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Bessie Head's A Question of Power: The Journey Through Disintegration to Wholeness

by LINDA SUSAN BEARD

AMIDST THE compartmentalization, fragmentation and preoccupation with taxonomy that characterize and undermine life in Southern Africa, Bessie Head, in *A Question of Power*, asks three important metaphysical questions. They are: what is the whole (and what constitutes wholeness); how does one achieve it; who or what is "God." The answers to the first two questions are provided in the opening pages of the novel. There, Elizabeth offers us a retrospective overview of her "journey into hell,"¹ a journey which she then chronicles in the ensuing narrative. But we have to experience her inner journey before we can begin to understand her conclusions. Thus, what is central to this novel is the process of disintegration through which Elizabeth discovers her own wholeness. The realm Elizabeth explores throughout that process is a religious one. She immerses us, beginning with the epigraph from Lawrence's "God," in a world peopled by the holy ones of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and classical mythology. Thus, the hallmark of Elizabeth's integration is the assertion on the last page of the novel: "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (p. 206). Through religious symbolism and allusion, Head ultimately defines the whole as the composite of *all* the fragments: the "normal and the abnormal" (p. 15), the "height of goodness" and the "depth of evil" (p. 36), the "demon" and the "goddess" (p. 43), both God and Satan (p. 161). Elizabeth translates this whole into political terms and calls it "the brotherhood of man" (p. 158), the whole of whom constitute God. "There is no God like ordinary people" (p. 197).

Elizabeth (for whom no last name is ever provided) is an exile in Botswana. Leaving behind her a disastrous marriage, Elizabeth immigrated to Botswana to look for a teaching position. To do this she is forced to sign an exit permit, thus permanently cutting herself off from her South African home. From the beginning, however, Elizabeth has been somewhat set apart as the daughter of a white woman and her "stable boy" (p. 16). With the institutionalization of her natural mother, Elizabeth is raised by a Coloured woman until age thirteen, and then by a missionary on the lookout for surfacing symptoms of genetic

1. Bessie Head, *A Question of Power* (London: Heinemann, 1974), p. 19. Subsequent references are to this edition.

insanity. Elizabeth's background, therefore, automatically places her, as she recognizes all too well, outside the usual. Her mystical experiences with Sello and Dan and their avatars only reaffirm for her her strangeness. "I don't think people who conduct telepathic relationships with other people are normal anyway, but I never thought it would happen to me," she confesses (pp. 57-58). What constitute her extraordinary ordinariness, however, are the qualities of soul she ascribes to Sello on the opening page of the novel: "the kind of humility which made him feel, within, totally unimportant, totally free from his own personal poisons—pride and arrogance and egoism of the soul" (p. 11). As one of the many spirits in her visions confides to Elizabeth, hers is a "heart of compassion" (p. 33). Moreover, the prize that Elizabeth feels responsible for earning in her life is "the brotherhood of man" (p. 37).

Beginning with the novel's epigraph from D. H. Lawrence's poem, "God," Head warns the reader of the danger of "disintegrative knowledge" which pulls one away from "God" and towards "the abyss." This is the fundamental polarity on which the narrative rests and which, moreover, Head will use to dismantle the myth of polarity itself. In allegorical fashion, Sello and Dan seem to represent the extremes of goodness and evil in this anatomy of a nervous breakdown and journey through the underworld. Such neat categories, however, are illusory, as Elizabeth learns, in particular, in her relationship with Sello. Both Sello and Dan drive her to the brink of psychological disintegration, but with different ends. Dan would annihilate her; Sello would destroy her illusions. Nevertheless, each would strip her of something, as the poor in the beginning of the novel "turned to Elizabeth and permanently stripped her of any vesture garments she might have acquired" (p. 32). That is a mimic foreshadowing of the "katabolism" to which Lawrence refers in "God." Sello the monk, as Elizabeth realizes retrospectively, could have warned her: "Here I am, about to strip myself of my spectacular array of vesture garments as they said I ought to, and to show you my own abyss. There are so many terrible lessons you have to learn this time; that the title God, in its absolute all-powerful form, is a disaster to its holder, the all-seeing eye is the greatest temptation. It turns a man into a wild debaucher, a maddened and wilful persecutor of his fellow men" (pp. 36-37). But he does not. Even at this point in the narrative, we are unsure as to what it is Sello's statements might refer. It is essential to the efficacy of the whole experience that Elizabeth and we do not understand. Elizabeth must be gradually denuded of any absolutes she holds. These are the illusions to which Sello will address himself. It is the absolutes themselves which comprise the dangerous "disintegrative knowledge" about which we are initially warned. The fundamental absolute to be dismantled, of course, is the myth of polarity.

Dan is a "power-maniac," one who "never saw people, humanity,

compassion, tenderness" (p. 19). He is a "warrior" (p. 103) with "a terrible will" who makes use of "magic rituals and all kinds of tricks" (p. 199). Elizabeth introduces us to him in the opening pages of Part Two: "He knew exactly what he wanted. He knew exactly what he was doing. He knew exactly who was going to die and how he was going to pick up the thirty pieces of silver at the end of the job. He was in it for money. The things of the soul were the greatest money-spinning business on earth. Treasures in heaven could be turned into real cash" (p. 103). The language used here to describe Dan is an excellent complement to the description given. With short, rapid-fire declarative sentences, Head underscores the absoluteness of Dan's perspective on the world. The allusion to Judas' betrayal of Jesus reinforces the negative. A great debaucher, Dan is symbolized by a giant phallus. The terrible orgiastic scenes he orchestrates with a gallery of seventy-one women illustrate that exploitative power. This "king of sex" (p. 168) and "king of women" (p. 149) enacts his copulative dramas in front of Elizabeth as a way of asserting her inferiority both as a woman and as a Coloured South African. Dan operates a metaphoric phonograph and a cinema which strive to reinforce inferiority in Elizabeth's own mind. His final assault is an attempt to coax her into psycho-sexual self-destruction and physical suicide. His "was not a creative function. It was death" (p. 19).

Opposing him in this apparent twentieth century allegory is Sello, "the white-robed monk" (p. 23) who supernaturally appears to Elizabeth. In the opening pages of the novel Elizabeth observes that she and Sello are "twin souls with closely-linked destinies and the same capacity to submerge other preoccupations in a pursuit after the things of the soul" (pp. 11-12). Sello is a holy man; he is also an ancient one. He is the Krishna and Rama of the poor of India (p. 32). He is Buddha. He is the alter ego of "the Father." He confesses to Elizabeth: "I'm very old, you know, in my soul. I have completed a billion cycles in my destiny" (p. 34). This is confirmed at the novel's end. Sello "had the long history of the human race in his heart, as he was Old Father Time" (p. 201). It is Sello, moreover, who rescues Elizabeth from Dan's mortal attacks.

But Head's tale is not a simple one. To begin with, "Sello" is a composite made up of several parts; Sello has numerous avatars. In addition to Sello the monk and the numerous other holy manifestations of Sello, there is "the living man" (p. 27) who is "a crop farmer and cattle breeder" (p. 28) and "wonderful family man" (p. 29). This Sello is an actual resident of Motabeng; from the novel's beginning to its end, however, the reader can not be sure whether or not Elizabeth ever has any real contact with this Sello. The reader's ability to really test the accuracy of Elizabeth's perception of the Motabeng crop farmer is severely limited by the fact that the narrator *is* undergoing a nervous breakdown. "Her so-called analytic mind was being shattered to pieces" (p. 52). Elizabeth "was not sure if she were awake or asleep"; "often after that

the dividing line between dream perceptions and waking reality was to become confused" (p. 22). But there is yet another side to Sello. This one is a "replica" of the monk "except that the man was clothed in a brown suit" (p. 37). Accompanying him is Medusa, who also has a holy alter ego—the "wife" of Sello the monk. Medusa is both powerful and sensuous. Sello permits her to taunt and to wound Elizabeth with "a terrible thunderbolt [which] struck her heart" (p. 39). This bolt shatters Elizabeth "into a thousand fragments" (p. 43). Moreover, Medusa, like Dan's women, mocks Elizabeth's femaleness. The goddess jeers at Elizabeth's inferior sexual prowess and invites Elizabeth to compare her vagina with Medusa's.

Elizabeth muses on the duality of Sello's character during an early hospitalization for her breakdown. Shortly after the nurse administers a shot, Sello again visits Elizabeth. He takes her to "a deep cesspit . . . filled almost to the brim with excreta" (p. 53). After that, "He caught hold of her roughly behind the neck and pushed her face near the stench. It was so high, so powerful, that her neck nearly snapped off her head at the encounter. She whimpered in fright. She heard him say fiercely: 'She made it. I'm cleaning it up. Come, I'll show you what you made'" (p. 53). Then Sello transforms himself into "an enormous sky-bird" while Elizabeth asks herself and us "was there ever a man whose heights and depths were so extreme they were totally disassociated from each other? . . ." (p. 53).

Sello is not alone, however, in possessing contradictory avatars. Dan, the "power-maniac," is likewise composed of other selves. To some degree, he and Sello are twin-souls. There seems to be little difference between the brown-suited Sello's treatment of Elizabeth and the attacks aimed at her by Dan. A few pages earlier than the scene described above, Dan had announced to Elizabeth that he and Sello were "friends who shared everything, including visions . . ." (p. 46). Part Two of the novel is, in many ways, a reenactment of the visions of Part One, interpreted the second time through Dan's perspective. In that respect, Dan and Sello share the fundamental material. At one point, Dan illustrates this dramatically. "Dan was clothed in a soft, white cloth, resembling the one Sello wore. He had on a pair of sandals. . . . He folded his hands softly in front of him, his face wore a sad, still expression: 'You see,' it said, 'That's the essence of me. In my soul I am the monk . . .'" (p. 115). Part of the reason behind Dan's recreation of visions earlier presented by Sello is "to show how deeply he had been involved all along in Sello's activities" (p. 119). The two supernatural souls are not, in fact, completely distinct from one another. In fact, the similarity between them only reinforces the lesson that Sello wants Elizabeth to learn: "that the title God, in its absolute all-powerful form, is a disaster to its holder . . ." (pp. 36-37). At the same time, their completely contradictory roles underscore the fallacy of absolutes, too. Each interprets

the truth according to his own absolute. (Sello, of course, qualifies his version of the story with the assistance of his brown-suited avatar.)

The positing of absolutes has, to a great extent, accounted for the evil and misery in the world. This is the significance behind Sello's discussions of the history of the past. The people he introduces as present day "Gods" to Elizabeth "turned out on observation to be ordinary, practical, sane people, seemingly their only distinction being that they had consciously concentrated on spiritual earnings" (p. 31). These are in sharp contrast, however, to those who "brought about dark times" (p. 34): "looming, monstrous personalities they called 'the Gods' . . . personalities whose deeds were hideous and yet who assumed powerful positions, presumably because they were in possession of thunderbolts" (p. 140).

Sello and Dan *are* involved in an allegorical battle and Elizabeth is in the center of the power struggle. At the same time, however, Head is not writing a tale about the conflict between an absolute good and evil. In fact, it is Elizabeth's perception of Sello and Dan in absolute terms that contributes most to her confusion and pain. Goodness and evil are interspersed throughout. That is the significance behind the allusions in the narrative to King David, the psalmist-adulterer-murderer and to the Christian Ku Klux Klan.

Both Sello and Dan lead Elizabeth into an abyss. Thus, they share a common bond in their roles as destroyers. Sello's call to Elizabeth, however, has death as its means, but not its end. Dan inadvertently helps Elizabeth to understand the whole by teaching her the lesson of opposites. ("He was one of the greatest teachers she'd worked with, but he taught by default—he taught iron and steel self-control through sheer, wild, abandoned debauchery . . ." [p. 202].) Sello's target is the illusion of absolutes—and the positing of Dan and Sello as strictly polar entities is one example of that illusion.

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

Elizabeth's involvement shortly thereafter in the Motabeng Secondary School's agricultural project is not, as it first seems, a disconnected tangential thesis on crop rotation in Botswana. This is the fertile ground where an alternate to Elizabeth's polar vision can be worked through. This is the place where Elizabeth comes "into contact with the wonderful strangeness of human nature" (p. 72). Her encounter with the Danish "Rattle-tongue," Camilla, is at first, only a continuation of absolute definitions. "Elizabeth looked at her with anguish. Human relationships with her were starkly black and white. She hated in a final way and loved in a final way. She had spent all her life running away from the type of white person like Camilla" (p. 77). She veers back and forth about her attitude toward the Dane: "one minute she really loved the half-mad woman, the next, she loathed her . . ." (p. 79). Elizabeth is not yet freed from a need to define in absolute terms. "She was to . . . come to an odd conclusion about Danes—they were either very, very bad or so impossibly God-like that they out-stripped the rest of mankind in humanity" (p. 80). This is still the hyperbolic valuation that we see in Elizabeth's definition of God, above. Such polar perspectives account to a large extent for the pain of Elizabeth's disintegrative experience. She stretches herself between extremes and is therefore very vulnerable to the question asked by one of Dan's recordings: "What sort of gymnast was she supposed to be, so overstrained between concepts of good and evil?" (p. 109).

Elizabeth's salvational encounter with the human and mystical Birgette is the beginning of the revision of her thinking. She tells the young agricultural volunteer:

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

In the narrative, Head devotes much space to the discussion of crop rotation and irrigation. We encounter, in effect, a short treatise on vegetable gardening. All of this is, however, part of Elizabeth's metaphysical education. It all works toward "the total de-mystifying of all illusions" (p. 86). The dismantling of those illusions and the literal and symbolic disintegration of Elizabeth's psyche are all preparations for the redemptive role she will play. As the Virgin crushed the head of the serpent, Elizabeth's ordinariness will defeat the power-maniac who has wed his own absolutism to his "will to evil" (p. 199).

It is because of her mystical gifts and her own special calling that Sello initially selected Elizabeth to do battle with the diabolical power-maniac. Sello explains that special vocation:

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

Elizabeth is a new messianic figure. To the degree that she and Sello share a divinity of soul, they are indeed soul-mates as she perceived earlier. Dan is her potential soul-mate. (In one of her nightmare experiences in Part Two, Elizabeth notes of her torturer: "The person wasn't asserting evil. He was saying he had the potential to be evil . . ." [p. 116].) Dan is what Elizabeth could become if she retained her beliefs in absolutes. That is why Sello thought Elizabeth "needed the insight into absolute evil" (p. 200). That is the reason, too, behind Sello's decision not to let Elizabeth see the incredible power she does possess. "If the things of the soul are really a question of power, then anyone in possession of power of the spirit could be Lucifer," he explains to her (p. 199). In fact, it is the overwhelming power of love and of Elizabeth's simplicity that defeats Dan's arrogance. Sello clarifies the reasoning behind the choice of a messianic Elizabeth at the conclusion of the novel:

"There are so many layers of awareness. . . . I showed him your surface layer, the perfection of your service to mankind. Bring an inferior into contact with a superior; he jumps on you and tramples you into the dust. He saw only what he thought was the milksop monk; it was so soft and tender it aroused all his savage, brutal passions. They go wild when they see something helpless, defenceless. . . . There's nothing I can do about the filth of his mind and heart, but I saw a way of taking away his power, through you. You were created with ten billion times more power than he. It was done at a time of desperation, and our weapon of war against the power-maniacs was concealed behind the facade of a laughing clown. You will never know your power." (p. 199)

It is Elizabeth's apparent powerlessness which dismantles Dan's own power. The combat itself, however, has necessitated a systematic inner breakdown for Elizabeth. The literal nervous breakdown for which she is hospitalized is accompanied by a deliberate disintegrative process throughout. That is the cost of the redemption Elizabeth brings; that is the price of prophecy. Elizabeth experiences the death that is an intrinsic part of the mystery of salvation. In one of her early encounters with the "vast company of [holy] people" (p. 31), she recognizes that common bond between them. "They had still, sad, fire-washed faces. The meaning of the stillness, sadness and intensity of expression did not reach her till some time later, when Sello exposed a detail of his past. It was death. It was the expression of people who had been killed and killed again in one cause after another for the liberation of mankind. She thought at that time: 'why, an absolute title has been shared. There are several hundred thousand people who are 'God' '" (p. 31). The death-to-life cycle is reinforced over and over again in this novel. That, indeed, is the mys-

tery at the heart of the Osiris-Isis-Horus myth to which the narrative so often alludes. At the heart of the disintegrative process is the seed for Elizabeth's soul-evolution. She is dying in order to become God and the prophet of God.

Elizabeth's experiences have a political as well as a metaphysical component. Through the choice of this doubly exiled South African, another compartmentalized absolute is destroyed. "I've got my concentration elsewhere," she explains to Dan when he accuses her of not being black. "It's in mankind in general, and black people fit in there, not as special freaks and oddities outside the scheme of things, with labels like Black Power or any other rubbish of that kind." She continues: "Any heaven, like a Black-Power heaven, that existed for a few individuals alone was pointless and useless" (p. 133). Elizabeth looks beyond the fragment to the whole. That whole comprises not only the "demon" and the "goddess" (p. 43) but also the several trinities: Father, Son, Holy Spirit; the Hindu trimurti; Sello, Dan and Elizabeth.

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