

**MADNESS IN BESSIE HEAD'S NOVELS: A  
PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF A QUESTION  
OF POWER AND MARU**

---

**KYUNGUN, FRANK**

Department of Educational Foundations and General  
Studies

Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University, Makurdi

---

***Abstract***

*This paper is a study of madness in Bessie Head's novels, A Question of Power and Maru. Employing Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis which focuses on the treatment of mental disorders by recognising the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious mind, the study shows how Head uses the madness as a strategic tool for revealing the evils of apartheid in South Africa. Head's novels reflect the problematic situation of children born by South Africans in the apartheid era and the social and political pressures they experienced, which predisposed them to psychological trauma. It is against this backdrop that the author highlights madness as an ingredient necessary for humanity to come to terms with the value of life and self-acceptance. The research found that there is a complex link between living under oppressive, traumatising social and political conditions such as the blacks in South Africa experienced in the apartheid era and a subculture of madness and that madness is a purgative cauldron for inner psychic conflicts. The study thus concludes that the hope for a free, just and prosperous post-apartheid South Africa lies in a combination of efforts made by both South African and non-South African citizens in a global context to right the deep rooted negative effects of racial oppression.*

**Keywords:** Madness, Bessie Head, Psychoanalytic Reading, *Power* and *Maru*

### **Introduction**

The preoccupation of literature in any society is determined by the events in that society. After all, literature's basic function is to monitor and artistically portray society's inadequacies in order to influence or change it. Since literature does not exist in isolation, black South African literature is a direct reflection of the black experience of apartheid, its aftermath in that country and the people's reactions to it. Using the prism of psychoanalysis, this study interprets the presentation of madness in Bessie Head's novels as reflection of an oppressive social structure based on racial discrimination.

The concretisation of the apartheid institution and its impact on the black population brought South Africa to the fore of world attention. Apartheid as a racial policy had its origin in the discrimination perpetrated against the original black owners of the land. Right from the early 1800's when the first set of Dutch settlers set their feet on black soil, their mission was to oppress, subjugate and deprive blacks of their land. This land was the major means of livelihood of South Africans and to which they had a great attachment. This dispossession, according to Dambudzo Marechera, was carried out in an awesome, fearful and overwhelming manner (89). Several years after, the British took over the whole area of South Africa as a protectorate. When South Africa was granted independence, the British handed over the means of administration and control of the land to Dutch

settlers. Dambudzo Marechera emphasised that in 1949, the apartheid policy was made into law by Dutch nationalists who came to power. Consequently, it became a subject of protest and resistance by blacks from all fronts including social, economic, political and literary activists. Black South Africans forged a force of resistance against the overbearing influence of the Dutch.

To the blacks and liberal writers, the apartheid policy in its entirety was a negation of life. The system ensured that white supremacy was preached and enforced in all spheres of life. The intention was to keep the Blackman and other coloured people permanently under deprivation and subjugation through violent laws. It is against this backdrop that a renowned South African nationalist, civil right activist and poet, Serotes Wally Mangane, posits that: “The abnormality of apartheid lies in its having imposed on us a condition which requires that as human beings we had to reject life so that we can accept life. We have not known how to live as human beings” (cited in Mzamane 96). By this, Mangane opines that until apartheid denies black humanity, the fight against apartheid is total and capable of costing one's life as the supreme sacrifice leading to eventual freedom.

The racist government created the apartheid environment through various acts and laws, the most notorious being the pass laws. Generally, the pass law was the raw symbol of black oppression; the most unrefined signpost of dehumanisation. As a result of its rigid and brutal enforcement, the black man ceased to be a man, lost his identity and was reduced to a simple book called “Pass”. This book of identity permitted

blacks to move freely from place to place. It became the essential guarantor of their movement as they carried it about. His survival endangered by the activities of the white oppressor; the black man had no alternative than to rise in resistance. Since no black person was spared the oppression, the entirety of the black community: men, women, children, old and young, were all involved in the resistance efforts to demobilise and dismantle apartheid. This led to violent clashes between non-whites and the racist authorities; the result was a catastrophic destruction of property and great loss of lives such as the June 16, 1976 Soweto Students Uprising (*South African History Online, 21-May-2013*) where the security forces tried unsuccessfully to disperse the crowd with teargas, then fired live bullets directly into them which resulted in great loss of lives. Helplessly, the students, in self defence, pelted the police with stones.

The violence that pervaded the South African landscape created psychological and social stress which pushed citizens to the precipice of madness. Thus, Black writers in South Africa reflected these in their creative works. In addition to capturing the struggle for indigenous South African liberation, they also produced black protest works that exactly reflected their state of being. The immense influence of the physical experience of life under apartheid on black writings created the body known as protest literature while reflecting changes in the tempo of the struggle. Denied of other means of self-expression, black writers became the voice of the people, by highlighting their problems and proffering a way forward as seen in Bessie Head's *A Question*

of *Power*. Consequently, this brought her into direct conflict with the apartheid government which was a symbol of oppression to all blacks and white liberals.

In treating the subject of madness, this paper undertakes a critical examination of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and *Maru*. Since there is a significant relationship between the text and its cultural and historical reality, an investigation of the historical location of the text is brought into focus. It is recognised in this background that Head's characters are products of their environment, so their attitudes must be viewed within the context of their world.

### **Review of Related Literature**

As a modern concept, the term madness is construed with varied meanings and interpretations. In his book *What is Madness?* Darian Leader, a renowned psychoanalyst, describes madness as “a psychic complex causality or even of an interior life... an ethical reversal” (11) based on illusion, a belief that internal life can be objectively measured. He explains that no one can be classified as sane; that madness is part of each and everyone. More importantly, he says, “what looks like psychic breakdown may instead be the result of a collapse in the carefully nurtured delusional system which has allowed the psychotic to live in relative peace both with the world and with her or himself” (109).

Mental illness affects people of all ages, races, cultures, and socio-economic classes. However, experiences of mental illness often differ greatly depending on one's culture or social group. In most societies, mental illness carries a

substantial stigma, or mark of shame. The mentally ill are often blamed for bringing on their own illnesses, and others may see them as victims of bad fate, religious and moral transgression, or witchcraft. The variation in behavioural norms does not mean, however, that definitions of mental illness are necessarily incompatible across cultures.

Madness has been a complex concept in literature, literary theory and psychology. In fiction, for instance, it can be used in different ways to complicate the novel, to make the character unreliable, hyper-sensitive or highly conscious, and to challenge the dividing lines of normal/abnormal, reason/unreason, and social norms. Bernaertset. al state that, "When a narrator or one of the main characters is affected by insanity, this leads to certain tensions and instabilities in the narrative, to use the terms with which James Phelan specifies narrative progression" (86). So, madness in literary works manifests certain characteristics as stratagem aimed at creating or dousing off tension in such manner that the author targets a particular social ill in order to satirise, deride, amuse or correct some practices.

In contrast to the rationality of earlier critique of the psychiatric and social forces that drive women mad, the 1970s introduced a new approach to madness. In novels such as Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), and *The Four-Gated City* (1969), madness was seen as a liberation or spiritual quest. Madness was no longer seen as destructive, but visionary or an experimentation with altered

states of consciousness to discover a potential power beneath madness.

Several critics have analysed the representation of madness in the works of prominent nineteenth-century writers, among them Barbara Rigney (1978). Rigney suggests that in *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte correlates chastity with sanity. She argues that Bronte continually associates sexuality with death throughout the novel, emphasising the message that a woman will lose her identity and therefore her sanity by engaging in sexual activity. Edgar Allan Poe's depictions of madness are well known, yet the means by which Poe brings forth the almost tactile quality in his work are less frequently studied. Leonard Engel looked closely at *The Fall of the House of Usher* focusing in particular on the way in which Poe uses the language and imagery of enclosure to follow the narrator on his journey from reason to insanity (23-31).

Gemma Wiseman in *Reflections on Madness, Literature and History*, claims that history and literature are riddled with examples of madness. From leaders to the “little people,” from writers to personas in their writing; there are those who dare to be “madly” different. She observes:

Madness is that jagged, ragged grey space between the perceived, level plain of reason and what could be asylum bound insanity. It is a social perception, measured by socially “healthy” norms. To blur the boundaries further, there are levels of madness, ranging from amusing, harmless eccentricities and oddities to disturbing, manic, ego and passion driven behaviour

patterns. (8)

However, levels and forms of madness are not exclusive to the realms of history. It also existed among literary writers. Included among “the mad ones” is the flamboyant 19<sup>th</sup> century playwright, Oscar Wilde who starred in the social set, was imprisoned and was recorded as “exploding” when his beloved China blue tea set went missing from his university room. Others like Coleridge, in a moment of self-induced madness (opium), created the well-known, poetic masterpiece “Xanadu”. But the greatest evidence of “madness” must be Jonathan Swift's satire, “Modest Proposal” (1789), when the narrator recommends that the Irish can breed their children as food for the rich; the rich implied here being English landlords that held forth at that time, as a solution to poverty.

Flora Veit-Wild's *Writing Madness: Borderlines of the Body in African Literature* follows in her study the transformation from colonial narratives projecting settlers' horror of the 'heart of darkness' onto the African body and mind, to African writers' interaction with these narratives and their own projections of what constitutes madness in a colonial and postcolonial world. She adopted a unique perspective, or series of perspectives, based on the notion of 'madness' – perceived madness, madness as device, actual madness, and the world as mad. She examines madness as exemplified in the writings of Dambudzo Marachera, Sony Labou Tansi, Bessie Head, Rebeka Njau and Tsitsi Dangaremba; however her work falls short as she goes to provide parameters for comparing these African writers with those of



any other continent.

Having thus established the prevalence and relevance of madness in literature and looked at various views of the concept among writers and critics, we shall now focus on the theoretical framework.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopts the psychoanalytical theory. Psychoanalysis, as a branch of psychology, focuses on treating mental disorders by recognising the relationship between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. Freud first stumbled across psychoanalysis with the case of Anna, a patient of his mentor, Dr. Joseph Breuer. Anna, at the age of 21, developed unexplained symptoms such as paralysis, spasm, inability to speak her native language, and hallucinations, and she was diagnosed with hysteria. Breuer and Freud realised that, when hypnotised, Anna could vividly recall the painful repressed memories that caused her symptoms. After understanding those memories, she was able to overcome some of her symptoms of hysteria. Thus, the case of Anna helped spur the development of psychoanalysis.

To fully understand psychoanalysis, one must have a firm grasp of the conscious and the unconscious. The conscious mind holds what you are currently aware of, including accessible memories, thoughts and perceptions. Conversely, the unconscious mind contains what the conscious mind is not aware of, including suppressed desires/emotions and instinct. It is the source of our motivations, most of which,

Freud believed, are sexual in nature. There is also the preconscious, which holds those thoughts and emotions that are not repressed and are not currently in the conscious, though, they are readily available. Freud's theory eventually developed into a three-part system that holds that human psyche is comprised of the id, ego, and the superego. The id is the unconscious or repressed desires a person has including the desires caused by the Oedipus complex. The ego is the conscious part of the brain, the part a person is aware of, and the superego is the conscience, the judge and jury in a person's mind. The psychoanalytical theory looks for the influences of all the three parts of the mind on literature. These will be explored in the analysis of *A Question of Power* and *Maru*.

### **Madness in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and *Maru***

One of the central concerns of Head in her writings is the discovery of the very essence of human co-existence, the friction it engenders and its results in life in Southern Africa. Head addresses these issues in *A Question of Power* and *Maru*. In these autobiographical works, racism and the prevailing cultural experiences are factors that determine the neurotic, whether an individual manifests a superior or inferior complex or not. According to Fanon, the colonial encounter rather than some supposedly universal Oedipus complex accounts for the psychopathology of the blacks in South Africa.

Each of these texts has strands of the mad world in them. Consequently, they can be referred to as the “insanity quartet”. The distinction between autobiography and

historical fiction is succinctly made by Sophia Ogwude who categorises Head's creative endeavour into autobiography, utopian writing, historical fiction and short story. The autobiography possesses the power and ability to open up to the reader an integral part of a historical personality. This it does by capturing the personal pressures suffered by the autobiographer, and the consequent metamorphosis and emergence of his final personality. The literary technique of the autobiography as a distinct form of prose, that is, the process by which experience is transformed into literature, is also quite important. Together they elicit our sympathy and involvement in each dilemma of human life which is the major subject of the genre. If the autobiography attempts to depict historical realities, the utopian, on the other hand, seeks to transcend the present and transpose into the ideal. It is a genre rooted in political and social issue.

The term historical novel is used to distinguish all novels which take their settings and some of their characters and events from history; “the term is usually applied only if the historical milieu and events are fairly elaborately developed and important to the central narrative”. It is used to solve social and psychological problems visited on the people. This shows the relationship between history and literature. The short story, on the other hand, thrives on its brevity. It can be read at one sitting. It thrives on few characters and limited settings. It is composed so that during the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control”. This paper is concerned with the first and third categories – precisely because our chosen texts fall into these categories.

It is from within these genres that the issue of madness and violence is expiated. For Head, the importance of autobiography lies in its virility in signifying life and in projecting a vision through which “life” is sustained. A close look at these texts shows they bear a close resemblance to the life history of Head herself. She presents her own experience through the characters' individual experiences. In this way, she delineates the manifestation of madness.

Head's treatment of the subject of madness can be viewed at two levels: the social level and the individual level. These two levels, though independent, however influence each other. At the social level, madness is pictured within the frame of shattered social values and the confusions that result from the crossbreed of African values with foreign ones. There is also an inbred clash of African beliefs and values among themselves. In *Maru*, the Botswanians see the Marsawas as inferior. The attempt to bridge this age old conception ultimately leads to confusion and dissatisfaction. This is the outcome of racism which has a deep psychic dimension to it. At the individual level, insanity has its foundation in a search for identity embarked upon from the sidewalk of an alienated consciousness. Individuals, as is evidenced in Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*, run mad as a result of pressure on their mental faculty. However, at other times it is a result of inability to come to terms with themselves and the reality of their lives. Consequently, this opens them up to unwholesome dominating influences.

Madness is a state in which unconscious processes predominate over conscious ones to the extent that they

control and determine perceptions of and responses to experiences. Such experiences, when judged by prevailing standards of logical thought and relevant emotion, are confused and inappropriate. Yet, the question that quickly arises is, who is sufficiently qualified to set standards for the psychology of human behaviour? A person is said to be mad when he is no longer able to reason in accordance with socially accepted modes. Head, through her characters, shows that madness and reason are not irreconcilable opposites. In actual fact, as her characters show, there is only a thin line between sanity and insanity; the one is never complete without the other. Society, Head seems to imply, loses its normality when it is overly concerned with the abnormal which after all is the very basis of normality.

Universally, there are psyche and psychic traits in all men responsible for individual and societal depravity. It is in Head's ability to manipulate her art in this direction that she achieves a measure of greatness. This comment on Conrad's work, made, also applies to Bessie Head:

Conrad's greatness as an artist lies in his disinclination to recognise boundaries in human character when he writes about Malays and Arabs. Mrs Almayer (Almayer's folly) is superstitious and depraved, but it has nothing to do with her half caste blood any more than it have anything to do with Nina's disillusionment in Christian teaching. Nina is an individual, her mixed ancestry is incidental. (102)

This is exactly how Head relates with her characters,

Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* and Margaret in *Maru*. They are not just individuals whose problems are externalised in terms of colour or race differences, but individuals shown as having problems with the seat of contending good and evil - the soul.

Head throws her characters down into the purgative cauldron of madness. Psychic conflict resolution is a violently maddening process. The approaches to it are varied. Head's female characters - Elizabeth, Margaret, Paulina, Maria and others, contrast favourably with those in the novel of Atwood, *Eyre*, Woolf or Bronte. The characters in the writings of these European novelists are psychologically crippled, disinherited and culturally bereft because they have been denied the love of strong figures of their own sex and "tribe". What each of the protagonists discovers is that they must find a mother figure, within themselves, and so begin the return from psychosis. Head's characters on the other hand are already aligned with strong mother figure influences that contribute to their psychosis and whose influence must be purged to return from psychosis (Rigney11-12).

In *A Question of Power* and *Maru*, there is a polarity between the twin characterisation modes utilised. In *Maru*, the polarity is between Moleka and *Maru*, both sons of chiefs, and between black Margaret Cadmore and Dikeledi. In *A Question of Power*, it is between Dan and Sello on one hand and Elizabeth, the victim of their psychic clash, on the other. There is also intra-polarity. Madness in these two texts grossly emphasises what happens to the individual caught in

between the preponderance of good at one spectrum and evil at the other. The individual is faced with making a choice from within the depths of their soul, on which will supersede the other. The clash between these spectrums can clearly be conceived and imagined as the ignition of a state of insanity. Individual experiences of insanity have societal roots and significance only as they are purged in the individuals to reform and make them better citizens. For the individual, it is purely a purgative process; a kind of washing of the water by the word (Eph.5:26) experience. No demarcations between the activator of madness, the participation in madness and the recipients of the result of madness exist here. All are found in a long continuum. They co-habit together to give the full construct of activities that portray sanity or insanity within the texts under discussion. The contention is that the madness experience is not limited to the main protagonists like Elizabeth and Margaret who are females. It also affects the twin polarity characters. Through them, we achieve introspection in character that ultimately exposes the deviation from the norm. All the characters carry within their bosoms the eggs and streaks of madness, against the background of racial hostility and difficulties. This leads to undue and unwanted suspicion amongst the characters to create what Clara Thomas in her prognosis of Jean Rhys *Wide Sargasso Sea* referred to as a culturally determined “psycho-biography.”

Head's division of *A Question of Power* and *Maru* into parts one and two is significant. One part symbolises good, the other evil. Her refusal to use a chapter-by-chapter division

epitomises her running concern with madness as an unpunctuated experience – a rushing stream of consciousness; an experiential method so to speak.

Head in a significant way introduces a new dimension to African writings concerned with insanity by giving the impression that insanity arises as a result of a genetic mutant passed from one generation to another. This is a biological construct for insanity which suggests that individual insanity is not simply socially and culturally determined. Men make conscious choices either of good or evil and this affects their sanity or otherwise. This is clearly what takes place in *A Question of Power* and *Maru*. The question then is how much influence or domination of another individual's psyche is required to make men insane and in what dimensions and measures. Like their creator, both Margaret and Elizabeth in *Maru* and *A Question of Power* are born and rejected in childhood. Both are born under mysterious circumstances; they barely know any of their biological parents and are taken care of by foster parents. However, as Roger A. Berger argues, what is most important is not the whites' insistence that Elizabeth is mad. Rather, more troubling is Elizabeth's internalising the racist fantasy that insanity is in some way hereditary. According to Berger,

It must be made clear immediately that hereditary insanity, along with other myths of ethno-psychiatry (e.g. the savagery of the native, his or her inmate childlessness) that Fanon explicitly explodes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, has no basic reality and reflects merely the extension of racism into psychoanalysis



(Berger 36).

Since the origins and birth of Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* and Margaret in *Maru* are shrouded in controversy, madness thus becomes a process of rebirth, a kind of “born again” experience with the attendant birth pangs and pains. This rebirth experience requires grace and ability to endure. There is a quality of pain to this experience. It is in the ferment of this rebirth process that the twin character polarities of Dan/Sello, and Moleka/*Maru*, come in and are significant. A synopsis of this rebirth process indicates a great creative force and energy within the souls of individuals which enables them see far beyond the ordinary. According to Virginia Woolf, mad people know things which normally sane people cannot know; they grapple with monsters of the mind that sane people suppress (89). This truism is manifested in Margaret Cadmore's skill, manifest in her drawing images that imprint on her subconscious. These images truly reflect her soul's composition and desire (even though she would not admit it); “She had an unexplored gift. Half consciously, her hand moved to a sheet of paper and a pencil, and without any faltering, concentrated on capturing that loving expression” (87).

Within this context, Head's characters in *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, through a descent into the abyss of madness, tap their potentials to make themselves better persons to affect their world. This is the result of collisions principally of good and evil elements within the soul of the characters competing for supremacy. Creative energies and forces imprisoned in the soul must be let loose by breaking

through the walls of the soul. Their eventual release dominates the individual, so that outside situations and circumstances lose their effect.

Head in a purely surrealistic endeavour escorts her readers into the mind recesses of *Maru*, to present the depths of secret activities in him. This is manifested in his fear of losing Margaret, the woman after his heart, to Moleka. His “wife's” inner love for Moleka pushes him to behave contrary to his normal disposition and consequently makes him paranoid. Quite often, the result is jealousy on the verge of insanity. In portraying Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* and Margaret in *Maru* as the character before whom lies the choice between one (Sello/*Maru*) and the other (Dan/Moleka), Head sufficiently captures the inner conflicts that characterise these women when overpowered by dominant powerful personalities. The end result of the catharsis of the inner conflict Elizabeth and Margaret experience enable them to delineate between evil and good and then make their choice.

Though both *A Question of Power* and *Maru* have racism as a catalyst to insanity, insanity itself is the measuring parameter of the social relevance of the experiences within the individual madness in the texts. For instance, what is the inherent quality in Moleka that fascinates Margaret such that even after she is manipulated into marriage with *Maru*, she retains a strong love and longing for Moleka in spite of his being evil? What are these innate qualities in Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* that make her susceptible to domination by an alternate set of powers - first Sello, then Dan. In *Maru*, Head visualises racism as a problem of “mental outlook”.

The superiority or inferiority of the races is an issue and condition of the mind, which suggests, accepts and manifests as a result of prevailing cultural exigencies, either a superiority or inferiority complex. According to Fanon, the colonial encounter rather than some supposedly universal Oedipus complex, accounts for the psychopathology of the black colonialism which affected even the culture of the people profoundly. Consequently, every neurosis of the colonised is a product of his colonial situation. Fanon notes that the negro's contact with the white world impacts on his psychic structures and leads to a collapse of ego which manifests chiefly in attempts by blackmen to become white. But, the black men can never, in the estimation of the Europeans, attain white-attitude, since his black skin already casts him as the image and symbol of dirtiness and evil, and an associate of Satan.

Another issue that triggers of insanity among the characters and which is also a result of racism is alienation. Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* experiences lunacy as a result of her alienation from meaningful livelihood as well as from "reality." Margaret in *Maru*, by virtue of her Marsawa background, is rejected within the community and alienated by all except Dikeledi. In school, this experience harasses her consciousness and lead to her blanking out - a symptom of insanity which has to do with withdrawal into the self. Her mind introspects into itself and contemplates an unimaginable response to her situation. This is symbolised by her quietness in the face of wrongful accusation and hostility. It is indicative of the throw back strength of shock

impacting a consciousness: “Why did you keep quiet?” She asked pointedly “I was surprised”, she replied quietly ...” (57). She is jolted and pushed more into this abyss of madness by her loss of concentration and a penchant for the fantasia locked in her imagination.

For Elizabeth, her psychic dislocation from the community is a source of unparalleled pain. Her coloured skin completely excludes her from being “initiated” into the African mysteries. This forces her to beg acceptance from the dominating race and consequently makes her an easy prey to them. Her sane and active disposition succumbs to tensions and strains built up within her by this situation, and she crosses the brink of sanity into insanity.

The greatness of Head's narrative lies in her linking the issue of the manifestation of innate madness in her protagonist with the same forms in the larger society. This gives her social relevance. This extract from *A Question of Power* clearly demonstrates the madness of the white power maniacs against the struggle for social evolution thus:

...In spite of her inability to like or understand political ideologies, she had also lived the back breaking life of all black people in South Africa ...There wasn't any kind of social evolution beyond that there wasn't any lift to the heart, just this vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks; and like Dan ...once you stared the important power maniacs in the face. You saw that he never saw people, humanity,

compassionate, tenderness ...what did they gain the powerful people, while they lived off other people's souls like vultures? ...Elizabeth felt that some of the answers lay in her experience in Botswana. (44)

For the mad protagonist, death performs a creative function within a social milieu that attempts to keep the individual's life but in the end takes it. Turning into one's self (or dying) thus becomes a way of preserving one's life. This process of dying often begins, as is the case of Elizabeth, with religion, then migration, alienation and certain degrees of hallucinatory conditions. The period of darkness to the "mad" character thus becomes a period of light and dense activity as expressed by the narrator:

She had the sudden feeling that someone entered the room. The full impact of it seemed to come from the roof, and was so strong that she jerked up in bed... This recurred for several nights and she simply reasoned that whatever, it was not a danger to her life ...it gave her a strange feeling of things being there right inside her and yet projected at the same time at a distance from her. She was not sure if she was awake or asleep, and often after that the dividing line between dream perceptions and waking reality was to become confused. (22)

This is Elizabeth's initiation into madness. The characters before her are not only symbolic of purity (the soft white flowing robes of a monk) but also of bondage (prison garments). This juxtaposition of symbolic images stretches

her mind to a state of turmoil as she names her experiences. Once the turmoil in her mind establishes itself, the hallucinating activity that keep in touch “with the monk figure” becomes a full time activity and transposes the unreal into reality for her as shown below:

The faint silvery white outline of his robe and his face were clearly discernable to her at all times, and so overpowering was the experience at first that in the early morning as she poured out a cup of tea, she would pour a cup and absentmindedly walk towards the chair and say, here's a cup of tea for you, and then jolt back to reality shaking her head, “Agh. I must be mad! That's just an intangible form.” (23)

In this state of madness, the intangible becomes tangible and is accepted without many questions. Though the monk figure has a real life counterpart, it is the monk figure as a phantom personality within the soul of Elizabeth that is of true significance. It is her attempt to keep up with the figure within that casts doubts on her sanity outside.

This monk figure represents good and is contrasted with Dan who represents evil. It is the latter part of Elizabeth's soul that has struggled to gain domination over her. In her state of insanity, it is her evil aspect that prompts, urges and commands the manifestation of the alter ego. The Sello in the physical, the living Sello is already married “to a large Motswana woman with strangely uncomprehending eye...,” yet the Sello in her mind's casting and function is single, desirable and good company. The truth, however, is

that there is hardly any relationship with the physical Sello. Head's employment of the comparative; that is the spiritual contextualised against the physical, helps to elucidate her subjects as she presents insanity in her work.

Insanity remoulds and remakes people better than they have been through a “god like” engineering which takes place in the soul. In the process of this creation, mystery mixed with magic, hysteria and fantasy are part of the atmosphere in which the insane experience is played out daily. The introduction of “medusa” into Elizabeth's congested subconscious is to delineate the unappeasable evil that is a seed in the human past. The purgation of this evil is achieved not by handling out the responsibility to another but by accepting this evil nature as part of man that needs to be put to death, and doing it. In *A Question of Power* and *Maru*, the mind is the operating theatre of the medusa. The mind is a cauldron of evil; yet, how could someone run away from their own mind? Each time the mind runs away, nervous breakdown results. This is because the individual involved is no longer able to dictate the limit to his actions. The mind of the individual, as portrayed in Head's characters, is a mirror of actual reality in different spheres of life.

Madness could be therapeutic, contrary to the general perception and assumption that it is unwholesome and damaging. By turning inward, man is able to submerge and defeat external forces that try to push him under mental disorder. This mental stability is expressed by Head in the character of Elizabeth thus: “Elizabeth looked at the nurse and laughed. She had been thrown a powerful life line as

though by turning inward, she had found the centre of herself and was still sane and secure, and that the evils which had begun to dominate her mind had a parallel of goodness” (55).

Another tributary of madness in this society is the image of perverse sexual activity such as rape, homosexuality, erotism, orgiastic explosions, etc. that have been accepted as normal. In *A Question of Power*, sexual extrovertism becomes a refuge for the harassed psyche and a defence mechanism:

It was the nightmare of the slums where she had grown up in South Africa, but it never dominated life. Usually, small girls got raped, but the men were known. The law caught up with them. Homosexuals were laughing, accepted as one of the oddities of life but they never duly disturbed people, perhaps totally normal people don't think about it at all because it isn't their problem. (112)

Sexual starvation and the contemplation of the intercourse process are some of the prime reasons for Elizabeth's madness. Because of the social stratification and racial bias, this sexual urge which could not be satisfied in the physical realm had to be transposed to a higher supernatural realm where the desire for it becomes an obsession. Her madness becomes a rebellion and a defence against the chauvinistic tendencies of men who are committed to relationships because “they had prostitutes in the background.” This is a social metaphor Head employs to show that a break in social relationships creates a mind suffering that evokes pain.



Sello's green truck, which is a symbol of high fertility, is a graphic summary of this sexual tendency – in metaphoric tones. Each name Head adopts for Dan's seventy-one nice time girls have symbolic significance (see Kenneth Little). These are a few of them; Madame loose Bottom, Body Beautiful, Madame Squelch Squelch, Sugar Plum Fairy, The Womb, Miss Pink Sugar Icing, Miss Sewing Machine, Miss Chopper. So many interpretations to these names are possible, but this is not the precinct of this paper. Suffice to say that they are a pointer to a relationship between sex and insanity. The price paid for love and sexual commitment is insanity and death; the loss of self. It is deducible that the need of the Dans and Sellos of the world to exploit and reduce the Elizabeths to the state of object in turn implies an insecurity of their own.

There is a danger of the loss of self when self love and self preservation become secondary to love for another. Marriage and sex, for Head, are linked not only to psychological death of the self but its physical death. This death process proceeds through the vessels of affliction. However, the protagonist is able to understand that sex includes life as well as death; that it can at least be theoretically natural and positive as well as mechanically destructive and negative. Dan is a symbol of the very elements that combine to affect Elizabeth's mental balance. This is concretised in sex, homosexuality, perversions of all kinds. Now, when a personality such as this dominates an individual's soul, what takes place can better be imagined. The paranoia it creates is a veritable source of madness; for it assaults the mind.

## Conclusion

This paper has looked at madness in Bessie Head's novels, *A Question of Power* and *Maru*. It has been widely accepted that in spite of and in the face of varied definitions of what constitutes madness, madness is simply a deviation from normal to the abnormal.

The content of literature in any society is determined by events in that society; thus, black African literature mirrors the black man's experience. In the case of South Africa, in general terms, black literature shows how oppression has created a relational dichotomy between blacks and whites. It captures the atrocities of apartheid and black response to it. It is in capturing these actions and reactions conjectured by apartheid that black South African literature becomes an instrument in the liberation struggle. Often, the preponderance of chaos, discrimination and inequality which apartheid engendered resulted to psychological trauma for the oppressed.

The paper concludes, therefore, that Bessie Head's two novels discussed in this article present racism as a catalyst for insanity and dementia as a manifestation of the other side of human experience. The opposite of madness is good reasoning, but after careful investigation, this paper concludes that rather than operate as mutual exclusives, they complement each other. This is because society loses its normalcy when it is overly concerned with the abnormal. Madness is envisaged as a purgative cauldron for the inner psychic conflicts, and the state of the character's soul

determines whether a return from psychosis is possible. At the level of the society, the hope for a free, just and prosperous post-apartheid South Africa lies in a combination of efforts made by both South African and non-South African citizens in a global context to right the deep rooted negative effects of racial oppression.

### References

- Bernaerts, L., Herman, L., & Vervaeck, B. "Narrative Threads of Madness." *Style*, 43.3(2009).283-290.
- Dambudzo, Marechera. *A Double Exile*. London: Boyars, 1978.
- Engle Leonard W. "The Journey from Reason to Madness: Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" *Essays in Art and Sciences*. xiv (1985), 23-31.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lab. Markmann. London: Pluto, 1986. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. vol.4. (J. Strachey and A. Tyson Trans.) London: Hogarth Press, 1960. Print.
- Head, Bessie. *Maru*. London: Heinemann, 1972..
- - - -*A Question of Power*. London: Longman, 2009. Print. <http://www.ngopulse.org/article/2018/06/13/%E2%80%8B-june-16-soweto-youth-uprisingSouth African History Online Accessed on 21-May-2013>.
- Leader, Darian. *What is Madness?* <https://www.amazon.com>. Accessed 21 March, 2021.

- Mphahlele, Ezekiel. *African Writing Today*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1967.
- Mzamane, Mbulelo. "Feminism in House of Hunger" *African Literature Today*. Ed. E. D. Jones, London: Heinemann Educational Books. 1987.
- Ogwude, Sophie. *Bessie Head: An Exile Writing on Home*. Zaria: ABU Press, 1998.
- Rigney, Barbara Hill. *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel Studies in Bronte, Woolf, Lessing and Atwood*. Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Press, 1978. Print
- Wiseman, Gemma. *Reflections on Madness, Literature and History*. [www.helium.com/items/321535/reflectionson-Madness-in-literature-and-history](http://www.helium.com/items/321535/reflectionson-Madness-in-literature-and-history)