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Gender Bias in *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head

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Abstract

A question of power is a prophetic novel. It displays power politics which was one of the features of Apartheid system. The central character Elizabeth and her mind's deviation, fluctuation, frustration and recovery are central to the novel. The novel very realistically captures the inner turmoil leading to her mental breakdown and final recovery after breaking the shackles of gender discrimination. Gender discrimination has been superficially created by society for ages. The novel unfolds many stages of damage and recovery. This paper uses Close reading of the text to unfold the hidden trauma of gender bias. *A Question of power* is not just a personal/domestic tragedy but a powerful novel depicting issues and voices of subaltern in an unusual political circumstances and patriarchal society.

Keywords: Gender, Gender discrimination, Subaltern, Violence.

A Question of Power is a great domestic tragedy. It unfolds many aspects of human psychic damage and recovery. It is a strong novel because it is intricately woven and unfolds the issues of gender bias and mental trauma. '*A Question of Power*' is a Question about the Power of Women that has always been seized by the patriarchal society. Moreover, it is about the existence and Identity of Female in Patriarchal as well colonial society. Head has used sections to divide the novel, and the game of damage and recovery has been shown beautifully. The best part about this novel is all about happy ending of recovery. But it is a tragedy as major portion of the story deals with the angst, turmoil and painful experiences of the

central character. The central female character goes through a long, difficult journey in search for her identity. The search for identity is equally important as existence. In any society, female has always been ignorant about her identity. The reason for not going through an arduous search for one's identity is the Question. This negligence of not questioning one's identity in a patriarchal society has given the patriarchal society to treat females as subhuman, object, subaltern, marginalized etc.

The story is divided into two parts: Sello and Dan. Sello section deals with the degeneration of Elizabeth's mental health, and the Dan section deals with her recovery of

mental health. Dan is described the narrator as a 'wild display of wreckage and destruction' (Head 1974:13)

'Before her gaze, Dan's head exploded into a ball of that red fire. The loud, pounding rhythm of his drama drummed in her ear's day and night. it was like large, grasping hands gathering every thread of her life to themselves for a total command; a total encroachment on her mind and soul'. (Head 1974:159). The character Dan and his intrusion in Elizabeth's mind creates a fear that traumatizes her soul. She is in the grip of a male figure. Even in her hallucination she is terrified by a male figure, and it is all about the domination and taking charge of a female's soul in patriarchal society. The symbolism of explosion of Dan's head into a red ball is utter fear that could lead to mental breakdown. It is a symbol of fire that destroys peace of mind. Another sensitive organ ear of Elizabeth is affected due to the pounding rhythm of Dan. A large grasping hand again symbolizes that something or somebody is approaching to take her into command. The approaching hand is trying to take her into total control which she cannot resist. Elizabeth is constantly fighting with this hallucinating figure, but her mind and soul is unstable. The problematic life of Elizabeth is the central crisis through which Head is depicting the male centered society trying to take control over the soul and mind of female.

Head has a unique knack to present a character's psychological perspective. Elizabeth and her hallucination are the best example of this portrayal.

The childhood experiences of Elizabeth were not good. Her childhood was troubled. The traumatic condition is very clear as she had to suffer from hunger loveless childhood. All this had an impact on her psychic experiences which shaped her personality.

Elizabeth married life was even horrible because she marries an ex-convict. Her husband was not an upright man. He was not an ideal

husband; he was engaged with several women. Her neighbor says to Elizabeth's: You have a strange husband. Sussie was standing outside the door and called him. He walked straight in and they went to bed. He's been doing this nearly every day now with Sussie. I also once greeted him and he said: 'How about a kiss?' And I said 'Bugger Off: What made you marry that thing?

Beauvoir's famous observation that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". (Beauvoir p.330)

Becoming woman has been stigmatized because of the indifference created by the male dominated society. Woman's voice has been unheard and categorized them as subaltern. It is quite ironic that a woman can speak but unheard. Power is central to the novel because Head has portrayed that Elizabeth is ready to embrace society as it is. She least cares about what people think of her gender, race, and color. She is not concerned about the power of resistance and to bring any kind of change. In the story Elizabeth faces same situation, and her inner conflict leads her towards neurotic disturbances. It is quite natural for a person to get disturbed and lose nervous balance after such traumatic experiences. She was going through double marginalization. Being a female her sufferings due to gender discrimination were even more aggravated by the apartheid society in which she was living. She could not resist initially. Her inability to understand the system was not the cause but her despise/hatred to understand made it worse.

Elizabeth was very alienated and broken. She describes her isolation as: 'I like the general atmosphere because I don't care whether people like me or not. I am used to isolation' (Head, 1981:56). Generally, in any society Isolation is seen as a normal and sometimes the result of one's personality. Isolation is sometimes seen as a healing time sometimes it is seen as trouble making agent. Human beings are not prone to isolation. It

always disintegrates and breaks a human being. Isolation is undoubtedly the worst experience for a human being. But Isolation of Elizabeth is depicted very clearly as she has mustered courage to live alone instead of being broken. Here Head has used contradictory situation as the central character is coping up with dual psychic marginalization, Patriarchal and colonial both are haunting simultaneously. When Elizabeth describes her situation, she is emotionally overflowed and mentally strong at the same time.

It is through her madness that the inner personality echoed, and her madness is the best example that in a patriarchal society female voices are unheard. A Question of Power is the best platform where readers can easily find different characters and different ideas through multiplicity of voices. The novel explores a single character undergoing different phases and showcasing inner turmoil. The best psychic journey that initially brings tension and ends with recovery.

Bell hooks remind us that "patriarchy has no gender". (Hook p.44) Head has chosen to tell what has been deeply experienced by the females. Patriarchy has its own power and ideology to run society. Hence, we see Head has beautifully encapsulated the bitter experience of Apartheid. Head has reconceptualized the bitter experiences off Gender problems. Head has presented an indictment of the patriarchal society that treats women as different and weaker gender. Head's message is the strongest in this novel 'A Question of Power' because she wants to see a world full of liberated woman. A Utopian society where there is no place for any kind of inequality, racialism and power oppression.

CONCLUSION

Women need to work on her inner self and control too much emotional aspects. Women shouldn't just blame the society for the pitiful state but try to restore identity. Woman's transformation is equally required for a

balanced society where the power is in equal hands. Transformation of a gender biased society into utopian and equal society is possible when women query about her own existence, power, rights, the reason behind racial construction and gender identity. Yes, this novel gives a clear hint about the dominating aspects of politics, but the negligence and reasoning attitude of woman. Woman's performance in the society is not to be submissive but to question the role of Suppressive power. Woman must make her stand to a difficult social situation. Women must be aware and look beyond the margins of 'a submissive, performing and unheard woman'. A woman must consider herself Absolute and capable of coping up with the socio-political conditions of the society. No doubt, Self-recognition could help women realize her worth.

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Biography of the Author

Dr. Rohini Jha is an Assistant Professor in the University Department of English at Veer Kunwar Singh University, Bihar, India. She is a qualified K-SLET candidate in English Literature and serves as Associate Editor of the *Applied Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Nigeria, and on the editorial boards of several journals. She has delivered special lectures and served as a resource person at academic institutions and international conferences in Russia, Brazil, Switzerland, and India. She has published more than a dozen research papers and edited academic books. Her research interests include postcolonial literature, race, gender, and feminism. She received the Global Achievement Award in Academic Skills in 2024 from the Grand Queens Club, Hyderabad. She also serves as Chief Programme Coordinator of the India Chapter of Satya Sanatan Maitri Sangh, Nepal.