

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

An Online Open Access Journal
ISSN 0975-2935
www.rupkatha.com

Volume V, Number 1, 2013

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Mary Magdalene or Virgin Mary: Nationalism and the Concept of Woman in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

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Abstract

Foucault believes that people live in systems of power different from one era to another. He applies the term “power archives” to demonstrate that those inside an institute cannot be aware of the subtle ways of power imposed on them. Likewise, it would be oversimplification to think that with the apparent end of colonialism, the colonized subjects will be free from subjugating contexts. In the case of women, the situation is even worse since they are repressed by both the colonialist and the post-colonial nationalist. “Under the anxiety of the influence” of the former colonial father, the once-belittled colonial men turn to support their females in terms of their body and soul, and in this way define them inside a strictly demarcated roles of good wives, mothers, and households or vicious prostitutes. Bessie Head in her semi-autobiographical masterpiece subtly examines this idea and through her coloured protagonist, Elizabeth, attempts to re-deconstruct this notion.

[**Keywords:** Bessie Head, motherhood, post-colonial, nationalism, women]

Women become sites on which various versions of scripture/ tradition/ law are elaborated and contested.”

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (AQP)² is the story of a lonely South African woman named Elizabeth who leaves her country and goes on a self-exile to Botswana. AQP depicts South Africa of the 1960s and 1970s, a period of vehement nationalistic and revolutionary conflicts. Not only does Elizabeth the “coloured” protagonist of the novel experience the unbearable condition of apartheid regime of white settlers, she also suffers from nationalistic and pan-nationalistic movements like Black Consciousness³ and Black Power.⁴ The important issue worth mentioning in relation to Black Consciousness and other like-minded nationalistic movements is their perception of woman and her role in the colonized and pos-colonized society. This study tends to discuss how women become victimized by nationalism and its worldview. Likewise, nationalist patriarchy becomes a complicit of the colonizer in women's oppression. AQP, in this respect becomes a complicated novel in which brutality of extremist nationalism is fully observed and analyzed by the female protagonist of the story whose hybridity makes her triply

colonized by colonizers and, consequently, blacks' racist nationalism and even their women the used to be colonized!

Although women and their unbearable condition are among the main motifs of the novel, Bessie Head by no means is a radical feminist in terms of western feminism. Her adherence to women is related, mainly, to the nationalistic ideas about women. Nationalism uses maternal imagery to provoke people's chauvinism and bind them under the single category of familial relationship leading to the inclusion of a group and exclusion of the "Other."⁵ Terms like mother-tongue, mother-land, mother-country, and mother-culture are very prevalent in the nationalistic literature.⁶ Having been repeated frequently, Female imagery becomes an important leitmotif in nationalism. While despite this emphasis, women have never been allowed to live like 'ordinary' human beings. They become symbols, the Achilles heel of nationalist patriarchy needing to be veiled, controlled, and watched. Black Consciousness as a form of ethnic nationalism represents woman as Africa in two ways: 'either a helpless victim of white rapists,' or a 'prostitute who has betrayed the black struggle by copulating with white men, and a fickle mother who throws away her starving children.'⁷ Black Consciousness with its emphasis on the concept of Mother-Africa represents this maternal symbol. There is a correlation between women and land/nations: 'across the colonial spectrum, the nation-state or its guiding principles are often imagined literally as a woman (e.g. the figures of Britannia and Mother India)' with 'a colossal statue of the motherland.' Nationalism defines a very limited and demarcated role for women and in this way restricts them morally, psychologically, and socially. 'Women in the nationalist literature are called upon as mothers or wives to reproduce the nation.'⁸ Otherwise, they will be labeled as prostitutes and perverts that have to be guided, purified, and even chastened to death. Elizabeth of *AQP* is not only the bearer of the tortures by 'soul personalities'⁹ like Dan and Sello who are 'greatly admired for being African nationalist[s]' (104), in her nightmares and real life, she is an eye-witness of innumerable murdered women as well. As an illustration of this, Elizabeth herself is a coloured orphan whose white mother is locked and commits suicide (i.e. indirectly killed by apartheid nationalists). Her mother's deed in terms of giving birth to an impure baby (neither white, nor black) is considered by the white nationalists as a deadly sin and, thus, she should be sentenced to the capital punishment.

Bessie Head in her novel represents a complex picture of women. The novel can be considered as a criticism of and a satirical comment on nationalistic representation of women. As Loomba argues, in order to fashion his self the nationalist patriarchy needs to fashion his wife 'into a fresh subservience.' Giving them titles like mother-country, they imply that a good woman is a housewife, an apolitical and docile being never contributing in ex-kitchen activity; otherwise, she will be an excommunicated prostitute. The commencement of the novel coincides with Elizabeth's "remembering" her past memories of her mother's suicide due to the rigid nationalistic system of apartheid: 'Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she having a child by a stable boy, who was a native' (16). Ironically, it is the Mother-Africa that kills Elizabeth's mother. It is due to the Afrikaners' racist segregating nationalism that Elizabeth, as a coloured, loses both her mother and her home. Mother is a protective power that Elizabeth has been both

literally (i.e. her real mother) and symbolically (i.e. her mother-country) deprived of. Shockingly, the novel depicts how Mother-Africa protects her children selectively. Using a killer as the Mother-Africa, Bessie Head not only challenges the patriarchy's definition of gender roles, but also dismisses the idea of nation as an idealized safe home, symbolically represented in the form of Medusa's vagina, for all the people. In the novel, Mother-Africa is represented in the form of Medusa, as a *femme fatale*, a Mary Magdalene (175) 'with thunderbolts by means of which tortures Elizabeth.' When Elizabeth enters the black realm¹⁰ she hopes to be behaved as other oppressed people, she is looking for a place where people live beside each other while enjoying a sense of belonging; however, Medusa, 'the surface reality of Africa,' the pitiless mother disillusiones her. South Africa's ethnic nationalism has been represented in the form of Medusa's 'abnormally constructed, like seven thousand vaginas in one' (64).¹¹ 'Seven thousand vaginas in one' indicates the highly shut-in, closed, fenced, and racist nationalism of both settlers and Africans where Elizabeth as a miscegenation is not admitted. She is neither allowed to enter the mother's womb nor has a vagina or womb to be an ideal woman a good mother and a fertile soil for nationalists:

Medusa was smiling. She had some top secret information to impart to Elizabeth. It was about her vagina... 'You haven't got anything *near* that, have you?'... Medusa said: 'Africa is troubled waters, you know. I'm a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You'll only drown here. You're not linked up to the people. You don't know any African languages' (44).

As a coloured woman she is deprived of a woman's most important prerequisite, motherhood. Furthermore, Elizabeth's mother with her heinous deed becomes a prostitute and therefore a symbol of a "bad" woman for Afrikaner's nationalism.¹² Medusa as the Mother-Africa for Black Consciousness is a complicit of Dan and Sello representatives of nationalist bourgeoisie (104). The hybrid Elizabeth is a victim of both white settler's nationalistic government and black nationalism of Black Consciousness. It is mainly, based on this bitter experience that Elizabeth herself also rejects her womanhood through rejecting her vagina and potentiality of motherhood. Due to having no mother and mother-land, she rejects the nationalist idea of the role of ideal woman represented as an ideal mother.¹³ Having suffered from the mother-country's unjust behavior towards her daughter, Elizabeth can see beneath the surface of the 'laugh of Medusa' and see the ugliness of nationalist's reality. Moreover, being mothered like being fathered means to be controlled. If the white colonizer uses paternal imagery to control the immature black man, the black nationalist also uses maternal imagery to ostracize his power through unifying the nation's children. In both cases familial imagery dominates the human relationship and gradates it. While the orphan Elizabeth seeks to find the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind.

Mother's womb for Freud is 'uncanny,' an ambivalent home to which one can retreat from the realm of reason. 'The female genital organs...this *unheimlich* place... is the entrance to the former *Heim* of all human beings.'¹⁴ The novel's protagonist is

surprisingly a motherless and wombless woman. The very term womb is an equivocal term. When Elizabeth believes that she does not have a vagina or womb, it implies that she can never feel at home and has no origin, no former *Heim*. Furthermore, womb is an 'uncanny home,' a 'Platonic cave' that does not let the insider see the ideal, and delimits her scope of view. If Elizabeth is expelled from "the abject" Mother-Africa's womb, she is also given an opportunity "to be a subject on trial and in process" to see beyond the prejudicial cave of the Black Consciousness and Black Power: 'I don't like exclusive brotherhoods for black people only. They wouldn't want you. You're not black' (132). 'I've got my concentration elsewhere. It is on mankind in general, and black people fit in there, not as special freaks and oddities, with labels like Black Power or any other rubbish of this kind' (133). In the light of exile, she sees the vanity of color and race prejudice. In contrast with other people imprisoned within the dark cave of Medusa's 'thousand in one womb' who cannot see the ideal, Elizabeth is given an opportunity to see the real source of the caved shadows:

Her decision to leave South Africa for Botswana, on a one-way exit permit, seems as much influenced by Pan-Africanism and the burgeoning Black Consciousness as by the absurdity of apartheid's racial politics.¹⁵

Nationalism, in *AQP*, is the world of black 'purity' and absolutism. Patriarchy of black nationalism, through its rigid dividing lines, asserts its Manichean worldview not only on black and nonblack but also on man and woman division. In this way, it tends to define male and female as opposites in spite of this polarization's impossibility and fatality. As Woolf believes, 'It is fatal to be a man or woman pure.'¹⁶ In nationalism as a patriarchal movement the man/woman opposition is highlighted. Women are considered as sex objects for both patriarchal nationalists and colonialists.¹⁷ They are represented as lands that must be protected from rapists, on the one hand, and be cultivated for securing the continuity of generation of that nation, on the other. Thinking is not their business. As Sello warns Elizabeth:

You're a strange woman, Elizabeth. The things you draw out of a man! You know, men don't really discuss the deep metaphysical profundities with women. Oh, they talk about love and things like that, but their deepest feelings they reserve for other men (24).

Women have no autonomy of themselves. They cannot be concerned with 'soul' issues. Even the highest of them is a docile follower of her husband. For example, Elizabeth in her dreams sees Buddha's wife. Despite being a queen, she is a housewife:

The wife of Buddha emerged from Elizabeth's person and walked towards Sello. She quietly settled herself at his feet. She was a queen of heaven who was a housekeeper. She'd travelled a journey with a man who had always deserted her in a pursuit after the things of the soul (200).

In nationalism, women are defined as ideal housewives or prostitutes. Dan's seventy-one-nice-time girls are ideal sex objects who solely live in Elizabeth's bedroom,

the seventy-one nice-time girls appeared at some stage or another to have fallen prostrate at Dan's feet, never to rise again. They mingled and moved together before Elizabeth's gaze, their one common bond being their blind adoration of Dan. They display no particular jealousy or hostility toward each other (164),

Medusa has an exquisite vagina, and Elizabeth is considered as a woman who just like her mother has no way except being a prostitute in Dan's idea. Throughout the story, in Elizabeth's dream life, Sello and Dan the two male nationalist figures deal with prostitutes, with docile sex-objects, with thoughtless creatures who blindly adore them.

He (Dan) was shown sitting in a car till dawn, in the embrace of a prostitute. His wife committed suicide. All the men were like that, they had prostitutes in the background. Half of them belonged to Dan (119).

Women are considered as apolitical figures that must be reared as good wives.

The ideal of the nation is often imagined as a woman, and the ideology of nationalism often invests the nation's core identity upon an idealized, patriarchal image of ideal womanhood. When this happens, women, as Virginia Woolf put it, effectively have no nation.¹⁸

The remarkable point is that these types of women only belong to the realm of incubus and nationalism while in her everyday life, Elizabeth does not encounter with such kinds of women. The women are all earning their livings through gardening, teaching, and farming. They work beside their men and even in the absence of them. Kenosi the silent and brilliant friend of Elizabeth, Camilla (the white snobbish woman), Mrs. Jones the old woman of the novel, Birgette the lonely girl, all are represented as active, political (positively or negatively), and productive human beings. The garden becomes a place of solidarity for all the women. Their cooperative work not only gives them activity and power (both economically and spiritually), it also deconstructs their roles as passive mother-countries. In this way they become powerful subjects with autonomous identity. The art-teacher who is a woman uses Elizabeth's cauliflower as a model of art, a still-life art. In her real life and gardening, Elizabeth comes across women as ordinary human beings with multidimensional attributes.

Elizabeth by no means is an ideal woman representative of the nationalistic concept of woman as mother-country.¹⁹ She has an analytical mind that is why Dan (the millionaire nationalist bourgeoisie) attacks her "head" the way he attacks his girls "vaginas." Bessie Head deliberately disregards the role of woman as a docile follower and passive receiver of the roles. She creates a woman, who defines her roles and constructs a new society that is by no means nationalistic. Nation reminds her of ethnic prejudices, exclusion, and marginalization. Elizabeth defies this idea through her cooperation in the development of the economy of Motabeng and her analytical mind. She refuses to be Dan's doll and on her way to realize the true concept of humanity, rejects the essential implication of race and identity. '[T]o join Dan in his nationalist paradise,' Elizabeth 'must join the rank of his seventy-one nice-time girls.' As a nice-time girl, Elizabeth would

become another object in Dan's collection of sexual talents—the only way the women are identified.²⁰

Elizabeth in the novel is a *sati*-like figure, an Indian widow.²¹ She is suppressed by both the British colonizer and the highly rigid patriarchal society. She witnesses the death of many nameless women in her nightmares and like Indian widow is doomed to die. Dan and Sello kill women like professional killers with no indignation. Elizabeth's analytical mind makes her a main target of nationalist elites since they cannot bear that a woman is able to recognize the hollow promises and threats of Dan and Sello as representatives of elite bourgeoisie: 'Her so-called analytical mind was being shattered to pieces. It depends on questions and more questions, tentative propositions, with all the time and patience in eternity to solve the riddles' (53). Elizabeth's relation to Sello is planned to be like that of a *sati* towards her husband. Elizabeth is expected to be a docile mute follower of Sello and even Dan (notice how his seventy-one-nice-time girls are sacrificed). However, at the end of the story when Sello dies she does not accept to die beside him. In this way, also, she rejects women's passivity and dependence on the patriarchal oppressors,

he sat in death, incapable of thought, feeling, movement. Elizabeth was not a part of his death, nor had she really felt that crying in the heart. She had been forcefully thrown into the state of death, alongside Sello, battered and smashed about, but she instantly sprang to life again, laughed and flung her hands into the air with a bounding sense of liberation. (100)

Despite being an outcast, a minor subaltern who is doomed to be suppressed and to follow the intellectual elite, we see that, Elizabeth, in this way, dismisses the elite/subaltern hierarchical relationship. Getting disappointed by the black world of nationalism, Elizabeth goes to her grey world where she disregards these labels in favor of ordinariness. For her, ordinary people are God-like and powerful. These people are conscious and effective not the power-maniac elites like Dan and Sello who are unaware of the potentials of the ordinariness and the 'unwritten laws.' The hollow men brought up by colonizers to support their benefits. As Macaulay demands the British government to rear 'a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in morals and in intellect'—in other words, a mimic man raised through our English School.' Mimicry repeats rather than re-presents.²²

Elizabeth of *AQP* is an anti-conventional woman who tries to resist the debilitating condition of nationalism. Disregarding woman's role as a passive symbol of good mother or prostitute, she is in search of ordinariness when a woman is a human being. Her hybridity helps her to violate the traditional borderlines of the colonizer and the nationalist's racist worldviews. She becomes an interstitial who wants to establish a 'third space,' to quote Bhabha, where every human being is a 'God' and Elizabeth is his/her prophet. Elizabeth in her life in the diaspora of Botswana begins to build a new society based on communality. Her society is an amalgamation of different races, different sexes where all the people can cooperate and build an Eden-like garden free from racial, sexual and patriarchal presuppositions.

Notes

¹ Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,' *Recasting Women*, K. Sangari and S. Vaid, eds. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989):88-126, 118, 115, qtd. in Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998) 221.

² Bessie Head, *A Question of Power* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1974).

³ Although the term has not been mentioned in the novel, it can be inferred from the indirect hints of the novel. Black Consciousness emphasized blackness in the face of white colonizers' superiority in term of their whiteness; however, the movement itself paved the way for ethnic and racist nationalism or even pan-nationalism that led to the exclusion of the 'Other.'

⁴ Black Power is an Afro-American movement of 1960's and 70's. Malcolm X. in a period was a leader of the movement. See also George M. Fredrickson's *Black Liberation, A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995).

⁵ For further information see also Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁶ It must be noted that 'mother-country,' sometimes, is the representative of the colonizer. The term metropolice means the mother city and the metropolitan is one who belongs to it. For example the Great Britain most of the time is considered as the mother-country for her subjugated countries. The very name Britannia as a female name is indicative of this fact. In this way the empire becomes a stepmother not a real one.

⁷ Dobrota Pucherova, 'A Romance That Failed: Bessie Head and Black Nationalism in 1960s South Africa,' *Research in African Literatures* 42.2 (Summer 2011): 105-124, 109. Black Consciousness' poetry is full of images of the raped woman as a symbol of Africa: 'when I lost you

you were a virgin rich with love
until they split your loins
eagle spread and raped you all
within three centuries
when they boasted their manhood.' Or:
'South Africa
how like a bitch you are
without a blush
unfeeling
look at yourself
you renegade on the original dream.' Or:
'And some bitch woman with dull brown eyes
Fries eggs and polony
For the fourth successive night,

eggs and polony for supper,
 And I don't know when last I had a woman.
 The way I feel—so sick,
 Never want a woman again.'

⁸ Loomba, 216.

⁹ From the onset of the novel, Elizabeth suffers from mental 'breakdowns.' Her life, dreams, and existence are hunted by invisible creatures, Dan and his seventy-one-nice- time girls, Sello, Medusa, and poor folks whom Elizabeth calls 'the soul personalities.'

¹⁰ As mentioned, Elizabeth is a coloured. This means that she is an outcome of white and black miscegenation. The novel represents Elizabeth's passage from South Africa to Botswana that is identifiable with her movement from the white realm of the colonialism to the black realm of the nationalism.

¹¹ The image of excrement is very dominant in Elizabeth's view about Medusa's method. This image is also related to the sense of exclusion: 'He (Sello) seemed to be disparately attached to that thing Medusa had which no other woman had.... It was abnormally constructed, like seven thousand vaginas in one.... and an atmosphere of brutal desire pervaded everything, stagnated everything, and the wrenching, miserable battle of tug-of-war stretched on and on with no end in sight. The contents of the cesspit leapt high into the air like an erupting volcano' (64).

¹² See also Caroline Rooney, *African Literature, Animism and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹³ Spivak asks: 'how can the mother be thought of as a subject, and recognized as a productive or creative source, if she has the body of a woman?' (Quite literally, the mother or surrogate mother is the bearer of another subject.)

¹⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003) 75.

¹⁵ Pucherova, 108.

¹⁶ Rooney, 133. The writer also continues, although not quite elaborated by Woolf in these terms, it is fatal to be a man pure because this is a destructive principle, that which eradicates the feminine. And it is fatal to be a woman pure because no such thing exists: if man pure is the All, woman pure is nothing.

¹⁷ In both nationalism and colonialism, women are both racially and sexually oppressed. One of the main reasons for this conduct of the nationalist patriarchy is his wish to rehabilitate his stature in the face of the colonizing patriarchy. The colonizer unmans the colonized man through seeing him as a 'boy.' For more details see also Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.

¹⁸ Robert J. C. Young, *Post-colonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 63-64.

¹⁹ Negritude has been attacked also for its representation of women. In particular, the images of 'mother Africa' and an idealized African womanhood have been challenged. For example, Omofolabo Ajayi points out that:

Although Senghor's objective is to vindicate Africa's compassion and its people-centered cultures, his work unmistakably echoes the colonialist's denigration of African civilization to justify colonizing and exploiting the people and their resources. It is within this haze of schism and assimilation that Negritude constructs its image of an idealized woman and the archetypal Mother of Africa. Pal Ahluwalia, *Politics and Post-colonial Theory: African Inflections* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 31.

²⁰ Clare Counihan, 'The Hell of Desire: Narrative, Identity and Utopia in *A Question of Power*,' *Research in African Literature* 42.1 (Spring 2011): 68-86, 74.

²¹ For further information see also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?: Speculations on Widow Sacrifice', *Wedge* 7.8 (Winter/Spring 1985): 120-30.

²² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 87-88. That is why we witness 'cosmic pessimism,' disappointed promise, failed republicanism, continuity of dictatorship this time by racist nationalist who look for purity of blood and color.

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