

Binary Oppositions: The Structure of Power in *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head

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ABSTRACT

A Question of Power by Bessie Head is a fictional autobiographical novel that deals with power relationships among characters in a pattern of a binary system. The theory of binary opposition views that one word exists as a supreme authority of power and another word represents a powerless opponent in a pair of binary words. This idea suggests that the position of power is unchangeable but this notion of the binary theory is questioned and challenged in the novel *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head. The concern of this paper is to demonstrate that how the position of power is transformed and interchanged and how a dominated or powerless opponent can take over the place of authority in a binary pair of words. So, this paper's thesis is not only proving that the position of power switches but also to claim that a victim of powerful authority can achieve power living in powerlessness or in oppression.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature, binary opposition, structuralism, power relationship, *A Question of Power*

INTRODUCTION

A Question of Power by Bessie Head is a fictional autobiographical novel that deals with power relationships among characters in a pattern of a binary system. Binary opposition is a concept of structuralist theory used to find out the denotative meaning of words in a pair which are opposite in nature and there is a power relationship between two words, for instance, God/Satan, good/evil, black/white, weak/strong and so on. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, "the binary opposition is the means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined in reciprocal determination with another term, as in binary code." (Fogarty, S 2005). The theory of binary oppositions views that one word exists as a supreme authority of power and another word represents a powerless opponent in a pair of binary words. This idea suggests that the position of power is unchangeable but this notion of the binary theory is questioned and challenged in the novel *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head.

The concern of this paper is to demonstrate that how the position of power is transformed and interchanged and to show how a dominated or powerless opponent can take over the place of authority in a binary pair of words. So, the thesis of this paper is not only proving

that the position of power switches but also to claim that a victim of powerful authority can achieve power living in powerlessness or in oppression. In the first part, this paper will discuss how the position of power switches in a binary system and in the second part; it will explore how a powerless opponent can attain the position of power living in powerlessness.

The power-switching in a binary system:

Though there are many binary words displayed in this novel, some pairs of words are chosen from the text to observe how power switches between two opponents in a binary. For example, the two characters, Dan and Sello represent God/Satan or good/evil binary in this novel. Though they both appear as God/good at the very beginning, they turn into satanic characters later on. Sello at first appears to be a good monk and Elizabeth, the central character accepts him as her friend. She compares Sello with Indian God Rama, Krishna, and Buddha. She becomes a follower of him spiritually saying "[...] Sello in his work, as the prophet of mankind." (25) and in practically, she finds him as a doctor as Bessie Head writes, "She was entirely dependent on Sello for direction and equally helpless, like a patient on his doctor for survival." (35). This God-like Sello later is shown to possess evil qualities to

oppress Elizabeth psychologically. In his confession, Sello says that he has killed several women in past and he was a follower of Lucifer: "I will never let you see it because I know what power does. If the things of the soul are really a question of power, then anyone in possession of the power of the spirit could be Lucifer" (p. 199 - original italics). On the other hand, when Dan appears for the first time, he seems to be a good director of the universe like a supreme God. In Bessie Head's word, "Dan was a much better manager of the universe than Sello" (25) but again, we can discover Dan as a sexually perverted person who raped many black women and torments Elizabeth physically and sexually. Thus, Dan and Sello belong to the position of God and the same time they turn into satanic characters. So, their position of authority is shifted in a binary system. Again, the characters of Sello and Medusa represent the binary of male/female or master/slave power relationships. The readers can assume that as a Godlike being, Sello is superior to Medusa but we can rediscover Medusa as commander of him and Sello as "her second in command". (62). In Elizabeth's words, "you know Sello? He has a terrible Medusa hidden away in his subconscious." (58). It suggests that Sello is subservient to Medusa. Here, male power loses its agency to female power and thus the idea of binary power relationship is questioned. Moreover, we can observe power switches in God/Human binary too in this novel. Elizabeth says, "There are several hundred thousand people who are God." (31) and "Most of the Gods are born among them (white people)." (29). Through these statements Bessie Head negates the power of spiritual God and she attributes God-power in human beings because, to her, human gods are more powerful than that of single divine God.

Achieving Power in Powerlessness:

If we explain the central character; Elizabeth and her life experience then we will understand that how power can be achieved being a victim of power. Elizabeth herself represents many binary partners at the same time. She is an exile, a binary of native. She is an oppressed and marginalized female, the binary of male patriarchy and she is black as a binary of white people. Although she has to play a role as multiple binary oppositions, her most difficult struggle lies in insanity/sanity binary. Elizabeth leaves her country during apartheid because of racial political violence and comes to Botswana for her new settlement but here she faces the native as her new oppressors as an exile. She experiences mental breakdown and goes insane. After having her first mental breakdown, Elizabeth is asked to submit a certificate of sanity by the principal of school but she refuses and leaves her teaching job. It's her first reaction of insanity what eventually challenges the sane world. Neglecting principal's request, she displays her physical bold approach against the male domination for the first time and her insanity plays a good role in this case. Living under poverty, pressure and insanity Elizabeth reaches to the understanding of the real world day by day. Losing her job, she involves

in a gardening project where she gets acquaintance and interaction with the community of people. She also discovers her leadership qualities during her work in the garden. Though she has to face her mental turmoil in every night because of her hallucination, she successfully continues her effort of gardening with the new community. So, gardening simultaneously symbolizes her power of productivity and helps her to links with reality. So, she starts coming out from her alienated and captivated single life. It gives her opportunity mixing with the community for the first time as an exile woman in Botswana what she could not do in her entire life. This indicates that Elizabeth gains the social power to live in the society as a human being. Leading an insane life with mental breakdowns, she finds her reconciliation in the end.

Dan and Sello both represent the power structure of patriarchy. Their media of dominance is sometimes physical, sometimes mental or sexual but mostly manipulative. Though Elizabeth is used by both Sello and Dan for their patriarchy purposes and they almost destroy her, but she does not allow them to deceive her in the end. Dan and Sello's plan is to keep her in an isolated world and to dominate her until her death but she comes out from her alienated and segregated life and finds herself into the process of healing, which she eventually achieves in the garden project. She works in the garden; produces vegetables and make friends with her co-workers. Thus she destroys her inner beings; Dan, Sello, and Medusa who imprison her into a segregated world but she gets her mental freedom coming out of it. By destroying these three characters, Elizabeth negates the power of patriarchy and regains her mental and physical power. Thus, the mechanism of power is questioned and Elizabeth associates its effect with madness.

Elizabeth gains knowledge when she joins to the community life and that knowledge brings her close to the real world. She achieves the ability to adapt herself to the social and political changes occur in the contemporary African continent. After having a couple of heavy mental breakdowns, she becomes more suicidal but even then she does not commit suicide rather she finds her joy of freedom in the end of the novel. She understands the value of her life as she says, "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (206). This understanding of life is achieved through her journey of insanity and thus insanity ensures power for Elizabeth.

Moreover, as *A Question of Power* is a fictional autobiography, we can say that living such a horrible life, Bessie Head has attained her mental strength to refuse being an object in the power game enacted by Sello and Dan and begin to construct her own power by writing it down. Madness is not only an illness for Head but also a source of criticism. In fact, insanity was viewed as both blessings and curse in ancient time too as Chabwera writes in her essay, "In ancient Greece, madness was seen as both a blessing and a curse. As a

curse, it was expressed in epilepsy, mania, melancholia or paranoia, while as a blessing it was believed to bring gifts such as prophecy and poetry” (Chabwera, 64). In case of Bessie head, it works as one kind of blessings which eventually helps her to write a famous fictional autobiography based on her mental illness. She uses madness as a tool in her narrative to raise questions about power structure of patriarchal society, social and political issues of apartheid scar in South Africa. She also rebukes religious beliefs and practices observed by South African people. In her insanity, she questions about the existence of God. She argues that if there is a true God then he would be able to save thousands of black people humiliated by white people during apartheid. As it did not happen, she depicts white men as gods who own the ultimate power to control the world. It is her insanity what makes Bessie Head able to argue against established rules and disciplines in her society. As we see, this novel is a symbol of power for Bessie Head which is written with the association of the spirit of madness. It proves that anyone can achieve power living in powerlessness. So, living in oppressions is not always powerless settlement rather it is a process to attain the position of power which is contrary to the binary opposition theory.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates two important issue; one, the position of power is not static rather its interchangeable between two words belong to the binary oppositions and two, a victim of powerful authority can achieve power through a journey into powerlessness. There are several limitations to claim these arguments because the critics can claim that insanity or mental illness gives Elizabeth or Head to survive in this world avoiding her possible suicidal death. So, she attains the power of survival or the

power of resistance, but she does not gain the power of domination which remains in the hands of oppositions. We can refer Foucault’s thought on power to argue this as he says, “Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere”. (*The History of Sexuality*, 92). This statement suggests that power can be produced by anyone from anywhere and Bessie Head produces it from insanity no matter what type of power it is. Her power of resistance or survival turns into the most significant power in the end of the novel when she writes, “A peaceful meditative privacy settled on her mind. Her painful, broken nerve-ends quietly knit together. She, for the first time in three years, embraced the solitude of the night with joy.” and “It was a gesture of belonging”. (206).

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