, 7) notes the apparatus for its military use as a “set of means arranged in conformity with a plan.” Nonetheless, the way Agamben fragments the definition of an apparatus reflects a Foucauldian understanding. Foucault was concerned with understanding the formation of subjectivity and, from that, Agamben uses a Foucauldian lens to classify all humans into two groups, namely “living beings” and “apparatuses in which living beings are incessantly captured” (Agamben 2009, 14). Then, between these two, is a third class, which Agamben refers to as the subjects. This class results from the relation between the “living beings” and “apparatuses.” He explains that apparatuses are not merely created by chance, but they are “rooted in the very process of ‘humanization’ that made ‘humans’ out of the animals we classify under the rubric *Homo sapiens*” (Agamben 2009, 16). Apparatuses are not instruments of violence but are a result of subjectification and governance. Apparatuses thus always produce their own subjects. Agamben (2009) traced the work of Foucault (1980, 1972), where he refers to an apparatus as “positivities,” the positive referring to something that is enforced and obligatory as opposed to something that is natural or free (Legg 2011). Foucault was more concerned with how the positivities (apparatuses) work with the relations, mechanisms, and “plays” of power. Agamben (2009) traces the term further to its theological genealogies; it originates from the Greek term *oikonomia*, generally meaning management. In the history of Christian theology, the notion of *oikonomia* came to be associated with a pastoral procedure, *oikonomia psuchon*, translated as “the economy of souls,” essentially referring to the management of all Christians (Agamben 2009; Legg 2011). Agamben critiques Foucault for not quite “completing” the analysis of dispositifs—particularly for not seeing how deeply totalising dispositifs become, and for allowing transcendent forms of resistance. Agamben emphasises the total reach of dispositifs: Almost everything becomes an apparatus—language, practices, and institutions.

Resistance that relies on transcendent norms or external standards risks reinforcing what it opposes. For Agamben, meaningful resistance must be immanent—it cannot appeal outside of the *dispositif* but must in some way deactivate the *dispositifs* from within, or live in a form that remains indifferent to their logic. He draws on ontology (the nature of being) as the ground for this resistance. Life, in its “form-of-life,” is what can be distinguished from or live despite the regulatory logic of power (Frost 2019).

A commonality that is evident in Foucault (1980) and Agamben (2009) is their emphasis on the apparatus as centred on the control of the behaviour, gestures, and thoughts of human beings. Apparatuses are mechanisms through which living beings become subjects. In other words, a living being becomes a subject when it is controlled and shaped by its social and political structures. Thus, to “become a subject” means to be both produced by and resistant to systems of power. Frost (2019) examines how Foucault and Agamben use the concept of the *dispositif* (or apparatus) to think about how power orders, controls, and shapes subjects. He focuses especially on how each theorises resistance in relation to the *dispositif*: what form resistance can take, how it relates to the individual (or singularity), and what kind of emancipatory politics is plausible under each view.

The apparatus is both a political metaphor for institutionalised oppression and a psychological metaphor for the internalised voice of domination in Elizabeth’s mind. Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* cannot be the apparatus in the same sense as the oppressive, external system Head ([1974] 2018) critiques—but she is deeply entangled with it. Here is how there is an internalisation of oppression in the novel. The apparatus is partly psychological, showing how racism, sexism, and colonial power structures live inside people’s minds. Elizabeth often becomes both victim and enforcer of this power. In her hallucinations, she repeats and polices the degrading voices of Sello, Dan, and their allies—suggesting she has absorbed the logic of the apparatus—thus it can be a convincing statement to view her as the apparatus. For Elizabeth, the self becomes a battleground because her breakdowns dramatise how the apparatus infiltrates personal consciousness. She becomes the site where it operates: Her body and mind are turned into a stage for its cruelty. In this sense, she *embodies* the apparatus, even though she is also its primary target.

However, there is an ambiguity to this power because by the end, Elizabeth resists and partly dismantles the apparatus by reclaiming compassion and love. But until that point, she sometimes reproduces its violence, particularly when she projects its judgements onto herself or others. So, Elizabeth is not the apparatus as a system, but she functions as one of its conduits—a living example of how oppressive structures get inside the self and blur the line between victim and instrument.

In this discussion, apparatuses produce subjectivities, and in an effort to explain this further, Elizabeth is referred to as a reference of analysis. Therefore, a paradigm and contextual shift is necessary to juxtapose her to Agamben’s conceptualisation. Elizabeth

possesses the features of an apparatus. She exists between two controlling worlds. When we, the audience, interact with other characters, she is in a position of power because she decides how much access we have to as well as the appearance of the other characters. Wahab (2017) reads the hallucinatory episodes involving Sello and Dan as dramatisations of Elizabeth's inner battle between good and evil, love and hate, and freedom and domination. She appears at the intersection of power relations between herself and other characters in the novel, like Sello, Medusa, and Dan. Elizabeth's character has been analysed by Pearse (1983), Gagliano (1999), Cappelli (2017), Ezebuilo and Ojiakor (2016), among others, and in their analysis, she is not seen as a protagonist that is in control of her fate and who takes control and power. Instead, she is portrayed as an individual who is dealing with racial traumas as a mixed-race person, abandonment, and isolation from her family. She is also depicted as a victim who has suffered severe psychological instability that has been caused by the stigma of her mother's psychological breakdown and suicide. Elizabeth is seen as seized between the characters of Sello, Medusa, and Dan. Her encounters with these characters torment her nightly life, unconsciously.

This unconscious nighttime must be explored in depth, because she exists between two worlds which she acknowledges are innate extremes of good and evil. Elizabeth's position is one of power, although she is tormented by clashes of her soul—clashes she encounters with Sello, Medusa, and Dan. The assumption is that Elizabeth is weak, which partly enables the symbolic figures of Sello and Dan in her hallucinations to exert power over her. As a woman, she should conform to gendered expectations; there are implicit expectations that she should be submissive, emotionally dependent, or defined through her relationships with men. Elizabeth resists these expectations, especially in her visions where she refuses domination by the male figures of power. Elizabeth creates psychological projections; Sello and Dan personify Elizabeth's internalised trauma and struggle with good and evil. Sello in his "good" form represents spiritual enlightenment and compassion, while Dan and the evil Sello embody corruption, lust, and cruelty—the forces of oppression and patriarchy within and without. By confronting them, Elizabeth symbolically purges the colonial and patriarchal voices that have controlled her psyche. They are mythic and symbolic beings; they blur the line between real and imaginary, male and female, divine and human—thus dissolving hierarchical oppositions. This ambiguity allows Head to challenge rigid systems (racial, sexual, moral) and replace them with a fluid, inclusive vision of existence.

However, this assumption is challenged as Elizabeth develops resilience and confronts the psychological power dynamics. She employs strategies of relations that help sustain her between the polarities existing within her. Because of her personal suffering, her experiences of physical and emotional isolation that had psychological manifestations, her relations are attempts to acquire personal and social power.

These relations can sometimes function as a mode of power. Unaware of what they possess, they create an apparatus. Elizabeth is an apparatus, a result of subjectification

and governance. She is moulded by a set of strategies and mechanisms, meaning she is a creation of various knowledges and experiences. She is formed by a network of elements. This can be interpreted as her being an individual that functions from a position of power, a position of holding and controlling relations. Even though she battles with negotiating spaces among Sello, Medusa, and Dan, these characters only come to exist because of her. Since an apparatus captures living beings, so does Elizabeth; she captures them and brings them to life, to existence. Throughout the novel, the audience does not know whether Elizabeth is awake or dreaming when she engages with the characters of Sello, Medusa, and Dan. But eventually, it is evident that Sello, Medusa, and Dan are psychological manifestations of Elizabeth. Anzaldúa (2007, 59) writes, “Nothing happens in the real world unless it first happens in the images in our head.” Elizabeth manifests the characters of Sello, Medusa, and Dan; she has internal battles with these characters; she considers both the good and the evil in how she presents them to an audience, which is a fair presentation since the soul, or an individual, is made up of good and evil (Vigne 1991). She is in fact in possession of power, in deciding how the audience receives the good and the evil. She creates subjects of her subconscious to the conscious mind. This is where power dynamics and relations form a critical part in understanding Elizabeth’s mode of survival, for her being an apparatus is a mode of survival. As Foucault notes (1980), power is a cluster of relations; it is not located, emanating from a particular location. Power is organised—meaning Elizabeth creates an atmosphere of power. She may exist in a world that is racially prejudiced and has isolated her, but she rejects that world and reimagines herself into an apparatus. Hence, it is important to analyse how power can aid us into being. The “disintegration” of her mind represents a necessary descent into chaos before the achievement of renewal and self-understanding. Madness becomes a metaphor for initiation—a painful yet purifying process through which Elizabeth gains insight and strength.

An apparatus is not a single person but a symbolic force. It represents the machinery of oppression, domination, and psychological control that Elizabeth, the protagonist, confronts during her mental breakdowns. The apparatus is depicted as an invisible but powerful system that manipulates, surveils, and torments Elizabeth in her hallucinatory visions. It operates through figures like Sello and Dan, who personify different facets of oppressive power—patriarchal domination, sexual exploitation, racism, and authoritarian control. In a broader sense, the apparatus reflects colonial and apartheid-era systems—bureaucratic, political, and ideological structures that dehumanise people, especially women and black subjects. On a psychological level, it externalises Elizabeth’s inner struggles with trauma, exile, and identity, showing how systemic oppression becomes internalised.

Power and Being

Exploring themes of power and being is a seminal theme in philosophy and a critical part of understanding how others view us vis-à-vis how we view and understand ourselves and the experiences we encounter. Since Elizabeth embodies an apparatus,

she has a dominant role in her life; she can mould herself and her thoughts at a subconscious and conscious level. Despite the evident racial discrimination and social segregation, Elizabeth must be considered as a protagonist that has control over her life. This does not mean that I am denying and overlooking her traumatic experiences in a racially divided South Africa. As a result of those experiences, she has had to deal with psychotic breakdowns, which she attempts to navigate between her conscious and subconscious mind.

In her subconscious, she encounters Sello who originated from a black body and soul. Sello prefers to be identified as part of mankind and belonging to a certain environment. He identifies himself as an African: “[H]e preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment” (Head [1974] 2018, 3). Magnolia (2002, 158) explains Sello in the following manner: “Sello is not just one man, one body, one race. He is the culmination of all of Africa, of all of the histories of African nations. Rather than being an essentialised representation, he is an equalised representation; he is an amalgam of Africanness, and his wisdom comes from this place of confluence.” Further into the novel, Sello appears to be linked to other characters, namely Buddha, Osiris, and Medusa. He seems to also appear and manifest to Elizabeth as these characters. He is linked to these characters although he is first introduced as African, but that is just one of the parts that make up who he is. Nonetheless, he is described as the “perfect statement” and also as “just anyone” (Head [1974] 2018, 3). By this understanding, Sello represents a variety of selves. Magnolia (2002) believes he represents the paradox of South Africa, because he seemingly is singular and omnipresent. Therefore, he can represent different tribes, because he already appears as different characters. As noted in the novel, “It was as though his soul was a jigsaw” (Head [1974] 2018, 3). Sello has the capacity to personify the multiplicity of South Africa. As a jigsaw, he has the good and evil part of him. There is a Sello of the white robes and a Sello in the brown suit. Sello in the white robes trusts Elizabeth’s strength; Sello in the brown suit devalues her humanity. Head ([1974] 2018, 31) writes: “She was entirely dependent on Sello for direction and equally helpless, like a patient on his doctor for survival, assuming that the doctor knew his job.” Elizabeth also trusted the Sello in the white robes, who is presented as a physician. A physician usually wears white robes, and Sello therefore embodies healing. This can be understood as a coping mechanism that Elizabeth employs to overcome the feeling of being exiled and isolated, which she has encountered in her life thus far.

It is a mode of being in which she creates alternative realities; Sello is the alternative in which she finds comfort, belonging, healing and acceptance. Therefore, through Sello she is humanised and recognised as human, not merely as the child of a white woman and a black man. She feels human; however, she does acknowledge that every individual has a good and a bad side, hence Sello’s character embodies both good and evil. “The evils overwhelming her were beginning to sound like South Africa from which she fled” (Head [1974] 2018, 57). This is a clear indication of the true reason she fled South Africa. It was a toxic environment for her; it depicted evil and, similarly, the evil parts

of Sello sounded like South Africa. What Elizabeth does by conjuring these characters in her imagination is both an act of her living her memory and constructing her memory. She is reliving moments that could have happened as well as creating moments (Gagiano 1999).

The novel in this discussion, *A Question of Power*, is known to be an autobiographical account of Head's life, although she deliberately omits and perhaps even adapts some of the material from her personal life experiences in Botswana. The novel can stand as a narrative that provides "self-critical and socially conscious transference" (Gagiano 1999, 47). In many ways, it provides social enlightenment, a moment of learning and transferring knowledge. For Elizabeth, creating those characters was a mode to survive her reality, while for Head, creating (writing) the novels was a mode of survival.

On the other end is Dan, who is introduced in the first part of the novel. Part two of the novel is dedicated and tilted towards Dan. Dan is seen as another major demon in Elizabeth's psyche (Magnolia 2002). Dan portrays himself as a powerful, confident, and self-assured man. He is everything Elizabeth would like to be: "[T]he fearful thing was that Dan had decided that he was a much better manager of the universe than Sello" (Head [1974] 2018, 19). Dan thought of himself as superior compared to Sello. His persona dominates Elizabeth, arguably to the point of oppression. When Dan mentions that he thought of himself as a "better manager of the universe," he thought of himself as the better psyche compared to Sello. He is more deserving and fit to rule Elizabeth's mind. "But once her relationship with the man, Dan Molomo, could be looked at with clear, hard eyes, she had turned again to Sello and held out her hands and said: 'Thank you! Oh God, thank you for the lever out of hell!'" (Head [1974] 2018, 4). Elizabeth understands Dan is a dominating and toxic spirit for her. Sello is her saviour, the person that could deliver her from the evil of Dan: "[S]he spent hours and hours undoing the links that bound her to Dan" (Head [1974] 2018, 4). She really wants to rid herself of Dan and everything that connects her to him. This is not an easy task, as Dan is a part of her psyche. His dominance is shown by introducing him to the audience early on in the novel and his utterance that he is a better manager than Sello. Dan appears to represent racist, oppressive, and sexist ideology: "You are supposed to feel jealous. You are inferior as a Coloured. You haven't got what that girl has got" (Head [1974] 2018, 134). Dan cannot simply be understood as just another character in Elizabeth's psyche; he represents something greater. He represents the South African nation that rejected and oppressed Elizabeth; Dan is the white, dominating, oppressive apartheid regime of South Africa. Dan represents a sexist and racist apartheid regime that oppressed and labelled Elizabeth as well as her mother as insane and unworthy because of their relations to a black person. Additionally, Dan's persona is likened to Hitler and Napoleon and their ambitions to rule the world because he, too, wanted to rule the universe.

It is critical to note how Elizabeth crafted both Sello and Dan from her experiences of torment and exclusion that she had to confront both in Botswana and South Africa. Her

unconscious, subconscious, and conscious experiences were further triggered when she was in Botswana, as she realised she was in a similar environment as where she came from. She crafts these characters in an attempt to deal with the oppression she encounters. She crafts these characters eloquently, because she creates a balance in their personality—they have good and bad traits. These characters weave into each other because they present her life experiences. Head ([1974] 2018, 5) writes, “The three of them had shared the strange journey into hell and kept close emotional tabs on each other.” For Elizabeth, Sello’s and Dan’s lives were intrinsically linked, because the apparatus which is Elizabeth had manifested Sello and Dan from a psyche as a mode of survival. Because she came from an environment in South Africa where her power and will were denied, she went to Motabeng to escape the denial of power and to give herself power. But the power she seeks to restore is that of self-worth and agency. She seeks to restore her worth as an individual who has will and agency over herself and her surroundings. She manages to do that by creating and producing her own subjects, namely Sello and Dan.

Elizabeth lives consciously through her subconscious, meaning everything that unfolds in the subconscious is essentially what she had hoped for consciously. She wanted to be accepted and acknowledged, and Sello provided that for her. She understood with that appetite that there was still a cruel and oppressive South Africa that would probably never accept her for who she is and how she came to exist, and Dan provided that constant reminder to Elizabeth. Her subconscious experiences are both liberating and oppressive, depending on how we read them and at what stage in the novel we encounter her inner struggles. Elizabeth’s confrontation with her subconscious becomes a journey towards self-knowledge and healing. By enduring and eventually confronting the madness within, Elizabeth begins to understand the sources of her pain—racial, sexual, and spiritual breakdowns. But through all the psychological breakdowns she encounters, Elizabeth engages and accepts the truths of her reality, the political and personal power struggles. Her power lies in her ability to recognise the good and evil in life and in finding comfort in a land where she is seen as a foreigner. She could not find that comfort in South Africa. Head ([1974] 2018, 222) writes, “A peaceful, meditative privacy settled on her mind. Her painful, broken nerve-ends quietly knitted together. She put Shorty to bed and, for the first time in three years, embraced the solitude of the night with joy.” This is a way for Elizabeth to accept everything she has encountered; she is making peace with all the pain she has endured in her life thus far. She embraces the night with joy. In the last line of the novel, Head ([1974] 2018, 223) writes, “As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging.” This is a pivotal line—Elizabeth chooses to belong. She does not leave it to the people of Botswana or South Africa to decide for her where she belongs. She makes an active decision that the land which she touches is the land to which she chooses to belong, regardless of whether the people of that land will accept her or not.

Concluding Remarks

Bessie Head argues that the most dangerous question of power is not only political, but deeply personal—it lies in one's mind, in how individuals confront oppression, trauma, and the forces that seek to control their identity. Elizabeth endured suffering in her short marriage and felt like an outsider in her country. She then made the decision to start a new life in Botswana, only to be left feeling isolated and discriminated against once more in a foreign country. Elizabeth must be commended for fighting back, albeit in an unconventional mode. Her self-awareness is shown in the way she creates and interacts interchangeably with the conscious and subconscious parts of her mind. Sello notes: "There are so many layers of awareness Bring an inferior into contact with a superior" (Head [1974] 2018, 214). This is what Elizabeth embodies—various layers of awareness—because being able to bring her subconscious and conscious parts to interact proves that she is aware of her reality. She brought the inferior into contact with the superior, the inferior being her fears and sense of abandonment, and the superior being her ability to create a sense of belonging for herself. Elizabeth truly was an apparatus; she created her own subjects and her own means of power.

Agamben's critique sharpens certain issues in Foucault (especially concerning totalising power and the role of ontology). The two thinkers ultimately diverge on what kind of resistance is possible or meaningful. The choice is between seeing resistance as something political, embodied, working through changed norms, institutions, or individual subjectivities (Foucault's side), or seeing resistance as an ontological condition—living forms of life that do not conform to the logic of dispositifs. In essence, Head disrupts colonial realism by blending autobiography, allegory, and spiritual vision, which resists fixed categories. This experimental style itself breaks from the "order" imposed by colonial literary forms, symbolically undoing structures of oppression.

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