

SOCIETAL UNDERTONE OF TRAUMA IN BESSIE HEAD'S *A QUESTION OF POWER*

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Abstract

The level of female suffering, racial and gender oppression, and the struggles of displaced marginalized women in Africa increases psychological sensitivity in African writers and scholars. The focus of this paper is to show how the protagonist of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* is caught up and is nearly destroyed by complications arising from certain social conditions fueled by patriarchal and postcolonial influences. These stifling conditions in society become instrumental in the social instability, psychological and mental imbalance of the protagonist later in life. In this paper, the trauma theory is employed to portray the consequences of universal problems like patriarchy and colonialism. The study finds out the devastating impact of oppressive patriarchal system, racism, emotional and psychological violence on the life of the protagonist. The study therefore shows how these social structures which are both restrictive and oppressive can affect the female personality and lead to trauma.

Key Words: Society, Undertone and Trauma

Introduction

The African continent is a society that has experienced patriarchy, colonialism and racial segregation. These and their effects reflect in the literature of different regions of Africa giving rise to the question of trauma especially for the female folk who were already subjected to the trauma of patriarchy. Trauma and the state of the mind have become part of the developments or trends in postcolonial African literature. The segregation of Blacks in South Africa is a social dilemma that attracted global attention. Apartheid was a system of racial segregation and discrimination in South Africa between 1948 and 1991. Two prominent apartheid laws were the prohibition of mixed marriage act of 1949 and the immorality act of 1950. These laws made it illegal for most South Africans to marry or have sexual relations across race. The Population Registration Act of 1950 divided South Africans into Black, White, Coloured and Indian. This division resulted in the forceful movement of non-white South Africans into segregated neighbourhood. These laws are part of the oppressive political ideology of the apartheid era and Bessie Head uses her novels to explicate these political problems and the horrible experiences of South Africans who were caught in the midst of apartheid laws.

Trauma Theory

Cary Caruth, who is recognized as a pioneer of trauma theory explains that trauma is derived from the Greek word “trávmá” which means physical wound, but in the literary field it is a “wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). Caruth and Shoshana Felman are two prominent members of the Department of Comparative Literature at Emory who have been working creatively on the intersection of trauma, literature, and psychoanalysis.

Early trauma theory portrays trauma as having some neurobiological features that refuse representation, cause dissociation and irreversible damage to the psyche (Balaev 1). Trauma underscores intense suffering coming from external individual source or social practice. It comes from one’s inability to cope with the emotions coming from an unhealthy experience. Caruth describes trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (181). Caruth’s classic trauma model relies on psychoanalytic features of trauma: repression, repetition and dissociation. She further explains that trauma apart from being a difficult experience is also an unclaimed experience, “not one’s own.” “The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (9) but Baleav contradicts this stand by stating that: “If the larger social, political and economic practices that influence violence are the background contexts or threads in the fabric of a traumatic experience in the first place, then trauma’s meaning is locatable than permanently lost” (8).

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) of the American Psychiatric Association accorded trauma its official recognition. This association defines trauma “as a serious injury or a threat to the physical integrity of the self in the form of an overwhelming, sudden, and inassimilable experience” (Visser 253). The Manual is of the view that an event is considered traumatic when it results in the actual or threatened injury, death, sexual violation or threat to the physical integrity of the person exposed to the trauma and when the person’s emotional response to the traumatic event includes intense fear, helplessness, or horror (Ruglass and Kendall-Tackett 5).

Both psychiatrists and psychoanalysts explore trauma theory and conclude that “trauma is embodied in the event which afterwards return to life as forms of memory, nightmares, or flashbacks” (Shamaila 234). The portrayal of these symptoms of trauma in fictional narratives makes them somewhat difficult to digest. Some African literary fictions including the selected texts of this research are replete with such threats to individual personality and negative emotional responses; thus placing a demand for critical studies based on trauma theory.

Societal Undertone of Trauma

On the surface reading a reader will conclude that Elizabeth, the protagonist of *A Question of Power* is mad but what Bessie Head does is an attempt at dramatising the life of a destabilised individual who has gone through the trauma of oppressive political ideologies of a racial and patriarchal society. Mohamed Helaly rightly observes that Elizabeth “suffer[s] greatly as a woman but her suffering as a hybrid is even greater. On the one hand, she is socially marginalized as a female living in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, she is also culturally colonized as an individual living in a society where racial discrimination is prevailing” (101). The abandonment and rejection of Elizabeth’s mother are extended to young Elizabeth as a result of the apartheid laws. “In Apartheid South Africa, the problems surrounding the half-caste child begin even before its conception. The union of black and white being illegal, the coming together of its parents is illegal, hence the child is the illegal product of an illegal affair” (Adetokunmbo 82).

Apart from creating and implementing laws that define individuals even before birth, the society goes a step further to prejudice and stigmatise victims of such obnoxious laws. Elizabeth is rejected by a nursing home because she does not look white. She is sent to a Boer family but is returned a week later for the same reason: the colour of her skin so the Child Welfare Committee pays a coloured woman to care for her. An innocent child goes through stigma because of the colour of her skin. “Elizabeth’s tragedy is linked to the madness of colonial violence and sovereignty of the colonizer who decides whose life is illegitimate and whose is legitimate, which life is a gift and which is a curse” (Borzaga 33). A curse because “there was no escape from it to the joy of being a human being with personality. There wasn’t any escape like that for anyone in South Africa” (Head 135). Growing up with her foster mother gives her no privilege to a normal childhood and leaving her foster home does not end her troubles. As soon as she arrives at the mission school, the principal gives her a disheartening information: “we have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you’re not careful you’ll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native” (Head 9). This prejudiced information shatters Elizabeth’s belief about her identity, sets the stage for a high level of injustice against her and lands her deeper into trauma. Herman states that “at the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities” (33). It is atrocious for the society and the principal to conclude that the fact that her mother was considered mad simply means that Elizabeth will go mad any moment. As she listens to the Principal’s story about her life, Elizabeth feels herself “. . . begin to split, to crack . . . she begins drifting away like a wave, turning into a cloud, into a hollow, into nothingness. Here the subject is not only faced with the fact of being non-White, different, or other, but she also experiences the hypothesis of her own abortion, she is faced with her annihilation . . .” (Borzaga 33). The principal lives on

the alertness of her insanity such that at the slightest quarrel between Elizabeth and other children, she is gravely punished by incarceration. Society made her understand that she is an outsider. It is like “living with permanent nervous tension . . .” (Head 19). Soon other girls observed the routine and took advantage of it.

Elizabeth grapples with this inhuman treatment till the end of her studentship. “Expelled from the earth, Elizabeth remains in the world of the ordinary as a walking body Mentally she is dislodged to another realm . . . that realm in which trauma keeps coming back and revealing itself under different shapes and guises” (Borzaga 34). Unfortunately, nobody notices her psychic condition rather society sees her physical reactions and judge her by them. She clearly asserts that “one would go stark, raving mad if a deep and endless endurance of suffering, such as one would encounter in South Africa, were really brought to the surface” (Head 84). Elizabeth does not only accept the inferior state society imposes on her but also internalizes it. Her life becomes almost meaningless thus, she joins a political party which was banned two days later. She suffers arrest and a court case. “It might have been the court case which eventually made her a stateless person . . .” (Head 11) so she is forced to take an exit permit which is a ticket of no return.

Society’s theory of Elizabeth’s life is that because she was born in a mental hospital by a mother believed to be insane who eventually commits the insane crime of suicide, Elizabeth is bound to go insane. Since her search for identity in a political party and in marriage fails, she moves to Botswana but she is already disposed for a mental and emotional breakdown because she has stored in her mind the scorn, disrespect, disdain, sadness, misery and desolation which made up her life in South Africa. She already has a negative view of herself as an illegal child born by a mad mother, a real social misfit. The effects of psychological, emotional and physical violence on Elizabeth is so devastating that when she tries to verbalise her battles with Dan, Medusa and Sello words fail her: “It seemed too fantastic to recall what happened to her between that time and the time she came out of the hospital. It seemed like the typical record of a lunatic The other was so chaotic and panic stricken that words jumbled sentences she uttered She had no clear idea of what she was saying . . . and she couldn’t get it straight” (Head 192-193). Her experience in the excerpt indicates a dissociation of the psyche which is one of the consequences of trauma. Adetokunbo agrees with this when he clearly states: “The socio-political system of apartheid creates perpetual tension in the society. To the sensitive and concerned individual especially, the conflicts and evils of life within the system can lead to a dissociation of the psyche” (83).

Also Elizabeth views herself as not being black or white but at the same time both. She therefore develops distorted view of her personality. This view of her personality added to “the divisive nature of her society, and the schism latent in Elizabeth's mulatto psychology become overt in her psychosis. When the character involved is one who, like Elizabeth, is extremely sensitive to her social circumstances, the problem becomes bewildering” (Adetokunbo 82-83).

Elizabeth's distorted view of herself makes it difficult for her to fit into a society where people are classified by their skin colour. She finds it difficult to identify with either black or white because doing so will mean hating and rejecting a part of herself. Thus, she is stuck in between the two and fragmentation sets in. Fragmentation is the "central principle of personality organization. Fragmentation in the inner representations of the self prevents the integration of identity" (Herman 107). Her struggles to reconcile these complexes are what Head portrays as her nightmares. These nightmares portray memories of her traumatic moments in South Africa. According to Herman:

Long after danger is past, traumatized people relive the events as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. (Herman 37)

Therefore for Elizabeth, the normal regulation of sleep and wakefulness becomes distorted and disrupted. Her bedtime becomes a time of heightened terror instead of a time of comfort and affection.

In Botswana her supposed land of redemption Elizabeth is still not redeemed from emotional breakdown. Femi Ojo-Ade describes her as ". . . a stranger in her home and still a stranger in the place she would like to call a new home. A low breed. A bastard. Daughter of a mad woman. Her non-identity, statelessness, chronic loneliness, and life on the verge of terrestrial hell, added to her inherited mental anguish, all make her logical guest of the mad house" (Qtd in Tucker 170). Her first mental breakdown in Motabeng comes as a result of staring at a black man's face. The man's colour awakens the conflict within her and she is overwhelmed. However, the remote cause of her outburst is the mental torture she has been having. For about a week, Elizabeth has been hearing, "the recurring monotonous song in her head: 'Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death' A week of it reduced her to a wreck" (Head 43). Her outburst is a desperate reaction to her nervous tension and not necessarily aimed at the shop attendant. Trauma theory explains her explosive or aggressive behaviour as a traumatised person's reaction to the feeling of overwhelming danger. Hers is a case of a contemporary woman battling with social forces with bizarre dimensions.

Elizabeth reaches her limit of endurance and goes insane but after losing her teaching job due to her mental aberration, she realizes that "people only function well when their inner lives are secure and peaceful. She was like a person driven out of her own house while demons rampaged within, turning everything upside down" (Head 49). Elizabeth musters courage to block her mind from remembering and

being affected by the devastating apartheid experiences. She then adapts to life in Motabeng: “a complete stranger like the Cape gooseberry settled down and became a part of the village life of Motabeng” (Head 163). Her connection with Kenosi is quite significant as this stands to signify the need for female connections in the fight against patriarchy and social injustices. The agricultural programme in Motabeng succeeds and is quite significant because it demonstrates power sharing; each one had something to contribute to the success of the programme and this brings a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

These unfavourable sociopolitical structures; patriarchal laws and inhuman treatment of fellow humans as portrayed in *A Question of Power* are what trauma critics point out as reasons for some abnormal behaviours and identity crises. The protagonist of Head is a clear example of victims of circumstance; unpleasant circumstances invented and perpetrated by society in which patriarchal and white power structures see only their power and not humans. They are like gods with the power of death over people. This raises the question: How does one relate to oneself and to others in the society in the face of negative social forces? Forces like dictators who see none as good or right but themselves. The consequence is that people especially females are left to grapple with the pangs of trauma. The writers strongly put forth the idea that women should not give up on the battle to withstand oppression and any hindrance on their way to progress. Uniting with other women is the key, bearing in mind that individuals are the very people who can change the structure of society. The paper has shown how a person’s psychology can be affected by society’s assessment and treatment of the individual. The treatment of trauma from the inside as portrayed by Head gives room for literary discourses on the themes of violence, madness and the divided self.

Apartheid may not be present in today’s South Africa but xenophobia and some other unpleasant sociopolitical conditions are very much around in Africa. The level of violence meted out against fellow humans in the name of the aforementioned calls for the attention of literary writers to create more awareness about the dangers of such inhuman actions drawing lessons of course from past similar experiences like apartheid.

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