CHAPTER-IV
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A QUESTION OF POWER

*A Question of Power* (1973) is Bessie Head’s most perplexing novel and the one that has received the most attention from critics. Openly autobiographical, the novel charts the terrifying course of her mental breakdown, her recovery, and her ultimate affirmation of the values — humility, decency, generosity and compassion — that provide the basis for Bessie Head’s moral perspective in all three novels.

Shortly after finishing *Maru*, early one morning Bessie Head rode into Serowe on her bicycle and pinned up a notice outside the post office, accusing the President of Botswana, Sir Seretse Khama, of incest with his daughter. Diagnosed as mad, Bessie Head was hospitalised in a mental institution. Returning home “cured”, a few months later, she wrote *A Question of Power*, an account of her two-year battle with progressive mental illness. Her reasons for writing were twofold. As therapy, it was to be “an examination of inner hells” that “was meant to end all hells forever”*. It was also an opportunity to explain her irrational allegations against Seretse Khama:

I could only record what I loathed and how it broke me. I had to do that because I really did put that notice up at the post office . . . What else could I do but explain my side? (KMM 44 BHP 152).

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The novel, written in the third person, records Elizabeth’s mental disintegration. The first indication of this is the telepathic communication that Elizabeth has with a godlike figure vaguely resembling a man called Sello, who is an important person in Motabeng. Elizabeth’s “absent-minded life” (25), her feeling that to the local people she is “an out-and-out outsider and would never be in on their things” (26), corresponds with her curiosity about the living Sello. It is not long before the godlike figure becomes a physical presence in her hut, a figure weaving the “soft, white, flowing robes of a monk” (22). Elizabeth engages in long, “absorbing conversations” with the white-robed monk, whom she addresses as Sello, and soon “her slowly unfolding internal drama” is “far more absorbing and demanding than any drama she could encounter in Motabeng village” (29). Their “pursuit after the things of the soul” (11), cannot preclude an examination of Sello’s “inner life”. Sello, indeed, has his “shadow”, the evil Medusa, and his goodness is strangled “to death with evil” (100).

Elizabeth’s internal drama becomes increasingly dominated by nightmarish hallucinations, and her mind disintegrates: “It was a state below animal, below living and so dark and forlorn, no loneliness and misery could be its equivalent” (14). Elizabeth becomes a “replica of the inner demons”, her relationships with friends and acquaintances slowly deteriorate. To avoid confrontation she turns “to flight before her own hatred” and resolves never to “see so-and-so again” (136). Finally, however, she cannot escape from the “satanic image of Sello, his boyfriend, his little girl with her face upturned in death” and “her screaming, agonised nervous system snapped to pieces” (175). Following her libellous attack on Sello, “words” and “the jumbled sentences she utter(s)” throw “her straight into the loony bin”. Her hospital notes are “the typical record of a lunatic” (179).
As Arthur Ravenscroft observes, “the phantom world that comes to life whenever Elizabeth is alone in her hut” could only have been invented by a novelist who had “herself gone through similar experiences, so frighteningly and authentically does it all pass before one’s eyes” (1976: 184). This recognition, however, does not assist the reader in unravelling this complex narrative. The problem lies in the long, incoherent description of dreams, the hallucinatory experiences combining highly condensed imagery with an elaborate procession of figures from myths, world religions, the Bible, and history. These figures jostle with one another for space in the text, physically merging into one another. Charles Sarvan and Jane Watts both feel that Bessie Head fails to achieve coherence because there is no separation, despite the fictionalised third-person perspective, “between the suffering individual and the creating artist” (1990: 12), no opportunity to “recollect” in “tranquillity” (1989: 141). R. Langen writes in his “Progresses of the Soul: Affliction in Three Novels of Colour” that “the text itself is ‘mad’” (1989: 10).

R. Langen suggests that the very nature of the experience itself resists interpretation. It must be read with the understanding that “the barriers of the normal, conventional and sane” are “all broken down” (1989: 15). Craig Mackenzie writes that the nature and content of her breakdown was for Bessie Head a subject of confusion that she never resolved in her lifetime (1989a: 34). Bessie Head’s letters to friends record this confusion. “I am in a weak position recounting it because I had to wait to gather enough clues to unravel the plot of the devil” (KMM 44BHP 152).

* A Question of Power, (much of the novel) takes place in a realm where souls move freely, temporally and spatially, and where they are measured in moral terms, though not on the usual scale with good at one end and evil at the other. It transpires that, in return for an
acceptance of her scenario, or at least some degree of suspension of disbelief, the reader is to accompany Bessie Head as she explores a nervous breakdown from within, an entirely different undertaking from analysing or discussing one.

There is a disconcerting authenticity about Bessie Head’s inner world. What psychologists would call hallucinations, she depicts as finely graduated departures from reality. In the early stages of the breakdown she can say: “Agh, I must be mad! That’s just an intangible form” (23), after she has offered a cup of tea to the white-robed monk always visible to her beside her bed. However, thereafter the landscape becomes more and more surrealistic, each subsequent encounter with Sello or Dan depicting some new facet of mental instability.

The conflict between these two characters is the other central issue of the novel. This and the closely related insanity theme – what Bessie Head had described as “a kind of under-current life” – are welded together by the novel’s outer framework, which is the story of how Elizabeth, a refugee and outcast, adapts to a rural African society and overcomes her sense of alienation through her participation in a development scheme.

To highlight the causes of the disintegration of Elizabeth’s personality, Bessie Head uses the device of externalising, even dramatising, her psychological scars and suppressed fears and aspirations in a series of dream visions. Sello and Dan, who themselves span the gap between reality and fantasy, not only because they gradually dominate her waking life just as much as her nightmares, but because she knows them also as inhabitants of her village of Motabeng, appear as the manipulators of these manifestations.
Elizabeth’s role in the unfolding drama is closely connected with suffering. She thinks about her past, her tragic childhood. She was born in South Africa. Her mother was white, her father black, an unforgivable sin in this racially segregated country in the late thirties. She bears not only the double burden of being an orphan and racial outcast, but also the stigma of possible hereditary madness, for she learns that her mother committed suicide in the mental hospital to which she had been confined after her daughter’s birth. Elizabeth develops an adoring love for this woman who insisted that she bear the same name as herself; and left instructions and money for her to be given a good education. As an adult Elizabeth wonders whether this is her initiation into the sharing of suffering. Perhaps her dead mother made a silent appeal: “Do you think I can bear the stigma of insanity alone? Share it with me” (17).

One of Elizabeth’s early visions is a moving encounter with the poor of Africa. People place cut and bleeding feet on Elizabeth’s bed and one woman asks her, “Will you help us? We are the people who have suffered”. They have the “still, sad, fire-washed faces . . . of people who had been killed and killed and killed again in one cause or another for the liberation of mankind” (31). Elizabeth knows that she must help them.

There is a constant fragmentation of the “characters” in Elizabeth’s inner universe, which increases the pressure on her mind. Sello and Elizabeth’s Socratic dialogues rapidly degenerate into confused nightmares as Sello divides himself into two dissimilar personalities. Two important new apparitions appear: a bolt-throwing superwoman named the Medusa and a character called the Father, walking round in the guise of an agricultural expert in Khaki shorts and hob-nailed boots. Medusa represents the destructively exclusive, “the surface reality of African society” (38). Here Elizabeth cannot belong. In the first
place, she is not a black woman, she is a coloured. Echoing the scorn Bessie Head’s African-American friend poured on her because she was not a “genuine African” (1990: 47), Medusa tells Elizabeth that “Africa is troubled waters ... You’ll only drown here ... You don’t know any African languages” (44). Elizabeth’s philanthropic feelings are likewise worthless. Medusa says that she can do much more good in Africa than Elizabeth can: “I am greater than you in goodness” (37). Elizabeth is also made to feel a failure sexually; she can in no way experience sexual sensations comparable with the exquisite ones Medusa produces.

The Father (a new portrayal of Gilbert from When Rain Clouds Gather) is introduced as one of Sello’s kindred spirits, for Sello disappears into him, indicating soul identification or the raising from the personal to the universal. In this case the father figure becomes a god figure and later a hero figure: “He remained a hero-image, to her” (107). The Father is a remarkably handsome man, “spectacular” and “dashing”. He can raise his “majestic head” and survey the universe “with cold eyes and supreme indifference”. He always identifies with the poor and wears his beggar’s rags with “the stately bearing of a king in fine raiment” (118). The Father is exactly what his name implies: the illegitimate Elizabeth’s personified desire for a father figure who is also a noble hero. That he watches over her, warns her of great danger and then deserts her also fits into the pattern. He cannot intrude on his daughter’s sexual experiences, unpleasant though she finds them. But he can and does resist Dan toughly for a long time.

Medusa, on the other hand, is gradually debunked. Elizabeth comes to terms with those aspects of her own personality which Medusa personifies. She begins to realise the limitations of belonging what Medusa, in her identification with African nationalism and
power-lusting Presidents, calls “my people”, for they can easily become mere child-like slaves dictated to by a “mother” or “father”. She cannot be hurt any more by being called coloured. “Too many people the world over were becoming mixed breeds and shading themselves down to browns and yellows and creams” (63). And as regards her sexuality, Elizabeth has to admit that other things, such as “long years of prison confinements . . . death . . . loss, suffering and sacrifice”, all aspects of love too, had counted more for her.

Elizabeth accepts with resignation her own limited sexuality for the same reason that she identifies with the poor. She too has the inbuilt knowledge of extreme oppression. Compared to the eccentric Sello and the glamorous Dan, she is self-effacing, subdued, a victim. Socially she is oppressed because she is a woman and politically because she is a coloured. This theme is examined in multifarious ways by Bessie Head. Spanning the centuries, covering the continent of Africa, feelers are sent out, parallels are drawn, ironic comments made. A victim of racial oppression, for example, is really a flexible, free person, she says. “He doesn’t have to think up endless laws and endless falsehood . . . He is presented with a thousand and one hells to live through and he usually lives through them all”. The victims’ faces become scarred with suffering, but the “torturers become more hideous day by day . . . Who is the greater man – the man who cries, broken by anguish, or his scoffing, mocking, jeering oppressor?” (84). Elizabeth is a victim of spiritual oppression for reasons which she does not understand and which she cannot totally resist. As she is drawn deeper into the web of evil she finds that her resources do not suffice. Her efforts to create counter-themes of goodness are “like the feeble flayings in the air of a beetle flung helplessly on its back” (64). She says that to prefer nobility and goodness is not enough. “There are forces who make a mockery of my preferences” (85). This refers to what
Elizabeth sees as yet another complicating element: her strong belief that it is Sello and later Sello and Dan who have invaded her life and are manipulating it for some purpose of their own. As she sees it, the fact that her experiences of the totally destructive nature of power are gradually uncovered through what she calls “an entirely abnormal relationship with two men” might not be “due to her dubious sanity” but to the “strangeness of the men themselves” (19).

Victims have subdued, reduced personalities but they also harbour strong passions. Elizabeth’s consuming love for Dan only comes out in glimpses for this reason. Only gradually do we realise that the form of hell she endures with him is one where his jeering genuinely affects her. She is jealous; she does feel sexually inadequate; she does feel an outsider socially.

These dramatised internal confrontations are juxtaposed with events relating to Elizabeth’s everyday life, which is concerned with starting a market gardening project in the village. There are people who help her in various ways: the “Eugene man” who has also fled from South Africa and is involved in “a thousand and one things at the same time” (68) to improve the opportunities of the young people and illiterate villagers in Motabeng; the young Peace Corps volunteer, Tom, who is equally willing to discuss the problems of the universe with Elizabeth or help her to erect a fence around her garden; her co-worker on the gardening project, Kenosi, who doggedly hauls her back to physical labour when her mental state is desperate; and her small son Shorty, whose preoccupation with paper aeroplanes, sky jets and footballs is greatly responsible for her recovering her sanity. The activities of the newly established local-industry groups are also vividly described and there are delightful sketches of some of the international volunteers working with Eugene on his many projects.
Inextricably worked into the theme of Elizabeth’s breakdown is Bessie Head’s treatment of the theme of good and evil. It is the growing realisation that good need not necessarily triumph over evil and that God need not be good that originally unhinges Elizabeth’s mind. First Sello is shown as a man of “vast inner perceptions” (11), a god-like figure. In terms of power, though, good cannot equal evil. Sello, is “opposed by personalities whose powers, when activated, rumbled across the heavens like thunder. He had nothing its equivalent is this war” (43). He has a quality of soul-power which is “passive, inactive, impersonal”. It is linked in some way to the “creative function, the dreamer of new dreams; and the essential ingredient in creativity is to create and let the dream fly away with a soft hand and heart” (42). Sello walks, moves, thinks and lives “like a flame on a dark night”. He holds the “essential clues to the evolution of the soul” but he holds them tentatively (41). With the passage of time this gentleness appears as weakness.

Good and evil continue to be depicted in ambiguous terms as Sello is associated with the evil Medusa and his mean-faced twin, the Sello in the brown suit. Over the centuries Sello has from his position of power perpetrated many evil actions in the name of God. Elizabeth herself has once been implicated. In one of her incarnations, as the biblical David, she has ordered the death of the innocent Uriah in order to marry his wife Bathsheba.

Just as Sello’s form of goodness has become undesirable, so Dan’s evil appears attractive. It is effective as compared to Sello’s spinelessness (43). Dan is associated with the blazing sun (100), contrasting with Sello’s “flame on a dark night”. His entrance is dramatic, in “clouds of swirling, revolving magic” (102) and on explosion of red fire, again in sharp contrast to Sello’s slow and humble materialisation.
Dan has control over physical feelings, deep exclusive love between two people, miracles and magic. He tells Elizabeth that he is frantically in love with her and that their souls are joined together at the roots (46). After enthralling her with tender demonstrations of physical love, which make Sello’s Socratic dialogues sink into insignificance, he gives her many indications of his god power. It is “a sort of spinning, revolving, eternal motion, a sort of power behind all powers that . . . kept the stars up there . . . that made the universe revolve around the universe. Ought a person not to turn over and sleep peacefully? Everything would be taken care of” (116). It gives Elizabeth a sense of false security. She can leave the shaping of her identity to someone else.

Shortly afterwards, however, the subtle exposures begin. Dan’s use of power is deathly dangerous. He uses slander and insinuation to destroy people, such as the Asian man who has shaped Elizabeth’s attitude to the poor (120). He begins to direct his power against Elizabeth. The visions become more and more degenerate. In ways by far outdoing Medusa’s realm of evil, Elizabeth is again confronted with her own sexual inadequacy and personal prejudices. Dan constantly works on the idea that she is not an African, she is not part of their show, she does not belong there and cannot react the way an African woman would to sexual advances. In a never-ending display, he parades all kinds of women before Elizabeth. At the same time he infests her days with twisted accounts of other people’s perversions. He undermines the innocent and normal; everything is “high sexual hysteria” (160). Yet she cannot free herself emotionally from him. She feels like a “rabbit trapped in helpless fascination by the powerful downward swoop of the hawk. It knows its death is near and awaits it, helplessly” (160).
Dan’s aim is to cause the fall of Sello. This he almost achieves. He twists and discredits Sello’s ideas for a better world until Elizabeth abandons him entirely. Sello now seems to alternate between lives of sainthood and spells of debauchery. He is “Jesus and the devil, too” (175).

Yet just when she reaches this, the lowest spiritual ebb, Sello says: “Elizabeth, love isn’t like that. Love is two people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the soul of the other like a ghoul!” (197). The softly spoken words from the weak Sello, diminished into insignificance before Dan’s all-dominating ostentation, suddenly sends shivers of renewed life through the battered Elizabeth, who is still blinded into believing that “living on the soul of the other is love. Thank you! Oh, God, thank you for the lever out of hell!” she cries in relief (198).

Sello’s words tip her centre of being back towards the ordinary. Everyday living with everyday kindness become important once more. Kenosi’s loyalty and painstaking stewardship of the garden; her son’s persistent trust in her; Tom’s untiring efforts to help her; Mrs Jone’s generosity of spirit, all confirm Elizabeth’s doctrine of the ordinary: “Ordinary people never mucked up the universe. They don’t have that kind of power, wild and flaring out of proportion. They have been the victims of it” (190). She sees that there is “no God like ordinary people. You’ll find Dan and Medusa in heaven and hell, but you won’t find ordinary human kindness and decency there. God in heaven is too important to be decent” (197). Elizabeth herself feels “as normal and ordinary as other people, yet she had been nearly killed in this rigmarole of hell” (200).

Sello’s and Dan’s attacks on Elizabeth frequently have her cowering; but in the final issue she is not cowed. Herein lies the strength of the victim. She is a necessary object on
which power can be exerted. But when power has destroyed her persecutors, she can pick up her life and continue living. Her passivity has become her strength.

In realising how narrow the division is between good and evil (161), Elizabeth also realises that goodness cannot be enforced. If a god figure is needed to enforce goodness, then he becomes the devil: “If the things of the souls are really a question of power, then anyone in possession of power of the spirit could be Lucifer” (199). She later realises that that was what Sello was trying to demonstrate to her by taking off his vesture garments: that goodness is vulnerable and that goodness devoid of power is love.

After her first breakdown Elizabeth regains her sanity by thinking that love is many variations of one theme—humility and equality. In an image which could have been taken directly from *Maru*, Elizabeth sees love as a young girl walking down the road to meet her lover. “And love was like a girl with wonder in her eyes. And love was like a girl with a flaming heart and impulsive arms. And love was so many things, so many variations of one theme: humility and equality— for when those men said: ‘Is it possible? Could you love me?’, thrones and kingdoms were of no account against the power of love” (54). This image has about it all the exclusiveness of romantic love.

Dan’s love is of this sort. He has shown it to her in the vision of the deep blue heaven where two people stand wrapped in an eternal embrace. They are surrounded by symbols of their love, grapevines with roots entwined, a roaring river symbolising powerful, all-consuming love: “There was nothing else, no people, no sharing” (108). Elizabeth’s recovery has depended on her understanding this: “She treasured the encounter with Dan. The suffering she had endured had sealed her Achilles’ heel; that of the brutal murderer for love”.

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With her journey to the depths of hell finally over, she once more thinks about love. Now she thinks of her love for Sello. Together, she feels, they have introduced “a softness and tenderness into mankind’s history”. They have

perfected the ideal of sharing everything and then they have perfectly shared everything with all mankind . . . It was the point at which there were no private hungers to be kissed, loved, adored. And yet there was a feeling of being kissed by everything; by the air, the soft flow of life, people’s smiles and friendships . . . That was the essential nature of their love for each other. It had included all mankind and . . . it equalised all things and all men (202).

Recovery from the nervous breakdown brings gradual healing to Elizabeth’s shattered nerves. She has learnt to accept herself as she is, personally, socially and politically. She has been forced to consider her own emotional life and has chosen service to others rather than self-indulgent forms of love. She has clarified her views on moral issues and acquired firm humanistic convictions. She has been able to surmount her feelings of isolation and alienation and place her hand on her land in a “gesture of belonging”.

In balancing the frenzied with the prosaic and using Elizabeth’s dogged structure to lead a normal existence to counterpoise the fierce internal struggle, Bessie Head believed that she had achieved a coherent structure for the novel. In the letter accompanying the manuscript she admitted that the novel was

either printable or totally unprintable. It is almost autobiographical but not in the usual way. The narrator or central character Elizabeth lives more in contact with her soul than living reality . . . It is an allegorical novel. It is about God and Dante’s inferno. Sello is the traditional image of God as Old Father Time, yet in no way does he give to Elizabeth a traditional explanation of God. He is doing several things at once—he is divesting himself of his vesture garments, he is partially recreating for Elizabeth the Fall of Man, he is slaying Lucifer or the killer dog power theme that has caused so much misery in human history. He goes about these activities in his own original way. Lucifer is Dan . . . He thinks as the original Lucifer did that he ought to be God, by himself, as his power impresses him . . . He cannot be God . . .

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unless he totally destroys both Elizabeth and Sello as they oppose power (1972: 24).

In calling the work “almost autobiographical”, Bessie Head is acknowledging the process of examining or reworking her own experiences in her three novels which has been progressively intensified. Seen together they constitute a trilogy; an untraditional trilogy in that the movement is inward rather than forward. The Sello-Dan theme is recognisably an extension of the Maru-Moleka one; though less pronounced, the tainted, ambiguous quality of goodness is also present in the earlier work.

As had been the case with both *Rain Clouds* and *Maru* and as her correspondence abundantly confirms, she once again transfers large areas of her everyday life directly into the novel, in this instance the Boiteko project. Important personalities she has known are included, either in symbolic form, such as the Father and Medusa, or as realistic, easily recognisable characters: the Eugene man, Kenosi, Shorty, for example, and Tom, whose name is not even changed.

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*A Question of Power*, Bessie Head has remarked, is “totally autobiographical”. However, despite its autobiographical elements, many of which relate to the mental breakdown that she suffered between 1970 and 1972, the novel shows a conscious articulation of her ideas about creative writing and continues the train of thought that is evident in *Maru*. In depicting Maru’s renunciation of power and Margaret’s exclusion from Moleka’s world, in that novel Bessie Head showed the artist awakening from “the common dream” and pursuing the “inner freedom” insistently referred to in *The Cardinals*. 

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Margaret’s spirit dies when the link with Moleka is broken but is revived when Maru takes her to a setting that she had been able to visualise through her creative imagination—a place where it is possible to be happy, though storms clouds threaten. The haunting fears symbolised by the storm clouds become a reality for the central character in *A Question of Power*, which shows the artist/visionary plunged once more into a world of unsettling and excruciatingly painful experiences.

In *A Question of Power*, the sense of well-being conveyed in the resolution of events in *Maru* is dissipated. The novel pictures the “nightmare side” of love and commitment, the “brutal, violent, ugly, possessive and dictatorial” nature that it may assume when the dominant partner in a relationship, whether the lover attempting to control the actions of the beloved or the leader binding the disciple to a cause, attempts to coerce the weaker. In reconstructing images that haunted her during her mental breakdown, Bessie Head suggests an analogy between the creative artist who becomes isolated in the attempt to maintain an independent outlook in a politically charged environment and the individual whose “links to the chain of existence” and events have snapped under the strain of loneliness and social discrimination. The autobiographical elements in the novel very directly mirror Bessie Head’s concerns as a creative artist, while presenting yet another perspective on the machinations of the “power-mad”.

In *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head represents the abstraction of “power” in concrete terms. The novel may be read as an allegory of ideas in which the central characters represent aspects of a single idea. Using the mode of the dream vision, Bessie Head organises the narrative to make sense at the literal level, which describes the adjustment of a newcomer to a hostile environment. As with *Maru*, no one explanation can
fit, and a particular one will ignore other possible readings. An analogy may, in effect, be drawn between Bessie Head’s text and the dream that is its basic motif. As C.G. Jung has observed, for example: “A great work of art is like a dream; for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is always ambiguous. A dream never says ‘you ought’ or ‘this is the truth’. It presents an image in much the same way as nature allows a plant to grow, and it is up to us to ‘draw conclusions’” (1984: 104). In A Question of Power the use of the dream motif serves both to develop multiple meanings in the text and to incorporate the principle of organic form.

Questions relating to the nature and exercise of power are explored as they affect Bessie Head’s personal life and her role as a creative artist, social relationships in South Africa and Botswana and the conflict of values and ideals in the production of culture. Maru brought out clearly the extent to which aspects of Bessie Head’s experience in South Africa and Botswana had become fused in her thinking. Both were examples of “internal colonialism” in which members of a racially defined elite oppressed, exploited, and disenfranchised groups whom they regarded as inferior. As a Coloured person in South Africa, Bessie Head had also, at times, felt excluded from black organisations. She thus saw herself as having something in common with a Masarwa in Tswana society.

The paradigms of dominance and oppression developed in the novel in relation to Botswana and South Africa raise questions about the most viable means of achieving political liberation. Such questions are explored in the context of black political activism in South Africa and nationalist activities in societies in transition from colonialism to political independence. The question whether African nationalism should become committed to the use of violence or pursue non-violent positive action in the Gandhian way had, in fact, been
debated by some African leaders. In the context of this debate, the Kenyan politician Tom Mboya had observed, for example: “It is not possible . . . to use in Africa the same Gandhian methods which were successful in India. The circumstances are entirely different and the spiritual approach does not seem to be easily transplantable to African soil” (1963: 45). In *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head considers “the spiritual approach” in the context of Africa and, in the process, the situation of the artist caught up in a cycle of violence.

The issues relating to the use of violence to combat oppression or initiate social change, the novel indicates, are perennial and universal. The recourse to violence, it suggests, points ultimately to a conception of God; the advocate of violence imagines an autocratic and whimsical deity imposing conditions from above through coercion. Imagining God in this way, Bessie Head shows, is destructive of both the individual and the society. In contrast, she sets her own egalitarian idea of a God who is observable in ordinary individuals in “moments of pure manifestation”. D.H. Lawrence wrote, “The gods are all things, and so are we. The gods are only ourselves, as we are in our moments of pure manifestation” (1964: 673).

The themes of the novel are mediated through the experiences of Elizabeth, a Coloured schoolteacher from an urban South African environment who is living in a village in Botswana with her young son. A victim of demoralising social conditions in South Africa, she sees the world as largely hostile. Elizabeth’s black African father had worked as a stable boy for her English mother’s family. Her parentage, thus, crosses not only racial lines but also social classes. Moreover, she is a product of an urban syncretic culture that has moved away from traditional ways. She is living in a largely tribal environment where, as she reflects, she is “an out-and-out outsider and would never be *in on their things.*”*
An important influence on Elizabeth in South Africa had been Hinduism: she had married a Coloured former convict largely because of his professed interest in Hindu philosophy. Influenced by such philosophical ideas and inclined to avoid overt political action, she wonders which is the right response to oppression and humiliation. Answers to questions raised by her South African experiences, she feels, “lay in her experiences in Botswana” (19). After a period in Botswana she reflects, for example: “The evils overwhelming her were beginning to sound like South Africa from which she had fled. The reasoning, the viciousness were the same, but this time the faces were black and it was not local people. It was large, looming soul personalities” (57). Elizabeth’s experiences in Botswana, in effect, lead her to focus on patterns in human behaviour rather than on individual instances of cruelty and hatred.

“Motabeng” the name of the village in which the novel is set, means “the place of sand” (19). Elizabeth privately renames it “The Village of the Rain-Wind” (20), thus identifying it with Serowe. In *A Question of Power*, the struggle for physical survival in barren territory is still the paradigm of the conflicts between characters. The village of Motabeng, which is situated near the Kalahari desert, is very much like Golema Mmidi in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Motabeng experiences “desert rain” which “dried up before it reached the ground” (20), but the inhabitants of Motabeng, like the villagers in Golema Mmidi, are aware of hidden reserves of water underground. At the outset, Elizabeth detects a “cruel side” to this “otherwise beautiful society” (21). Witchcraft, for example, which is much whispered about, seems to her, initially, only “a permanent adult game that should really have been relegated to children” (21). Gradually, however, she feels herself being pulled in by the undercurrents of village life. Barely three months after her arrival in
Motabeng she begins to have strange and unsettling nightmares. As her nightmares become more disturbing, any contentment she had felt in village life disappears and Elizabeth gives way to the hatred and despair she had tried to suppress. Consequently, she suffers a mental breakdown.

Elizabeth's mental breakdown and recovery are depicted as analogous with a journey through semi-darkness and danger. Her journey fits into the tripartite scheme of the *rites de passage* – initiation (disruption of a pattern of existence or entry into unfamiliar territory), disintegration (breakdown of the former pattern), and reintegration, which imply the ability to achieve a balanced outlook and participate effectively in the life of the community on returning to it. Elizabeth identifies her experience as a "soul journey", which she associates with medieval allegory and romance: "Journeys into the soul are not for women with children, not all that dark heaving turmoil. They are for men, and the toughest of them took off into the solitude of the forest and fought out their battles with hell in deep seclusion" (50). She thus compares herself implicitly, for example, with the traveller in the dark wood at the opening of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the knight questing for the Holy Grail, or the religious recluse. Gillian Stead Eilersen has rightly put, in his book "Bessie Head: Thunder behind her Ears", that Bessie Head made this connection, for example, in her observation "It is an allegorical novel. It is about God and Dante's inferno" (1995: 149). However, while Elizabeth's experiences highlight the conflict between spiritual and material values, they point to Bessie Head's concerns as a writer, for they are also used as a means of exploring the relative power of ideas and action in the shaping of a culture.

Two principal male figures, Sello and Dan, appear in Elizabeth's nightmares. Realistic descriptions suggest the vividness with which they materialise in her consciousness
and convey distinct impressions of character. A comparison may be made, for example, with James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, in which, Hans Meyerhof has observed, “the time involved is the entire past of human history”, and “the personal identity of the central characters” may actually become suspended or transformed, through the use of myth and allusions to literary antecedents, into “an identity of human types” (1961: 41). Sello in his “present evolution” (62-63) is African, as are the characters with whom he interacts in Elizabeth’s dreams.

As in *Maru* and the earlier novels, naming is a significant aspect of characterisation that helps to define the thematic focus of the novel. “Sello” an ordinary name which, as Gillian Stead Eilersen has pointed out, was that of Stephen Sello, an official African National Congress (ANC) representative among the South African refugees in Serowe, develops a variety of associations in the narrative. Like Maru, Sello is given specific lunar associations. He is identified, for example, with the Egyptian god Osiris. Lunar associations are further suggested by the partial correspondence on his name with that of the Greek moon goddess Selene. A possible further association for Sello, who is associated with religion, is with the Selli, the priests of Zeus, but Sello’s various manifestations also suggest ordinary associations of the word -- the hermit’s cell, a room in a monastery, the “hell” of Elizabeth’s nightmares.

“Dan” represents the first syllable of “Dangoh,” a name among the Khoisan people for “a Devil, a black chief, who does much harm to them.” I. Schapera has observed, Dan is elsewhere mentioned as one of a triad with Mawu and Lisa (1930: 387). Where Sello’s associations are lunar, Dan’s are solar, and it is worth noting, therefore that “Dan” is an
appellation of the sun god in Assyrian mythology, who is in some sources identified with Satan.

As Gertrude Jobes has rightly put, Elizabeth seems the least remarkable of the names of the central figures in the narrative. An examination of its etymology is, however, instructive. Elizabeth is derived through Greek from the Hebrew Elisheba, meaning "worshiper of god" (1962: 505). The meaning of the name clearly has reference to the themes of the novel and helps to define Elizabeth's position in relation to Sello and Dan, who in turn dominate her nightmares. Other meanings of her name, such as "consecrated to God" and "glorious within", can be associated with different stages of development, connoting, in the first instance, commitment and, in the second, the sense of exaltation that the traveller, having overcome dangers and temptations, experiences at the end of the journey.

In describing Elizabeth's dreams/nightmares, Bessie Head blends material from different cultural and literary traditions. The tradition of the inspired vision that is referred to in the epigraph to the novel, for example, belongs to a wide body of scriptural writing and oral narrative. Elizabeth’s dreams, to begin with, however, are the result of an inner conflict that is specifically related to the cultural environment in which she lives. In African as in Western tradition, the dream is regarded as a symptom of inner conflict. Elizabeth’s nightmares are linked to the African environment, where, as Monica Wilson has observed: "long before Freud analysed the dreams of his Viennese patients, it was understood that dreams were an expression of inner conflict, before Erikson spoke of the loss of identity, African villagers talked of those with majestic authority casting a shadow (nesitunzi in Xhosa) and those torn within casting no shadow (1971: 75). Elizabeth's deteriorating
mental state is thus traceable to social causes and is symptomatic of unhealthy social conditions.

Elizabeth’s mental breakdown may be attributed, to begin with, to her abnormal relationship with the community. She harbors feelings of resentment and anger because of earlier oppression and humiliation and because of her isolation. She lives in a community where there is a deep-rooted belief that “if a man is alone with his thoughts, he may think of some mischief he can do” (1981: 40). Elizabeth’s awareness of this, together with her tendency to pursue an individual line of thinking, creates feelings of guilt, which arise also from a too strong sense of individualism in a society where a communal ethic prevails, a situation that clearly parallels that of the writer whose vision does not reflect the “common dream”. Her anger, resentment, and guilt are like evil powers that guide her thoughts and prevent her from forming healthy social relationships.

Elizabeth identifies the figures Sello and Dan who appear in her dreams with two black African men whom she has seen in the village, thus giving further local reference to her nightmares. The situation in which a Coloured woman, like Elizabeth, who feels largely excluded from local social activities, is being haunted by apparitions of black men is also related to patterns of thought in her immediate environment. As Monica Wilson has observed, “where there are rigid prohibitions of marriage within a clan or colour caste, then there are stories of demon lovers who have all the attributes of the prohibited category” (1971: 36-37). In the largely tribal village of Motabeng, Elizabeth is not only an outsider but also someone whose status is unclear. She is an unattached woman grappling with problems of race and sexuality. She is a powerless, marginal individual who, in contrast with the figures who dominate her thoughts or “cast a shadow” over her, is “torn within” and is of

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little importance in the community. Again a parallel may be recognised with Bessie Head, the Coloured woman, overshadowed by black activist politicians.

In depicting Elizabeth’s disturbed mental condition, Bessie Head relates it to creative as well as pathological aspects of psychoanalytical theory. Having suffered through a series of nightmares, Elizabeth ultimately achieves a state of equilibrium with an admitted psychobiographical dimension. The nature of the conflict in her mind is associated with intellectual activity as, for example, when she reflects, “The wild-eyed Medusa was expressing the surface reality of African society. It was shut-in and exclusive. It had a strong theme on power-worship running through it, and power people needed small, narrow shut-in worlds. They never felt secure in the big, wide, flexible universe where there were too many cross-currents of opposing thought. She was disturbed by the awakening conflict. Other nations, harsh climates, high peaks of endeavour and suffering had shaped her soul” (38). Elizabeth’s thoughts clearly turn on an inability to conform to the mood of the moment and a sense of difference stemming from a universalist stance among people who are inclined to think narrowly.

An important influence on Bessie Head’s method is the tradition of the gothic novel, which also used psychodrama to convey sustained political and social analysis. In gothic novels figures disappear and reappear in inexplicable ways, as the central character has repeated nightmare visions in the same room. As Fiona Robertson has observed, the main characters in *A Question of Power* are recognisable as gothic character types. Elizabeth typifies the persecuted woman who falls into an “abyss of isolation, incomprehension and helplessness”, that threatens to “distort permanently [her] perception of the ordered and comprehensible social world” (1994: 193-94). Sello’s character recalls a stock figure in
gothic novels suggesting both the good monk who offers comfort and the prideful and hypocritical prelate who exercises a sinister power, as, for example, the good monk in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and the ambivalent and sinister Schedoni in her *The Italian*. In characterising Sello, Bessie Head hints at the sinister power that religious leaders have traditionally exercised over ordinary people and thus touches on another important preoccupation in gothic novels, which, as Chris Baldick has observed, are concerned with "religious delusions and bigotry" (1989: xii). Dan is clearly the philanderer, "destructive, unprincipled, self-indulgent, subversive" (206). He is both the dashing hero and the tyrannical lover. An actor of consummate ability with a strong sense of superiority, he demonstrates his power in a variety of ways.

Fitting her characters into the conventions of the gothic novel allowed Bessie Head to deal with evil in creative terms and to introduce magical elements in the novel. As Craig MacKenzie has observed in his book on Bessie Head, *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*, "the main function of a writer is to make life magical and to communicate a sense of wonder" (1990: 67). By giving the figures that haunted her psyche literary as well as social equivalents, she also expanded the meaning of the text, moving the experiences described beyond the personal level. As Margaret does with her paintings in *Maru*, Bessie Head regulates the flow of images (in Elizabeth's case also obsessional forms) produced by her creative imagination by organising them into a meaningful pattern and demonstrates, in the process, both a relationship and a difference between life and art.

As Fiona Robertson has rightly put, Elizabeth's dreams eventually plunge her into madness – one of the "tropes of cultural malaise" (1994: 197). Bessie Head's use of this trope, in particular, her heroine's progress from dreaming to madness, suggests comparisons
with well-known eighteenth-century novelists, among them "pioneer women writers" whom she admired. Madness, as Margaret Anne Doody has observed was for eighteenth-century women novelists a characteristic image of feminine pain: "The women novelists themselves became fond of presenting female characters who temporarily lose their reason and enter into a heightened state of morbid perceptiveness. . . . The women novelists also found in the presentation of an extraordinarily irrational state a means of expressing the extreme of feminine pain" (1977: 546). As Bessie Head's other novels do, however, A Question of Power reveals a variety of influences even in the portrayal of a single circumstance, as Bessie Head develops the motif of sexual persecution and transposes it into contemporary terms by the use of explicit sexual details and specific references to continuing patterns of male dominance in African societies.

The racial circumstances surrounding Elizabeth's persecution also suggest, for example, correspondences between her situation and that of Bertha Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, which influenced the characterisation of Mouse/Charlotte Smith in The Cardinals. In Bessie Head's case, as in that of her character Elizabeth, who kept "books [by writers she loved] beside her bed and each night read and re-read their most glorious soaring passages" (148), fictional characters (figments of the imagination) came to life to impose their personalities on individuals whom she encountered in her daily routine. As Joyce Johnson has observed, Bessie Head uses gothic imagery not only to make a point about "female pain" but also to develop parallels between the overcharged imagination of the mad person and the "expanded consciousness" of the artist, thus suggesting both the pathological and the creative operations of the imagination. One may compare Ayi Kwei Armah's use of this metaphor in Fragments (1982: 497-510).
While the influences of a particular literary period are evident in *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head’s method, as demonstrated so far, is eclectic. Moreover, she is concerned not only with the situation of the writer in the contemporary Southern African literary milieu but also with the role of the creative artist/intellectual over time. Elizabeth, Sello, and Dan are thus identified, severally, with mythic prototypes who are associated with significant stages in human history. Sello, for example, is recognizable as a portrait of the archetypal healer, teacher, and wizard. This archetype of "the helper and redeemer", on the one hand, and the "magician, deceiver, corrupter and tempter," on the other, C.G. Jung has observed, has "lain buried and dormant in the unconscious since the dawn of history; it is awakened whenever the times are out of joint and a great error deflects society from the right path" (1984: 103). As Craig Mackenzie has observed, Elizabeth’s personal history and the social environment in which it unfolds indicate that “the time is out of joint”, and, as in *Maru*, Bessie Head contemplates the way forward for the creative writer who attempts to “dream dreams a little ahead of the somewhat vicious clamour of revolution and the horrible stench of evil social systems (1990: 28).

(ii)

The novel is written in two parts, the first titled “Sello” and the second “Dan”. A more detailed examination of the text reveals the extraordinary layering of meaning that Bessie Head has achieved in this novel through the use of figurative language, symbol and allusion. As noted earlier, Bessie Head had remarked that *Maru* gave her a chance to show
off her learning, and in *A Question of Power*, she demonstrates as wide a frame of reference as in her earlier novel.

While Sello is identified specifically as African and is associated with various mythic figures and fictional characters, he is also a personification of human striving for perfection. As the prototype of the individual struggling to achieve moral perfection, Sello is identified with humankind as a whole rather than "with a particular environment" (11). His striving is shared by a woman who is later identified with Elizabeth who "paralleled his inner development"; they are "twin souls with closely - linked destinies" (11). To begin with he is associated with religion: "Say Einstein, for instance, had, at some dim beginning of his soul, decided that science was the best profession for him. And over the centuries, throughout all his incarnations, he had worked at science, till he became expert in his chosen field. Then the same process applied to Sello. He had chosen religion" (25). Elizabeth's role becomes clear when Sello is further characterised as "the creative function, the dreamer of new dreams" (42).

Sello first appears in Elizabeth's dreams one night three months after her arrival in Motabeng. She is not sure whether she is awake or asleep, and after that "the dividing line between dream perceptions and waking reality was to become confused" (22). She is visited by the apparition for several nights before she develops a clear visual impression of him. His dress and aspect suggest someone who has been subjected to spiritual ordeals. Donning and shedding garments are important motifs in the novel suggesting not only passing from sight (death) but also metaphorphosis. They refer to the idea of the body as a covering for the soul, thus linking texts as different as *The Bhagavath Gita* and poems by English seventeenth-century poets like Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan. But his manner is
reassuring: "He wore the soft, white, flowing robes of a monk, but in a peculiar fashion, with his shoulders slightly hunched forward, as though it were a prison garment. He stared straight at Elizabeth in a friendly way and said in a voice of quiet affection: 'My friend'" (22). He reminds Elizabeth of someone she has seen in the village but suggests also a figure of great spiritual authority: "He looked like a man she has seen about the village of Motabeng who drove a green truck, but the name she associated in her mind with the monk - robed man was that of an almost universally adored God" (23). The God who first comes to mind is Buddha: "Elizabeth turned and looked at Sello. He averted his face. It was Buddha, and the only face she had acquired apart from Sello" (sic) (32).

Sello, an idealised vision of the African man that she projects onto a man whom she has seen in the village and Buddhism, which accepts suffering as a condition of life, are Elizabeth's two points of reference at this time. Wearing his monk's robes like "a prison garment" the apparition represents both those who suffer and those who have the capacity to rise above oppression through submission to discipline. Sello's vulnerability, which is later emphasised, indicates that the ideas associated with him may be misused and distorted, as happens, for example, when he is overwhelmed by Medusa, a figure Bessie Head uses to represent irrationality and fanaticism, among other things.

Having identified Sello with religion and, by extension, with moral and spiritual concerns, Elizabeth associates him variously with other religious leaders over time and universalises the reference of her experiences. Mention of Buddha introduces the idea of the great teacher, who forgoes the opportunity to withdraw from engagement with people and events to continue to work for the good of humankind. This reflects an important aspect of Bessie Head's thinking as it relates to the writer's commitment. Buddha is significant not
only as a spiritual leader but also as an example of a committed individual who renounced public life and direct political action but worked toward enlightenment. The example of Buddha also suggests the persistence and evolution of beliefs implied by a succession of avatars. The parallels between religion and “poetry” are again obvious. Both religious beliefs and literary traditions are kept alive not by a single individual but by a succession of individuals sharing a vision and devoting themselves to a common purpose.

As Elizabeth’s nightmares continue, Sello is associated with specific historical figures and individuals in the contemporary period who have worked to achieve racial equality to improve the material conditions of living in South Africa. On some occasions, for example, Sello merges into the person of an Asian who preaches Gandhian ideas of tolerance and respect for the poor. On one occasion he “walks into” a figure who is referred to as “the Father” and who is identifiable with the South African philanthropist Patrick van Rensburg, whom Bessie Head mentions in Serowe. Such individuals are subsumed in the personality of Sello as part of an ongoing idea in the process of social evolution.

As David Philip has observed, as in the The Cardinals Bessie Head’s representation of the turmoil in Elizabeth’s mind is clearly an attempt to objectify her own struggle as a creative artist confronted with the issue of commitment by suggesting “parallel developments”. While she consciously accepted that “the task of the writer is to serve humanity and not party politicians and their temporary fixations” (1993: 100), her conscious will, like Elizabeth’s, was persistently undermined by the pressure of events that are represented in the novel as the operations of the unconscious. This is in keeping with C.G. Jung’s observation, for example: “Whenever the creative force predominates, life is ruled and shaped by the unconscious rather than the conscious will, and the ego is swept along on
an underground current, becoming nothing more than a helpless observer of events" (1984: 103). As Craig Mackenzie has observed, "as a victim of oppression, Bessie Head instinctively identified with the underdog, ‘the poor of Africa’. Conscious reflection and traumatic personal experiences, however, showed the underdog as he really is ... a passionate person without any nice, fancy manners, who could be revolting” (1990: 48).

Elizabeth’s “conversations” with Sello continue for more than three years, with interruptions by Dan, who looks on cynically. At first, Elizabeth hopes that Sello’s teaching will help her to control unhealthy impulses stemming from a sense of isolation and experience of discrimination. In other terms, she attempts to find answers to problems that perplex her through intellectual inquiry, which is represented by Sello’s teaching. In the dream imagery, Sello introduces her to a spectacular array of personalities from the past who reflect his achievement as the “prophet of mankind” (44). These scenes that he creates are clearly a metaphor for the process by which Elizabeth acquires a knowledge of the past, and of those who have fought spiritual battles for the sake of humankind. Such knowledge infuses her with brotherly love, as she reviews the process of social evolution through which some societies have moved away from situations in which a few entirely manipulated power to oppress the many, to one in which ordinary people have begun to recognise their capabilities. However, given the extent to which her own life has been dominated by the “vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks” (19), she cannot sustain faith in Sello’s vision. Moreover, the record also shows how religious belief has been misused and the intellect swayed by the passions.

With the introduction of Medusa, Elizabeth’s nightmares highlight the irrational and fanatical aspects of spirituality and morality, bringing also to the fore the analogies with
political ideology. In confronting Elizabeth, Medusa represents not only those tendencies in
the community that destroy social harmony and work against the effort to achieve perfection
but also the evil impulses within herself. The individual, Elizabeth recognises, may be
seduced as much by the "direct and tangible form of his own evils, his power lusts, his
greeds, his self-importance" (40), as the community is by agencies promulgating hatred and
prejudice.

Medusa, the gorgon, a standard metaphor for forces perceived as harmful to society,
also suggests the unsympathetic gaze of a "coldly satirical eye" the phrase is from George
Eliot's Amos Barton: Scenes of Clerical Life (1983: 40), that may inhabit the aspiring artist.
This image of a pre-Hellenic mother goddess combines the opposed principles of life and
death, and thus represents both creative and destructive potential. Bessie Head's remarks
elsewhere indicate that Medusa in A Question of Power is meant to personify both good and
evil. In A Woman Alone, for example, she points out that this character was partially drawn
on her African American friend of two years who was married to a Motswana. Bessie Head
observed of this friend, a woman with a strong social conscience, who had questioned her
resolve as a writer to remain politically uninvolved: "I think that why she said all those
things to me - that I wasn't a genuine African, that I only longed to eat good food and that I
might accidentally find myself with the damned on judgement day. Because who was going
to feed the poor while I communicated peacefully with my God" (A Woman Alone, 47).
While Bessie Head recognised the compassion which moved her friend, she found her
strident in her expressions of sympathy for the underdog. In Bessie Head's view, the appeal
of power is even more insidious when a dominant personality is struck by compassion. As
Wilson Harris has observed, in the character of Medusa, Bessie Head thus depicts
“manoeuvres by which humanity (all parties claim to work for humanity) reinforces a bias, reinforces its deprivations into a self-righteous cult, a self-righteous polarisation, a self-righteous ghetto” (1989: 18). In her own case, she decided not to be a member of particular faction, observing “My writing is not on anybody’s bandwagon. It is on the sidelines where I can more or less think things out with a clear head” (1959: 230). While concerned about political and social oppression, Bessie Head took a view rather like that of Bertolt Brecht. In Brecht’s work, as Martin Esslin has observed: “The poor are mean and the rich are ruthless and cruel. Repeatedly Brecht demonstrates his thesis that the suffering poor, if given a chance to get on top, would be as greedy and heartless as the vulgar rapacious businessmen he so delighted in putting before his audience” (1959: 230).

As associated with Sello, Medusa attempts to impose on Elizabeth a form of allegiance to the oppressed born out of an awareness of, and compassion for, suffering. At the same time, she forces Elizabeth, who has been trying to concentrate on instances of human interaction revealing “the compassion and tenderness with which people regarded each other, the uncertainties of questing within, the lack of assertion and dominance” (42), to contemplate scenes of ugliness and perversion. Bessie Head thus refers to the situation of the artist whose attempt to construct a positive vision of reality is undermined by the pointed reminders and seductive arguments of those wanting to influence her. More specifically she refers to pressures she felt in her own environment, for Medusa shows a narrowly localised view.

Medusa, as suggested earlier, is also a projection of Elizabeth’s own weakness, her taunts revealing Elizabeth’s special areas of vulnerability. Medusa tempts Elizabeth to
devalue moral and intellectual concerns, to give way to hateful thoughts and indulge herself sexually. In Elizabeth’s nightmares, she flaunts her body: “Without any bother for decencies, she sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation travelled out of her toward Elizabeth. . . . It was like falling into deep warm waters, lazily raising one hand and resting in a heaven of bliss. Then she looked at Elizabeth and smiled, a mocking superior smile. “You haven’t got anything near that, have you?” (44). Images of falling and being submerged are linked with that of a haven that is later associated with exclusivity and elitism. In response to the invitation to abandon her own system of values and compete on Medusa’s level, Elizabeth reflects that the vagina was “not such a pleasant area of the body to concentrate on, possibly only now and then if necessary” (44). This is not, as Lewis Nkosi has suggested, an indication of the author’s “profoundest conviction” about the “insignificance of sex” (1981: 102). Bessie Head is primarily interested in using Medusa as a figure linking different layers of meaning in the novel. While Medusa’s taunting of Elizabeth conveys in imagistic terms the idea of a lonely young woman tempted to abandon control in the contemporary environment that promotes sexual freedom, it is also a metaphor with more general implications. In the mythological sources on which Bessie Head draws, and within the framework of the dream, sexual excess is a metaphor for other types of excess, and the emotions stemming from sexual passion are often opposed to the forces of reason or the pursuit of spiritual perfection. The sexual language of dreams, C.G. Jung has observed, “is, in fact, an archaic language which naturally uses all the analogies readiest to hand without their necessarily coinciding with a real sexual content” (1974: 49). Clearly one of the things that Medusa tempts Elizabeth to do is to centre her life on the sensual rather than the spiritual. The escape into sensuality is not only a temptation for the
religious devotee but also a direction taken at times by creative artists rebelling against the contemporary orthodoxy.

Medusa also taunts Elizabeth about her lack of involvement and inability to participate fully in the life of the community. Playing the roles of both "rhetorician" and "sentimentalist", she claims moral superiority and promulgates uncritically the idea of "the deserving poor", an error into which naïve humanitarians and reformers are often led. Thus she tells Elizabeth, "I am greater than you in goodness" (37). She suggests that as a Coloured woman Elizabeth cannot communicate effectively with black Africans: "Africa is troubled waters. I'm a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You'll only drown here. You're not linked upto the people. You don't know any African languages" (44). Reference to "troubled waters", as Margaret Anne Doody has noted, "occurs frequently in the dream imagery of gothic novels" (1997: 554).

Medusa's observations, which raise the issue of cultural authenticity, mirror Elizabeth's own thoughts and reflect the kind of self-doubt that Bessie Head, a Coloured writer working in an environment of black nationalism, might have experienced. As heroines in gothic novels are, she is made to feel guilty for things over which she has little control. Her suffering cannot be explained and cannot be attributed to any specific wrongdoing. "Anticipating the heroes of the Waverley Novels", Fiona Robertson has observed, "characters in Gothic cannot speak out, fail to respond with the right words to accusations and interrogations and have their powers of independent speech suspended by eloquent figures of power" (1994: 81). They are, she also points out, "defined by their passivity" (107). Elizabeth, however, also lives in a society in which "something is evil because it is punished" (207). A passive figure, Elizabeth cannot defend herself against
Medusa's criticisms. Medusa, in effect, challenges her as the hostile critic often does the creative writer, about her relationship with the people, her ability to speak their language, and her passivist outlook.

The breakdown in Elizabeth's mental condition becomes apparent to others in the community soon after these visitations by Medusa. Her inner conflict takes over her existence and leads to a public display of anger that becomes so violent that she has to be hospitalised. On her release from the hospital, where she is kept only briefly, she finds herself, unable to continue teaching. The school board requires a certificate of sanity, and Elizabeth herself has arrived at the conclusion that teaching is not her vocation. She appeals to the South African Eugene, who finds her work in the vegetable garden that is part of his project at the local elementary school and where he wants to copy some of the methods being taught by the Danish agricultural officers attached to the Motabeng secondary school. This gives Elizabeth contact with influences that make her, for a brief period, more resilient. She even manages to achieve her dream of "a small whitewashed house" (69-70). Recalling Johnny's and Mouse's house repeatedly referred to in The Cardinals, this reminds us of the continuity in Bessie Head's use of imagery (1993:63, 78, 104).

The mood of the story changes with the description of Elizabeth's initial involvement in the gardening project. There are several lively "snapshots" of the individuals with whom she interacts, which recall Bessie Head's technique in her short stories, vivid, economical description touched with ironic humour. Two women among the Danish agricultural officers and school teachers attract Elizabeth's attention particularly — Camilla, who in a strident and overbearing way demands friendship, and Birgitte, "the bookworm", who is quiet and withdrawn. Elizabeth perceives Camilla as an ingrained...
racialist and is surprised when the seemingly unassuming Birgitte is able to exert pressure on her to change her behaviour in a positive way. In depicting Elizabeth’s interaction with the Danish women, Bessie Head reiterates views on writing that were articulated in *The Cardinals*. Elizabeth notes that Camilla, who helps to supervise the garden project, cannot express herself clearly even to an educated person like her: “She flung information at her in such a way as to make it totally incomprehensible and meaningless, subtly demonstrating that to reach her level of education Elizabeth had to be able to grasp the incoherent” (76). Moreover, Camilla is made to observe rather grandly: “In our country culture has become so complex, this complexity is reflected in our literature. It takes a certain level of education to understand our novelists. The ordinary man cannot understand them” (79). As Camilla reels off a list of authors, Elizabeth reflects wryly: “It never occurred to her that those authors had ceased to be of any value whatsoever to their society – or was it really true that an extreme height of culture and the incomprehensible went hand in hand?” (79). One is led to recall Johnny’s observations to Mouse in *The Cardinals*: “I don’t care for very obscure and intellectual writers. I do not see why many interesting ideas cannot be expressed in short, simple sentences. Long, involved diatribes and obscure meanings confuse and bore the mind. The longer a sentence is, the harder it is to grasp” (1993: 92-93). In *A Question of Power*, as in *The Cardinals*, Bessie Head sees simplicity of expression and proper integration of ideas as essential to communication.

The routines of the farming project, caring for her son, the kindness of individuals, and the example of her co-worker Kenozi give Elizabeth’s life some stability. Medusa, however, continues her visitations with Sello of the brown suit looking on. Around Christmas time, when routines become relaxed and Elizabeth’s loneliness becomes more
pronounced, she falls into “a crashing depression” (91) and begins to doubt Sello’s power to determine the future: “He had defined the future, in African terms, as one of unpromising goodness. It had been fixed for her securely in his earlier attitudes. Then he had tried to weave Medusa into this structure. She was too powerful a personality for his methods: the slow interweaving pattern of life where one thing influenced another, where cells formed and re-formed in a natural way without violence. Why did he display only that aspect of Medusa? Why had he occupied himself all the time with evil?” (95-96). In general terms, Elizabeth questions the necessity for the “relentless cruelty and hatred” (92) manifested in the evolution of culture, which is usually understood as a striving toward moral and intellectual excellence. In more specific terms, Bessie Head refers to the loss of faith among African writers, who became disillusioned with political leaders with whom they had worked to achieve the common goal of national independence. The writers did not anticipate the conflicts that would arise in the aftermath of independence.

The growth of antagonism between the writer and the politician was outlined by Wole Soyinka, at a conference in 1967:

When the writer woke from his opium dream of metaphysical abstractions, he found that the politician had used his absence from earth to consolidate his position; more often than not the writer, who in any case belonged to the same or a superior intellectual class, rationalised his situation and refused to deny himself the rewards of joining writers in safety and comfort. . . . When he is purged from the long deception and has begun to express new wisdoms, the gates of the preventive-detention fortresses open up and close on him. He becomes on exile (1969: 18).

Elizabeth’s journey with Sello and Medusa, the fanatical spirit that is equally subversive of religious or political ideals, allegorises the troubled relationship between writers and
politicians, as well as Bessie Head's own anxieties about the relevance of her work to her sociopolitical environment.

Elizabeth, as Bessie Head does in her writing elsewhere, rebels against a condition of life where destructive and creative forces cannot be separated and isolated and wonders whether the agencies of evil have overcome goodness or whether suffering has been inflicted on her merely to demonstrate her helplessness. Sello's failure to restrain Medusa clearly allegorises the erosion of benign cultural influences by forces of anarchy and the collapse of ideas under the weight of events. Elizabeth, thus, rejects what Sello stands for. Her examination of the patterns of knowledge and beliefs of the past, both African and European, can neither explain nor nullify the power of evil. Sello's goodness seems coterminous with passivity, and she must attempt to discover an alternative and more dynamic response to her situation. This change in outlook is depicted in her relationship with Dan, who assumes ascendancy over her mind as Sello's influence wanes.

Elizabeth's first impression of Dan is described in imagery suggesting the renewal of the creative impulse – the dawning of a new day, birdsong, a limitless horizon, and sunrise: "The dawn came. The soft shifts and changes of light stirred with a slow wonder over the vast expanse of the African sky. A small bird in a tree outside awoke and trilled loudly. The soft cool air, so fresh and full of the perfume of the bush, swirled around her face and form as she stood watching the sun thrust one powerful, majestic golden arm above the horizon" (100). The rising of the sun is also, however, a standard metaphor in traditional African poetry for the arrival of the chief. As the sun moving across the horizon, Dan represents the chief both as the authority on practical matters and as a symbol of strength and virility whose magical powers ensure the well-being of the nation and the fertility of the
land. In opposition to Sello, Dan is associated in the novel with the popular nationalist leader in a contemporary postcolonial society. His ascendancy marks a new orientation in the society when political issues have displaced spiritual and intellectual concerns. It also refers to the context mentioned earlier when intellectuals and writers were "thrust" aside when they failed to endorse the political leader’s policies. Contemptuous of Sello, Elizabeth is ready to pursue the promise of the new day heralded by this rising “sun”, and the first part of the novel ends with a reference to her changed commitment: “May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds” (100).

At the beginning of the novel, where Sello was associated with “the things of the spirit” (11-12), Dan was associated with the passions, promising “a fierce forever relationship with wonderful music and fantastic thrills and sensations” (12). In part two, Dan is more specifically associated with public life and political action. Appearing suddenly on the (political) horizon and identified, as is Moleka, with a power that may become oppressive as it becomes more intense, he is clearly the prototype of the individual who expects to be “visibly and speedily important, and to rule and cut a figure in the world”.

Bessie Head’s depiction of Sello, who is clearly a “believer in culture”, and Dan, a “believer in action”, recalls, Matthew Arnold’s discussion in Culture and Anarchy. “The true business of culture,” Arnold observed, is to “get men to allow their thoughts and consciousness to play on their stock notions and habits disinterestedly and freely; to get men to try, in preference to staunchly acting with imperfect knowledge, to obtain some sounder basis of knowledge on which to act”. The “friends of culture” should thus not expect “to take the believers in action by storm or to be visibly important, and to rule and cut a figure in the world” (1994: 37). Arnold’s views correspond with aspects of Bessie Head’s thinking
(e.g., her disapproval of people who want to be important) just as his further comment applies to a situation she had accepted in regard to herself; “But, if despondency and violence are both of them forbidden to the believer in culture, yet neither, on the other hand, is public life and direct political action much permitted to him” (1994: 138).

The novel offers a brief but significant physical description of “the living man” with whom Elizabeth identifies Dan and the social circle in which he moves:

The details of the living man were scant. He ordered a fantastic array of suits from somewhere, and he was short, black and handsome. He was the friend of Sello, so people said. Someone told her that he was also greatly admired for being an African nationalist in a country where people were only concerned about tribal affairs. Otherwise the circle of the people he moved amongst were so removed from the sorts of people she associated with as to make his way of life a total mystery. They were frighteningly scornful and aloof, and generally wore dark glasses. Sello belonged in that circle too (104).

Sello’s presence in Dan’s circle is not surprising, for Sello too is a member of the elite. There were, of course, writers who continued to collaborate with oppressive regimes to ensure their own safety and to protect their interests.

Elizabeth cannot exist comfortably in Dan’s circle. As she reflects: “Dan was the kind of man she would never have looked at till doomsday. It was much worse from her side, she wasn’t a genuine African; she was a half-breed. Dan was later to inform her: ‘People don’t care a damn about you’” (104).

Bessie Head is, clearly, also using Dan to represent aspects of male behaviour that she found troubling. He exhibits a “loose, carefree sexuality” and a “cruelty, really spite” that Elizabeth associates with witchcraft practices (137). He demonstrates none of the positive characteristics of African tradition – respect for family obligations, respect for the
elders and the work ethic. In addition to exploiting the potential for evil in others, he invents evidence to prove the existence of evil in those he hates. Under Dan’s influence, Elizabeth begins to see normal human relationships as twisted. As Elizabeth’s conversations with Tom, the American Peace Corps worker whose friendship she depended on in the period before her final and major mental breakdown, show, her “interaction” with Dan represents her attempt to clarify an ideological position in the light of her experience of social oppression and racial discrimination. Despite the experiences that she has undergone, she ultimately rejects Dan’s way, which not only denies the humanity of those excluded from the special group to which he recognises a commitment but is also ultimately based on coercion—the naked exercise of power.

Dan’s power is symbolised in the novel by his ability to dominate and use women, and in her depiction of Dan’s interaction with women, Bessie Head satirises the outlook that sees sexual virility as a value in itself. As Moleka is in *Maru*, he is compared with the storm—in this case, a “violent windstorm full of sand and swirling” (147) that leaves a wasteland in its wake. References to violent physical activity reinforce the idea of indulgence and excess but clearly also allude to the devastating rhetoric and empty gestures of a politician. In contrast with Sello, who is associated with birds and, in particular, with a great sky-bird, Dan, it is implied, lacks the creative ability to sustain the image that he wishes to project.

Dan’s sexual excesses described in part two complement Medusa’s exhibitionism in the first section. One is reminded in Medusa’s case of the old woman in *When Rain Clouds Gather* who tried to lure Makhaya with her granddaughter. Medusa’s exhibitionism, like the action of the “old hag,” demonstrates a mentality that, Bessie Head suggests, ruined a
continent. Dan’s affairs with various women whom he parades before Elizabeth further demonstrate his power, mock her powerlessness, and keep her in a state of emotional turmoil.

Dan’s women, however, are also representations of political factions and interest groups with which the nationalist leader may be allied from time to time. They are chosen both from the “early vision of the beautiful people” (128) and from the “nice-time girls” (128) of the contemporary period. In describing them, Bessie Head alludes to grassroots groups such as peasants and agricultural workers, urban proletarian groups including displaced and unemployed workers, and bourgeois nationalist groups. Bessie Head does not always identify a woman with particular group, for one affiliation does not preclude another, as is the case with occupational and tribal affiliations, for example. In some instances, too, she seems to be referring to alliances with foreign agencies – liberal opinion in Europe and the United States, commercial interests, and former colonial powers.

In the second section of the novel, the sexual act is clearly also a metaphor for secret, underhand, and corrupt political and business transactions. This metaphor contrasts Sello, the visionary coping with “the demons of lust”, and Dan, an evil power presiding over a hell or underworld not to fight the evil forces there but to dominate them and use them to increase his power. As in the first section of the novel, the vagina is a symbol of an underworld. Evil though he is, Dan is himself a victim of his own power spinning “away from himself in a dizzy kind of death dance of will, distraction and dissipation” (92).

Dan’s intervention disrupts Elizabeth’s existence in more specific ways than Sello’s teaching had. In filling her mind with doubts about Sello, Dan interposes obstacles to
intellectual and creative pursuits. The aggressive active influences of Dan's world impinge on the passive, contemplative tendencies of an earlier period, before Medusa overwhelmed Sello. As Elizabeth reflects: "She had lived a life other than this, where her soul was her own and the peace within had let her mind meander on all sorts of dreamy pathways. She had writers she loved, and kept their books beside her bed and each night read and re-read their most glorious soaring passages. They seemed to grow old with her, and only as her mind matured did a comprehension of their struggle and efforts grow as a living reality in her own mind. She had tried to pick up those books, but between her and the written words reeled Dan's terrible records" (148). The rivalry between Sello and Dan for control of Elizabeth's mind emerges here very clearly as a metaphor for the "struggle and efforts" of artists over time to clarify their vision of reality. In *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head thus makes art out of her own inner "tragic war" as she uses the "inner tensions and contradictions within the author's mind, conscious and subconscious", to represent other types of personality conflicts both in the contemporary African and in wider, historical contexts.

As Martin Esslin notes of Brecht, whom Bessie Head mentioned as an influence on her, the real secret of the "three-dimensional effect" of his plays, "which always move on several levels of time, space, and narrative method at once", lies in "the inner tensions and contradictions within the author's mind, conscious and subconscious". As he further observes: "It seems that such deep conflicts within a personality are among the conditions without which major creative work cannot be produced, that each work must spring from the constant and painful clash between different levels of the artist's personality" (1959: 236).
Despite her inner turmoil Elizabeth maintains a degree of outward calm in the face of Dan’s continued assaults. As she reflects: “It wasn’t any kind of physical stamina that kept her going, but a vague instinctive pattern of normal human decencies combined with the work she did, the people she met each day and the unfolding of a project with inventive possibilities. But a person eventually becomes a replica of the inner demons he battles with” (149-50). Eventually Dan succeeds in destroying her belief in human goodness (repeating what Medusa had done) and she has a further mental breakdown. This is indicated when, giving way to an irresistible impulse, she attacks Mrs. Jones, an old English woman who has been kind to her and one who, like her, is an ordinary individual, “a replica of the humanity of the slum women she had grown up within South Africa” (170). This proof of the extent to which she has absorbed Dan’s teaching creates, feelings of despair and she contemplates killing her son and committing suicide. No longer able to distinguish between reality and nightmare, she puts up a notice on the wall of the village post office accusing Sello of being “a filthy pervert who sleeps with his own daughter” (175). At this point, the village policemen intervene and she is taken to the local hospital, from which she is later transferred to a mental hospital, which is approximately six hundred miles from Motabeng. Mention of the distance emphasises Elizabeth’s further isolation and the extent to which Dan has forced her away from the instinctive pattern of normal “decencies” that she had, despite setbacks, begun to develop in Motabeng.

During her mental breakdown, Elizabeth’s anger stemming from the experiences associated with Dan is expressed in a hatred of everything African. She overcomes her anger but is not fully in control of her emotions when she is sent home after seven months. Once home, she is aware of Sello, who had withdrawn from her dreams for more than a
year. Dan also returns to subject her to further excruciating experiences, but she now inclines to the things that Sello represents. The kindness of the neighbour who cared for her son; the concern shown by Tom, who like Eugene, is an example of someone who is able to translate philosophical principles into healthy and useful activity; and the generosity of the living man Sello, who refuses to bring charges against her for the incident involving the placard, testify to the existence of goodness.

As Elizabeth recovers further, she discusses her nightmares with Tom. She explains her illness as due to her loss of the sense of goodness and her strong awareness of greed and arrogance around her. Sello’s teaching, a small light in a world of darkness, had become obscured by an overwhelming evidence of evil. She is able to interpret her inner “war” as an aspect of an ongoing and universal conflict between incompatible elements struggling for dominance in society.

As Elizabeth’s nightmares recede, the wife of Buddha emerges from her person and is united with Sello, who once again takes on the aspect of Buddha. Returned once more to a normal state of mind, Elizabeth reflects on her recent experiences: “She’d travelled a journey with a man who had always deserted her in a pursuit after the things of the soul. He’d achieved his Nirvana and she’d toppled him out of it, she’d stained his hands with blood. . . . Maybe, the work she and Sello had done together had introduced a softness and tenderness into mankind’s history. The flowers, the animals, the everyday events of people’s lives had been exalted by them. . . . They had perfected together the ideal of sharing everything and then perfectly shared everything with all mankind” (202-3). The phrase “the work she and Sello had done together” may be read as a reference to the activities associated with religion and poetry in their ideal form. Sello is again associated with the qualities of
mind and spirit that underlie the hope for progress toward a more equitable and humane society. Elizabeth, who had formerly rejected Sello’s idea of good as coterminous with passivity, realises, even more after her encounter with Dan, how easily good can be transformed into evil. After intense soul searching she is, once again, her proper self - the Coloured woman from South Africa and an exile in Botswana who has undergone a traumatic social experience at a particular period in history. Her other self, the representative human type who is caught up in the constant struggle between incompatible social forces, retires to the background, leaving Elizabeth, who like the artist, is “accustomed to seeing things in pictures and imagery” (104) to construct her vision of the future within her cultural situation and to pursue “the elegant pathway of private thought” (206).

Elizabeth’s struggle with and triumph over the forces represented by Medusa and Dan reflect the situation of the creative artist freeing herself of restrictive ideologies. Like the bodhisattva with whom she is associated, she achieves spiritual enlightenment that can be translated into artistic terms. A “blabbermouth” who steps into the sunlight to disclose things others want to keep secret – the various forms of intimidation practiced on ignorant people – she is identifiable with the writer who is critical of oppressive political regimes. Elizabeth’s resolve, as she emerges from her terrifying experiences and is reconciled with Sello, for example, is to tell the truth, “no matter if it was the most horrific truth mankind had ever heard” (200). Her commitment, like Bessie Head’s, is not to a particular faction. She is aware, however, that Sello will regain control of “the God show” only again to become overwhelmed by opposing forces, and that the struggle in which she is engaged, as an artist asserting intellectual inquiry over fanaticism, is continuous.
At the end of the novel, Elizabeth is specifically identified with Bessie Head the literary artist, as she attempts to "jot down fragmentary notes" (204) about her experiences. Her awareness of a new beginning in her life is suggested in the lines of a poem, "Song Of A Man Who Has Come Through" by D.H. Lawrence, which haunt her mind: "Not I, but the wind that blows through me! A fine wind is blowing the new direction of time. If only I let it bear me . . . ." (205). As in *Maru*, the blowing wind is an image of the renewal of the writer's inspiration.

As in the earlier novels, Bessie Head's literary concerns are also revealed in her use of language—her ability to blend together different kinds and levels of meaning in a single image and the dense layering of meaning in the work. In directing attention to creative uses of language in this novel, she also draws attention to its use as a political tool—its power to intimidate, induce conformity, and direct thought. The reader is constantly reminded that *A Question of Power* is not simply a story about a disoriented personality or an embattled society but that it is also an exploration of the power of language, its complex operations within culture, and the artist's role in liberating language and thought.

As Arthur Ravenscroft has pointed out, "to see Bessie Head's handling of Elizabeth's mental instability as a clever literary device to make possible an epic confrontation between Good and Evil within the confines of a realist novel, is to underestimate the achievement. One wonders again and again whether the phantom world that comes to life whenever Elizabeth is alone in her hut could have been invented by a novelist who had not herself gone through similar experiences, so frighteningly and authentically does it all pass before one's eyes. But there is no confusion of identity between the novelist and the character, and Bessie Head makes one realise often how close is the similarity between the most fevered creations of a deranged mind and the insanities of deranged societies" (1976: 183-84).
Bessie Head called her autobiographical novel, *A Question of Power*, “a private journey to the sources of evil”. Elizabeth, the protagonist, is a South African refugee in Botswana who experiences temporary insanity. In dreams and fantasies she encounters both local and mythical figures representing the extremes of good and evil who cause her to assess the nature of her femininity and Africanness. This psychological work explores the roots of female oppression and questions the existence of God, as when Elizabeth concludes that there is “only one God and his name is Man”. *A Question of Power* was hailed as a powerful novel encompassing profound theological and personal issues. While some initial reviewers contended that the hazy distinction between Elizabeth’s real and imaginary lives rendered the book excessively complex, most critics now laud as successful Bessie Head’s representation of a woman’s struggle to come to terms with her madness and social situation.

As Charlotte H. Bruner has observed, in *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head develops some maternal-filial relationships more fully: the frustration in trivial argument within the strong mother-child attachment, the bewilderment of a child with an ill parent or one who is not herself:

Her head was throbbing with pain from a sleepless and feverish night. She grabbed a pile of his clothes off a chair and said irritably: ‘You’d like to be slaughtered, hey? Shut your mouth, you damn little nuisance’. He took all his moods from her and imitated her in every way. A day which started off like this could throw him off balance completely. Suddenly, he seemed to sense something funny in the air and mimicked in a shrill voice: ‘You’d like to be slaughtered, hey? Shut your mouth, you damn little nuisance’.
The anguish of a parent unable to provide food and shelter and education underlies the confrontation, of course. It is a commonplace that parents frequently strain for patience, understanding, in dealing with children. In the conditions of exile, the tensions may break. Bessie Head’s own problems of adjustment are obviously complicated by her feeling for and responsibility for her son. “My only truly autobiographical work is *A Question of Power*”, she writes, “the other books drew on personal experience but not so directly”.

The woman’s position as sole provider increases her tensions; this autobiographical theme is consistent in Bessie Head’s work. In the first novel, Paulina’s cattle herd is her only security for herself and her two children. In the second novel, both Margaret’s support themselves as teachers. In the third, when Elizabeth loses her teaching job, she experiences a crushing depression. ... She pushed her leaden feet towards the small boy who sat under the tree. “If I die, would you like to die, too?” she asked, crazily.

“What is to die?” he asked, interested. “It’s like going away,” she said. “There isn’t anyone to cook food or wash clothes. The house gets empty”.

“Here do we go to?” he asked, a little anxiously. “I don’t know”, she said.

In the story, “Witchcraft”, Mma Mabele has to have her job to support her family. She survives a mysterious affliction and alone provides for her children, on sheer will power: “There is no one to help the people, not even God. I could not sit down because I am too poor, and there is no one to feed my children.” Dikeledi in *The Collector of Treasures* must provide for her three sons while her husband, although a well-to-do government official, denies child support. Hence, the woman, with limited employment status, as sole provider
undergoes additional strain and psychic stress if she is an exile without support of husband, friends, or a known community.

*A Question of Power* reflects a variety of emotional crises resulting from stress upon this sensitive writer. Even the name of the lead character, like the nursery rhyme refrain – Elizabeth, Betty, Betsy and Bess – evidences the self-identification of the writer with her lead character. Bessie Head takes the reader through Elizabeth’s emotional breakdowns which immediately follow her exile and then recur later and provoke her dismissal from her teaching assignment. “Something was going drastically wrong with her own life. Just the other day she had broken down and cried . . . ‘I’m not sure I’m quite normal any more” Shortly thereafter, Elizabeth receives the school board report: “We have received a report that you have been shouting and swearing at people in public. Such behaviour is unbecoming to a teacher. We are doubtful of your sanity, and request that you submit to us a certificate of sanity from a medical officer within fourteen days of receipt of this notice”. The hospital suggested is too far away, the situation humiliating, the other teachers are hostile. The conditions of conforming to accepted social patterns in what is basically still a conservative man’s world in a Black African society almost defeat her: “She fell into a deep hole of such excruciating torture that, she went stark, raving mad” (94). Her hallucinations deny her sexuality and her Africanness.

In *A Question of Power*, the male image creates the threat, provokes the female upset. The male images in hallucination and thought–transference extend to include several males, real and unreal, who blend and shift, somewhat as do those of Maru and Moleka earlier in *Maru*. The male images in *A Question of Power*, Dan, the two Sellos, and others, change roles from protector to abuser, taunter to lover, African to Africa, good to evil. They
threaten Elizabeth’s sexuality, attract, repel, wearing down her resistance until a spark explodes, destroying her sanity. Often the male image becomes Africa, which she wants to identify with but cannot. “A persistent theme was that she was not genuinely African; he had to give her the real African insight” (94). The image of Dan is frequently hostile and threatening. “The social defects he heightened in himself, then set himself up before Elizabeth as the epitome of the African male. It began to make all things African vile and obscene. The evils overwhelming her were beginning to sound like South Africa from which she had fled. The reasoning, the viciousness were the same, but this time the faces were black” (94).

Charles Larson says, “The burden of exile, mixed with guilt feelings about the colour of her skin . . . produce a kind of sexual frigidity, and for a time Elizabeth becomes mad. All of this the reader sees through Elizabeth’s distorted mind. At the end of the story, with her devils exorcised, Elizabeth turns to the land for comfort and solace” (1991: 4). This persecution-rejection theme persists and deepens throughout Bessie Head’s work. In actuality, the Botswana government, consistently refusing her requests for citizenship, like most government bodies is dominantly male, and continues to deny her. Can she ever belong, or does her skin colour, her genealogy, her intellectualism, her artistic sensitivity forever disbar her for her differentness?

Except for her son, the portraits of male figures become increasingly threatening. The short story, “Witchcraft”, published in 1975, is much like a small crystallisation of the novel, A Question of Power. The plot may even be foreshadowed by a passage in the novel: “People who have suffered from the wanton cruelty of others prefer the truth at all times, no matter what it might cost them . . . there was also the village level of life, witchcraft and all
the hidden terrors of darkness.” The question of power, of one’s inner strength to survive, to find solace in the simple and bare existence of poor village life continues to be a lead theme. In her interview with Ms. Head says, “In South Africa the white man took even the air away from us — it was his air and his birds and his land. In Botswana, I have a little bird outside my window every day” (1992: 94).

As Nancy Topping Bazin has observed, like Virginia Woolf, Zora Neale Hurston, and Doris Lessing, Bessie Head views the need of the male to see himself twice as big as he really is as one of the chief causes of unjust, undemocratic, and unkind behaviour. In *A Question of Power* the male need to dominate and feel superior to others is represented by two men, Sello and Dan. They come to life and into power through the mad imaginings of Elizabeth. They are so real to her that she talks with them and feels her life literally threatened by them. It is because Sello and Dan use every power they have to try to destroy Elizabeth psychologically that she is mad. To regain her sanity, she must defeat them.

Elizabeth learns that Sello has already “killed several women”, and he has molested his own child. Moreover, he is the creator of the powerful Medusa, who inhabits Elizabeth’s mad world. His Medusa is really “the direct and tangible form of his own evils, his power lusts, his greeds, his self importance”. Medusa, manipulated by Sello, tortures Elizabeth’s until she almost obliterates her: “It wasn’t Elizabeth’s body she was thrusting into extinction. It was the soul; the bolts were aimed at her soul. It seemed to make death that much slower, that much more piecemeal. The narrow, mean eyes of Sello in the brown suit stared at her over Medusa’s shoulder”.

Sello and Dan try to kill Elizabeth’s spirit. They do this primarily through manipulating her feelings about sexuality and through using sexuality to degrade her. To
undermine Elizabeth’s sense of herself as a woman, Sello uses Medusa, and Dan uses his “seventy-one-nice-time girls”. Medusa with a smile offers Elizabeth some secret information:

It was about her vagina. Without any bother for decencies she sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation travelled out of her towards Elizabeth. It enveloped from head to toe like a slow, deep, sensuous bomb. It was like falling into deep, warm waters, lazily raising one hand and resting in a heaven of bliss. Then she looked at Elizabeth and smiled, a mocking superior smile: “You haven’t got anything near that, have you?”

Sello displays before Elizabeth his own attraction to Medusa. He “issued to low moan of anguish. He seemed to be desperately attached to that thing Medusa had which no other woman had. And even this was a mockery. It was abnormally constructed, like seven thousand vaginas in one, turned on and operating at white heat”.

Elizabeth is attracted to Dan’s overwhelming masculinity: “He made a woman feel like an ancient and knowledgeable queen of love”. But Dan displays his power not just over her but over all women. He sadistically parades his many women before her and his message to her is that she should be jealous: “I go with all these women because you are inferior. You cannot make it up to my level”. But, of course, just at the moment when she decides she dislikes him and wants “to pull her mind out of the chaos”, he says: “If you leave me I’ll die, because I have nothing else”.

One of the key images in Elizabeth’s madness is Dan “standing in front of her, his pants down, as usual, flaying his powerful penis in the air saying: ‘Look, I’m going to show you how I sleep with B . . . She has a womb I can’t forget. When I go with a woman I go for one hour. You can’t do that’”. His women include Miss Wriggly–Bottom, who “had small round breasts and a neat, nipped–in waist. She walked in time to a silent jazz tune she was
humming and wriggled her bottom". There was also Miss Sewing Machine who "liked her penny-button tickled". He added to the display "Miss Pelican-Beak, Miss Chopper, Miss Pink Sugar-Icing, whom he was on the point of marrying, Madame Make-Love-On-The-Floor where anything goes, The Sugar–Plum Fairy, more of body Beautiful, more of The Womb, a demonstration of sexual stamina with five local women, this time the lights on, Madame Squelch, Madame Loose–Bottom–the list of them was endless". Elizabeth took heavy doses of sleeping tablets to block out his all night activities with these "nice-time girls". For Dan sometimes tumbled these women into bed right beside Elizabeth ("They kept on bumping her awake"), and he encouraged them to use her personal possessions to clean up: "He was abnormally obsessed with dirt on his women. They washed and washed in her bathroom; they put on Elizabeth's dresses and underwear and made use of her perfumes".

Of course, if Dan finds that any of his seventy-one "nice-time girls" are too sexual, then he panics and turns against them. He views women as dirty if they are more sexually potent than he. He could not stand the sexual potency of Madame Loose–Bottom or the hysterical, feverish orgasm of Body Beautiful. Because the pelvis of Madame Squelch was like "molten lava", going with her made him throw up. One night he decided Miss Pelican–Beak with her long, tough vagina was "too pushy", so he broke her legs and elbows and re-designed her pelvis to make it more passive. Then he left her for Miss Chopped. Thus, his hatred for women was not all directed at Elizabeth. But she takes his behaviour personally: "Why, why, why? What have I done?" Indeed it drives her further into madness; she becomes dysfunctional and must be hospitalised.
Both Sello and Dan use male homosexuality to make Elizabeth feel excluded. Dan tells Elizabeth it is a "universal phenomenon". He makes Sello appear before her with his boyfriend, and he says, "They do it all the time". The displays of homosexuality like the displays of heterosexuality are meant to degrade her. These nightmares are extensions of her experiences with her husband: "Women were always complaining of being molested by her husband. Then there was also a white man who was his boy-friend. After a year she picked up the small boy and walked out of the house, never to return".

Elizabeth's recognition of the similarity between racist and sexist attitudes is clear. She knew that white people "went out of their way to hate you or loathe you"; similarly, Dan hits her with a "torrent of hatred" every day. She finds the misogyny of some African males to be untempered by "love and tenderness and personal romantic treasuring of women". She calls both racists and sexist's power - maniacs. "What did they gain, the power, people, while they lived off other people's souls like vultures?" Medusa serves as an image for domination; she represents these attitudes: "Who's running the show around here? I am. Who knows everything around here? I do. Who's wearing the pants in this house? I am".

On a philosophical level, Elizabeth is saved from permanent madness by her faith in a value system different from Dan's and Sello's and by a different concept of God. In practice, she is saved by working in a garden with a woman friend Kenosi, who admires and respects her. Her work relationship with this woman provides her with a feminist model. Ultimately, Elizabeth rejects the patriarchal model of thinking and behaving in favour of a feminist mode of thinking and behaving. This rejection of a philosophy of domination in favour of an egalitarian philosophy is reflected in her comments about God.
Elizabeth rejects a god in the sky, because “God in heaven is too important to be decent.” Her ideal is to bring holiness down to earth. The gods are, in fact, those “killed and killed and killed again in one cause after another for the liberation of mankind” She saw the gods as “ordinary, practical, sane people, seemingly their only distinction being that they had consciously concentrated on spiritual earnings. All the push and direction was towards the equality of man in his soul, as though, if it were not fixed up there, it never would be anywhere else”. She concludes that “there are several hundred thousand people who are God”. Her prayer is, “Oh God . . . May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds”.

Elizabeth concludes that this can occur only through a struggle against greed and arrogance and an excessive concern for self. Sello admits, “I thought too much of myself. I am the root cause of human suffering”. At one point Elizabeth and Sello “perfected together the ideal of sharing everything and then perfectly shared everything with all mankind”. But it is through the horrors of her contact with Dan in her hallucinations that she has learned the most:

He had deepened and intensified all her qualities. ... he taught by default – he taught iron and steel self-control through sheer, wild, abandoned debauchery; he taught the extremes of love and tenderness through the extreme of hate; he taught on alertness for falsehoods within, because he had used any means at his disposal to destroy Sello. And from the degradation and destruction of her life and arisen a still, lofty serenity of soul nothing could shake.

The aim must be to tap into one’s powers, and she places her emphasis on the soul: “If it’s basically right there, then other things fall into place. That’s my struggle and that’s black power, but it’s a power that belongs to all mankind and in which all mankind can share”.

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Although her language in sometimes sexist, Bessie Head's philosophy and ethics parallel those of feminist philosopher/theologians such as Rosemary Ruether, Naomi Goldenberg, and Elizabeth Dodson Gray. They too reject the hierarchy in traditional religions and cry out for a more egalitarian world-view. Feminist theologians speak out against the male God in the sky and the lingering Christian view that the world was created specifically for Man and that he has the right to use nature and women as he pleases. Nor is it surprising that the political philosophy in feminist utopian fiction is most akin to anarchism, for women are tired of being ruled, manipulated, and exploited by authoritarian figures. So, too, is Bessie Head's protagonist.

Throughout Elizabeth's madness, there existed the possibility of being healed and made sane by working in a vegetable garden with Kenosi. Kenosi had about her a quiet strength and purposefulness that appealed to Elizabeth. As they worked together, "Elizabeth clung to the woman. There seemed to be no other justification for her continued existence, so near to death was she". She found in the un-educated, hardworking Kenosi a "knowingness and grasp of life" that made her beautiful. Most important of all, Kenosi needs her. Kenosi tells her, "you must never leave the garden... I cannot work without you". Her relationship with this woman keeps in sight the possibility of something quite different from the patriarchal relationships she has in the nightmare world: their "work-relationship has been established on the solid respect of one partner for another". Kenosi enables Elizabeth to maintain her belief that egalitarian relationships are possible. Sello's comment to Elizabeth about her relationship with Dan also helps to save her: "Elizabeth, love isn't like that. Love is two people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the soul of the other like a ghoul!".
Elizabeth withstands the cruelty and torture of Medusa and the two men who inhabit her madness through not giving in to their view of her as nothing. At one point she tells Sello that he is making a mistake, for she is God too. Although they almost totally annihilate her sense of self, their misogynist behaviour only serves to confirm her faith in the opposite of everything they represent. Throughout her struggle against these symbols of the patriarchal power system which people her hallucinations, she continues to articulate her faith in goodness, love, equality, and inner strength.

The movement toward mysticism found in feminist philosophy is obviously present in Elizabeth’s as well. Elizabeth has been tested by the nightmare of madness created by Sello in his role as spiritual mentor. Once she has passed through this hell, her knowledge of evil helps her to rediscover an impersonal, mystical love. She is transported into a state in which there are “no private hungers to be kissed, loved, adored. And yet there was a feeling of being kissed by everything; by the air, the soft flow of life, people’s smiles and friendships”. This “vast and universal love” equalises all things and all people. Elizabeth emerges from her hell with a confirmed belief in such love and a “lofty serenity of soul nothing could shake”. At the end of the book, she recognises that humankind’s fundamental error is the “relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky. Since man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed”.

Bessie Head chooses to focus on sexism rather than racism in *A Question of Power*. This forces her African readers, more familiar with racism, to see the similarities between the two and their common root in the philosophy of domination. Men degrade, manipulate, and abuse women in Elizabeth’s nightmare, basically because they fail to perceive
sacredness in them. Elizabeth advocates a philosophy that insists upon the sacredness of all life because of her subjection to the patriarchal behaviour. As Nancy Topping Bazin observes, “This is typical of the evolution of feminist thought. That is why feminists speak of ecological and peace issues as well as equal rights; and that is why they speak of equal rights not only for women but also for the poor, the handicapped, and the racially oppressed” (1985: 36).

The last words of the novel are “a gesture of belonging”, as Elizabeth settles herself for her first untortured night’s sleep in three years, annealed both spiritually and socially, as in imagination, she places one soft hand over her land.

As Roberta Rubenstein has rightly put it, “A Question of Power succeeds as an intense, even mythic dramatisation of the mind’s struggle for autonomy and as a symbolic protest against the political realities of South Africa. Bessie Head skillfully involves the reader in the immediacy and terror of Elizabeth’s confrontations with her demons. Yet the rhythmic alternation with her progress in the village provides an almost pastoral balance to the Dostoevskian intensity of the mad episodes. The result is a work of striking virtuosity - an artistically shaped descent into the linked hells of madness and oppression, and a resolution that provides the hope of both internal and external reconciliation” (1974:31).

As Robert L. Bemer has observed, Bessie Head’s third novel (A Question of Power) is thus a remarkable attempt to escape from the limitations of mere “protest” literature in which Black South African writers so often find themselves. It would have been natural for her, and easier, to have written an attack on the indignities of apartheid which have driven her into exile in Botswana. Certainly South African racism is the ultimate source of the difficulties besetting Elizabeth, her “coloured” protagonist. But Bessie Head chooses to
make her novel out of Elizabeth’s response to injustice — first in madness and finally in a heroic struggle out of that madness into wholeness and wisdom. The novel’s subject is power in all its physical and moral ramifications, and Elizabeth’s final wisdom is understood in terms of her achievement of the power of love and human understanding.

Because of the essential wisdom of the novel it is unfortunate that the nightmare passages, though imaginative and remarkable in their way, are not more successful. Regrettably they too often seem to be out of the writer’s control. Still, the novel is significant as a talented writer’s attempt to avoid the didactic pitfalls, which so often endanger spokesmen for oppressed peoples.

The most important kind of power implied in the novel is, finally, the power of the human spirit to overcome its own movement toward annihilation. Elizabeth’s internal battle ceases when she at last exorcises the negative “powers” within, and finds in their place that “There is only one God and his name is Man”.

(iv)

The “questions of power” in Bessie Head’s novel constantly refer to spiritual configurations of freedom and confinement. While Maru deals emphatically with oppressive social and discursive domains, A Question of Power constantly combines these with spiritual ones. “Good” and “evil” recur in this novel. These terms are often invoked as poles in a Manichean opposition, especially in the second section titled, “Dan”. Here Bessie Head focuses primarily on the relations and myths that trap her central victimised character in cultural binarisms. She is a “racial hybrid” in a society where “racial purity” is valued, she
is an exile and she is a woman. Elsewhere, however, "good" and "evil", existing in a curiously symbiotic relationship, are seen mainly as projections emanating from the perception of the observer. On this level, Bessie Head dwells abstrusely on questions about how Elizabeth may approach creativity, intelligence and serenity in ways which are genuinely independent, new and liberating.

Although it is both simplistic and misleading to reduce *A Question Power* to the author’s psychological state, Bessie Head’s detailed exploration of the psychic anguish of a central character can be explored in relation to her declining faith in the political freedoms and creativity offered by her life in Botswana. Shortly before starting *A Question of Power* and after she had completed *Maru*, she grew progressively more cynical about her situation in Botswana and increasingly preoccupied with the idea of her personal persecution. In the early seventies, letters to correspondents such as Giles Gordon, Jean Highland and Naomi Mitchison register a mounting introversion and anxiety about victimisation. Gillian Stead Eilersen offers a comprehensive account of Bessie Head’s erratic emotional state in the early seventies and her eventual hospitalization (1995: 134-153). By 1972, when she started working on the novel, she was fluctuating between moments of calm and the psychological distress and paranoia which first led to her hospitalisation. Much of this vacillating is registered in her novel. The central character, Elizabeth, alternates between moments of "madness", where she lives entirely within her unconscious fears and projections, and moments of "sanity" when she inhabits and acts in an external world. While the overt fusing of autobiography and fiction suggests a pattern seen in previous novels, the realistic story of how a central character tries to make a home as an exile and outcast plays only a peripheral
role in *A Question of Power*. Bessie Head focuses primarily on Elizabeth’s internal struggles.

Bessie Head’s emotional and psychic state at the time of writing *A Question of Power* does not explain the novel’s meanings, but allows us to consider the logic of her positioned concern with the unconscious. In a letter to Giles Gordon, Bessie Head wrote that the “dark area of the subconscious does interest me and would affect my writing and thinking but only in relation to what I survived and what I gained” (BKMM 44 BHP 1). The complexity and range of images and themes in *A Question of Power* have baffled many critics, as revealed, for example, in Elizabeth Evasdaughter’s claim that the novel registers an “overload of memories and observation that are in violent conflict with one another” (1989: 80). Annette Kuhn provides a suggestive formulation for confronting this “overload”. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, she writes that the “Unconscious...may be regarded as the price paid for language and human culture” (1994: 47). The effects of the repressions produced when the subject is culturally constituted are a surfeit of meanings. As Annette Kuhn implies, the unconscious is the site where an “overload” registers the terrifying complexity of apparently stable human experiences.

This perspective is stressed in Jacqueline Rose’s approach to Sylvia Plath’s treatment of the unconscious. Dealing with the “spectre of psychic life” in Plath’s oeuvre (1992: 3), Rose shows how critics develop the following reductive objectives. On one hand, Plath is clinically diagnosed, so that her works are seen as evidence of schizophrenia and psychosis. On the other hand, her writings are interpreted as testimonies of her persecution. In this way, “psychic life is stripped of its own logic” and the “problem of the unconscious” is removed (1992: 3-4). Pursuing apparently different directions, critics of Bessie Head’s
novel have treated *A Question of Power* in similar ways. For early reviewers and certain later critics, the novel becomes a testimony of “madness”, with normative appraisals diagnosing the schizophrenia of both the text and its author. The normative view is explicit in Elizabeth Evasdaughter’s “Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* Read as a Mariner’s Guide to Paranoia” (1989). Evasdaughter treats the novel as a straightforward testimony of Bessie Head’s psychic experiences. Defining the text as a “case study of paranoid schizophrenia”, she lists its features of “paranoid schizophrenia” according to the *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1989: 75).

Alternatively, a critic like Margaret Tucker stresses the interpretive power of the text. Yet Tucker straightforwardly sees its view of the unconscious as the world of power which the character needs to challenge. Focusing on Elizabeth as the victim of two male characters’ sexual violence, she concludes that “*A Question of Power* is about finding freedom from and amidst oppression; by exposing hierarchies of power, and in particular the objectification of women as the foundation of patriarchy, Elizabeth jumps out of Dan’s and Sello’s ‘big picture’ to form another time (1988: 181). For Tucker, an “external” world is neatly opposed to the character’s inner one, so that their connection is simplified. Criticism of Bessie Head’s treatment of psychic anguish has therefore shifted between extremes in the same way that it has, according to Jacqueline Rose, for Plath: “between the idea of Plath as a victim of patriarchy (source of her ills) and the idea of her self-generating (blameworthy) psychic distress” (1992: 129).

As Jacqueline Rose has observed Bessie Head’s treatment of the unconscious complicates the “issue of who is doing what to whom, where does the misery come from, in what . . . does it find its origins and cause” (1992: 130). The central character’s persecution
is often traced to her self-perception, and her struggle is not so much against an oppressive surrounding world, but with an inner world irreducibly enmeshed with an outer one. Through her self-analysis, Elizabeth discovers memories, anxieties and cognitive orientations that rule out any straightforward discovery of external causes and internal solutions.

In the course of understanding her perceptions and self-definition, Elizabeth turns increasingly to anchors offered by Hindu philosophy. Her path towards recovery parallels the writer's perception of her own. Although Bessie Head's early writings were infused with fragments of Eastern religions and philosophy, she turned increasingly to Hinduism for explanations of her emotional turmoil in the seventies. Gillian Stead Eilersen deals especially with her preoccupation with reincarnation and destiny as ways of interpreting her victimisation. Referring to her letters to Jean Highland, Eilersen writes: “She felt herself to be part of a soul drama, a new act of the eternal conflict between good and evil. . . . Behind everything she described was her underlying belief in reincarnation. In this life she was meeting up with spiritual giants who had been her friends and foes in previous incarnations” (1995: 129). Eilersen also identifies Bessie Head's particular interest in The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, reflecting the views of a religious leader whose attempts to fuse Hinduism with other world religions made his movement especially accessible in the West. Using Western frameworks to translate a central Hindu principle, Ramakrishna stressed the location of suffering in perception, claiming that “Everything is in the mind. . . . You can dye the mind with any colour you wish. . . . If you keep your mind in evil company, your thoughts, ideas and words will be coloured with evil; but keep in the company of Bhaktas,
then your thoughts, ideas and words will be of God. The mind is everything” (Ramakrishna quoted in Noss, 1980: 213).

*A Question of Power* draws parallels between the experiences of the author and its central character more directly than *Maru*. Through the experiences of Elizabeth, a South African schoolteacher who settles in a Botswana village with her son, Bessie Head represents many of the circumstances of her own solitary life in exile. The novel is primarily concerned with the hallucinations of Elizabeth, who is afflicted by mental breakdowns revolving around figures and memories that haunt her life in exile. Elizabeth begins to hear voices a few months after her arrival in the village of Motabeng. She frequently loses faith in the healing potential of her involvement in village life, and during her nervous breakdowns is overwhelmed by the figures in her psychic world. When her hallucinating starts, she traces it to the legacy of her mother, the white woman she never knew. Having been incarcerated in a South African mental hospital, her mother bequeaths a “silent appeal”: “Now you know. Do you think I can share the stigma of insanity alone? Share it with me” (17). *A Question of Power* does not, in the way *The Cardinals* and Bessie Head’s self-narratives do, deal consistently with Elizabeth’s quest in relation to maternal figures. But it does insist that gender myths and relations constantly shape her psychological torments.

Like Margaret in *Maru*, Elizabeth is repeatedly defined as an inferior subject within different dominant relations and ideologies. She is black; she is an outcast and refugee in Botswana; she is a “half-caste”; she is an orphan; she is believed to have inherited her mother’s madness; and she is a woman in a patriarchal society. While the material and political determinants of Margaret’s subjugation are clearly explained, these determinants
are intricately conveyed through Bessie Head’s presentation of Elizabeth’s psychic life. The novel provides fragmented and brief references to her past and real-life experiences, and these are usually filtered through her consciousness. At the start of the novel, in one of her first memories, she recollects her oppressive naming by the principal of the mission school she attended as a child: “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” (16). Like the shifting marginal positions in which Margaret is trapped in *Maru*, so Elizabeth is located in compound forms of marginalisation forcing her to live “on the end of South Africa’s life” (18).

While Elizabeth is dominated within diverse social and discursive forms of power, her entrapment is revealed mainly in relation to two male figures that repeatedly intrude on her psychic life. In the novel’s framework of her everyday life, she barely knows the real Sello, “a man she had seen about the village of Motabeng who drove a green truck” (23), and who is well-known as a crop farmer and cattle breeder, or Dan, “one of the very few cattle millionaires in the country” (104). In her inner world, however, the three make a “strange journey into hell” and keep “close emotional tabs on each other” (12). Initially, Sello functions as a supportive father figure who helps Elizabeth to understand and overcome her psychological torment. When she first encounters him, he appears in monk’s robes as a spiritually enlightened teacher. Many of his liberating teachings are exemplified by heroic figures in Bessie Head’s earlier and later texts. An important theme here is the pivotal role of the everyday struggles of ordinary people, and the view that “the Gods turned out on observation to be ordinary, practical, sane people” (31). This theme is linked to the
idea that politically liberating struggles are also spiritually healing ones. Thus, Sello’s political vision has a spiritual basis: “All the push and direction was towards the equality of man in his soul, as though, if it were not fixed up there, it never would be anywhere else” (31). Throughout, Sello’s spiritual authority is linked to Eastern gods such as Krishna, Rama and Buddha.

As Part One proceeds, however, Sello’s saviour image is seen to co-exist with his own pursuit of power. In Elizabeth’s other hallucinations, he appears in a brown suit as a figure “who had no contact with the Sello in the monk’s robes” (39). In the form of a worldly and autocratic leader, he conceals an obsessive desire for control behind his “vesture garments” of spirituality: “Sello’s favourite hunting ground had been India, and [Elizabeth] privately accused him of being the originator of the caste system” (32). She reflects on what he might have said: “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 man into a wild debaucher, a maddened and wilful persecutor of his fellow men” (36). Using what Elizabeth Evasdaughter refers to as “emblematic historical tyrannies”, Bessie Head stresses the universality of her exploration of power: “Nearly every nation had that background of mythology-loomning, monstrous personalities they called ‘the Gods’, personalities who formed the base of their attitudes to royalty and class; personalities whose deeds were hideous and yet who assumed powerful positions” (1989: 40).

As Ifeyinwa Achufusi has observed that (1987:101), power is therefore approached both from the viewpoint of instances of persecution at specific historical moments, and as a ubiquitous social and interpersonal pattern. In this pattern, subject positions generate parasitic relationships between rapacious oppressors and their dehumanised victims. With
her frequent references to ancient Egyptian deities and myths, Bessie Head turns to the
institution of theocracy and the way that structural power relations become sanctified norms.
Worldly powers are seen to lead to cultural perceptions of innate supremacy, indicating how
insidiously those in power assume a godlike status. An obvious figure of naturalised
despotism is the Roman emperor Caligula, whose authority was attached to divinity before
and after his death” (1987: 100). Bessie Head’s other exemplars of power mania include
Napoleon, Hitler and Al Capone. Not only does she isolate figures that have persecuted
others throughout history; she also describes a “meeting of the mythological and the socio-
historical” (1987: 101) in which mythological embodiments of power such as Satan, Zeus,
Lucifer and Set reveal that power is embodied in a variety of guises. Elizabeth’s perceptions
constantly shift between a view of the specific in, for example, her memories of apartheid
South Africa, or her understanding of Hitler and World War II, to a view of power embodied
in archetypal figures from different cultural contexts.

Bessie Head shows that power becomes a compulsive force and unleashes an
insatiable need for victims. Her cosmic view in this novel develops insights associated with
overtly destructive figures in When Rain Clouds Gather and Maru. It indicates that power
engenders a manic behaviour that is more intractable than material oppression. The cosmic
view discloses patterns concealed by the apparently commonplace figures and events of
everyday life and by ostensibly disconnected historical cycles.

This is a view that echoes the paranoid perception in much of Bessie Head’s letter-
writing. In the same way that Bessie Head does in many of her letters, Elizabeth perceives
"some coherent, broad, overall pattern” (40) and uncovers menacing forces concealed by
everyday actions and behaviour. The process is especially clear in her battles in relation to
Sello, whose oppressive power explicitly surfaces in his relationship with the figure of Medusa. When she first appears, Medusa is the serene wife of the monk-like Sello. With Sello in the brown suit, the woman who is the “extreme of spirituality” (37) is transformed into the “wild-eyed Medusa” (38). Medusa’s status often parallels the position of Elizabeth when she becomes, symbolically, a projection confirming Sello’s power.

In an explicit reference to Medusa’s symbolic meaning, the mythological figure is explained as the representation of how a “man is overwhelmed by his own internal darkness”, as the “direct and tangible form of his own evils, his power lusts, his greeds, his self-importance” (40). This is directly related to Sello’s invocation of Medusa as a symbol of what he has “hidden away in his subconscious” (58). Through Medusa, Sello is able to displace his repressed impulses and project them onto a demonised female figure. This pattern is rooted in Bessie Head’s distinctive interpretation of the Greek myth of the Gorgons: the trio of terrifying Gorgon sisters becomes a projection of what man denies in himself. Although the threat of Medusa is removed when she is killed by Perseus, Medusa’s decapitated head continues to pose a threat. The story of Medusa’s power—that the sight of her turns men to stone—admits to the fragility of “manhood” as a fiction based on repression and projection. When “man” sees Medusa, he ceases to exist, losing a “self” as symbolic presence in a frozen “absence”. This interpretation of the myth explains Sello’s anxiety about Medusa. While she initially appears as a force that he controls, she periodically eludes this control and displays an “evil” greater than his own. Sello’s desperate need to control her is thus traced to his psycho-existential need to preserve his fictive sense of dominance and control.
It is noteworthy that the text suggests that Elizabeth is also trapped in a current in which “anyone in possession of power of the spirit could be Lucifer” (199). In one of her hallucinations, she sees “a group of people [who] were the poor of Africa. Each placed one bare foot on her bed, turned sideways so that she could see that their feet were cut and bleeding. They said nothing, but an old woman out of the crowd turned to Elizabeth and said: ‘Will you help us? We are people who have suffered” (31). By confronting such spectacles, Elizabeth is made to realise that, despite her own history of persecution, she may also be propelled by delusions of superiority. She therefore confronts her potential to persecute others, a response that is suggested when her anger towards the Botswana suddenly surfaces in racist attacks.

Her awareness of power as a pervasive force within and around her points to the spiritual routes for transcending it. These routes often lead to Medusa. When she takes over Sello’s persecuting role, Medusa frequently taunts Elizabeth with the idea of her sexual inadequacy and social inferiority. Her taunting focuses especially on Elizabeth’s ascribed positions as a woman, as insane and as “coloured”. Shortly after her first appearance, Medusa “impart[s] some top secret information” to Elizabeth “about her vagina” (44) and transmits a sexual sensation which “enveloped Elizabeth from head to toe like a slow, deep sensuous bomb” (44). Elizabeth is seen to rationalise her projected inadequacy by reflecting that “She might have had [a vagina] but it was not such a pleasant area of the body to concentrate on, possibly only now and then when necessary” (44). Her responses reveal her psychological struggle as she both accepts and denies Medusa’s messages suggesting her sexual inadequacy. In the abrupt shifts in Elizabeth’s self-exploration, Medusa’s reference
to sexuality is linked to Elizabeth’s memory of her perceived “insanity”, and she recalls Medusa’s smile when she had her first mental breakdown (44).

At the same moment, Elizabeth is reminded of another anxiety when Medusa announces that “You’ll only drown here. You’re not linked to the people. You don’t know any African languages” (44). Medusa underscores the implications of Elizabeth’s “coloured” status and associates it with alienation and political powerlessness. For Elizabeth, this reminder of being “rigidly classified Coloured” causes her to fall “into a deep hole of such excruciating torture that, briefly, she went stark, raving mad” (44).

In this sequence of hallucinations, Medusa ritualises Elizabeth’s repressed anxieties and oppressive memories. While these originate in social texts, they also constitute Elizabeth’s self-perception and the knowledge through which she tries to resist official positions. Although she tries to question her oppressive locations, her dilemma is that she does not possess the psychological, spiritual or discursive freedom with which to resist them.

This difficulty is underscored when the meanings Medusa attaches to Elizabeth affect her attitudes and behaviour in the real world and the “ugliness of the inner torment was abruptly ripped open and exposed to public view” (50). At a stage when Elizabeth seems determined to continue her day-to-day life, she takes her child shopping. When she encounters a Motswana clerk in the post office, she is suddenly consumed by racial hatred. The account of the surfacing racism in Elizabeth’s mind suggests that her repressed thoughts are physically overwhelming: “She was choking for air . . . The insistent hiss was mean, stifling, vicious. Whom could she accuse to end it? She sprang to her feet, slamming the
chair against the wall, and shouted: “Oh, you bloody bastard Botswana!” . . . Then she simply opened her mouth in one long piercing scream” (50).

This mental breakdown encodes the tormented workings of her psyche and her perception of her struggle with it. Elizabeth is clearly unable to control the psychic violence within herself. Yet, in the poignant reference to her powerlessness to find a target to “accuse, to end it” (51), this passage also captures her desperate effort to end the source of her torments in her own mind. The gap between Elizabeth’s psychic resources and her desire for freedom explains her anguished battles with the figure of Medusa. Medusa is not, as Huma Ibrahim puts it, “the other”; she “inhabits part of Elizabeth’s consciousness” (1996: 138). Elizabeth eventually acknowledges, therefore, that this figure functions as the projection of myths that she herself internalises.

Bessie Head’s starkly visual representation of Elizabeth’s psyche is continued in descriptions of the character’s mind as a form of receptacle extraneous to herself. At one stage, Sello leads her to a cesspit which he claims is created by Medusa: “It was alive, and its contents rumbled. Huge angry flies buzzed over its surface with a loud humming” (53). In this description, Elizabeth’s unconscious is symbolised as a repository of the “filth” which she inherits and over which she has no control. When Sello reveals this image, he forces her to confront it against her will. Significantly, Elizabeth, immediately prior to confronting the pit, laments the powerlessness of her “so-called analytical mind” (52). In the same way that Elizabeth externalises facets of her unconscious as Medusa, so does she confront with horror the pollution of her own mind.

Medusa’s status as the projection of both Sello and Elizabeth sheds light on Sello’s role in Elizabeth’s psychological struggle. Although she is often represented as his victim,
she sees his plight as similar to her own. The two are often aligned in a joint endeavour to understand power and sources for transcending it. Reflecting on her relationship with Sello at the end of the novel, Elizabeth concludes: “He frightened her deeply. He’d conducted a strange drama, in a secret way, and it had been so terrible that she had gone insane. . . . Funny thing, though, she really adored Sello, as though they were two companions who shared a permanent joke” (200). As Maria Oulassen points out, Bessie Head’s perception of “soul-evolution” (1997: 11) is important to an understanding of the relationship between the two characters. Reincarnation means that personalities have transmigrating souls and that past lives affect their relationships and struggles in each incarnation. Bessie Head, at the time of writing *A Question of Power*, was deeply preoccupied with these questions in her own life. Through the close relationship between Sello and Elizabeth, she explores the possibilities for inner growth between two personalities who are seen to share previous trials and an ongoing spiritual quest. This pattern seems to emerge obliquely in the relationships and similarities between Maru and Margaret in *Maru* or Johnny and Mouse in *The Cardinals*.

Sello’s stature as a spiritual mentor is stressed even when he tortures Elizabeth. His own claim about himself, that he is a “spiritual superman” (63) is not simply contested in Elizabeth’s (or Head’s) diagnosis of worldly power. Rather, Sello emerges as a prototype of the spiritually enlightened presences that appear throughout Bessie Head’s fiction. It is important, then, to consider how his spiritual greatness is often celebrated in the text, and how this is connected to patterns in Bessie Head’s other fictions.

At the start of the novel, Sello is represented as a universal hero since “it seemed almost incidental that he was African” (11). Stressing his tremendous wisdom and
perceptiveness, the novel captures his pantheist encounters with his surroundings: "He loved each particle of earth around him, the everyday event of sunrise, the people and animals of the village of Motabeng; perhaps his love included the whole universe" (11). Like Makhaya and occasionally Maru, Sello possesses the vision that leads to a uniquely receptive interaction with his surrounding world. Descriptions of his spiritual resources therefore foreground his cosmic importance as a figure of enlightenment, a mature soul whose cycles of rebirth and enlightenment prepare him to value everything that surrounds him. Most importantly, his spiritual maturity allows him to function as a guru. His teaching is not directly instructive, but revolves around a sharing of experiences and journeys.

The mentoring relationship between Sello and Elizabeth is significantly different from the one between Mouse and Johnny, or between Margaret Cadmore senior and Margaret. Many of the encounters between Sello and Elizabeth suggest a Platonic dialogue, in which the teacher prompts the pupil, both through direct questioning and through his acts, into greater awareness. Elizabeth is therefore able to feel that the two of them "were twin souls with closely-linked destinies and the same capacity to submerge other preoccupations in a pursuit after the things of the soul. . . . [which] did not bear comparing with the lofty statements of mankind's teachers" (12).

In her persuasive discussion of the influence of Eastern philosophy in *A Question of Power*, June Campbell explores Sello's role as a guru and draws the following conclusion:

Bessie Head's use of the Buddha, as the intermediary who guides and challenges Elizabeth in the guise of Sello, reflects her belief in the importance of individual enlightenment not only of our own world, but also of the motivations of others. It is Sello's role in unfolding a series of grotesque and confusing scenarios which...challenge all the fears and concepts that are harboured within her. He does this by enabling Elizabeth to consider and confront the various aspects of her
existence—her physical being-in-the-world, her relationships with those around her, and her inner search for meaning and spiritual freedom (1993: 72).

Elizabeth’s tutelage, therefore, does not occur through passive learning but through the self-discovery and exploration that Bessie Head often admired in certain aspects of Hindu teaching. The reference to Eastern teaching is stressed in the allusions to Sello’s status as a Buddha figure, in the transmigrations of both Sello and Elizabeth and in the flexible teacher-pupil relationship that is central to certain forms of Hinduism. Nirad Chaudhuri deals with this in his discussion of the unique relationship that Hinduism postulates between gods and human beings: one in which individuals may upbraid, castigate and approach gods, who often are seen to have the failings of ordinary mortals (1979: 19).

In *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head turns emphatically to spiritual teaching, understood as a process of self-generated discovery that is facilitated through but not directly taught by a socially powerful teacher figure. This view of power defines it as a visionary breadth associated with particular kinds of male leaders whose actions have a cosmic significance. The magnificence surrounding such heroic figures is developed in three of the main subjects of *Serowe* and is exemplified in the figure of Sebina in *A Bewitched Crossroad*. The patterns in these later texts as well as in *A Question of Power*, suggest that Bessie Head tentatively resolves her paradoxes about what the pupil can learn from a teacher without capitulating to the oppressive legacies of instruction, regimentation and repetition. By locating the source and effects of teaching in a universalised realm of spiritual greatness, Bessie Head describes forms of authority and intelligence that do not erode innate and independent creativity but nurture it.
The effect of Sello’s mentoring is not, however, straightforward for Elizabeth and her spiritual recovery is hesitant. This uncertainty is captured in two images that, at the end of Part One, convey her partial recuperation. The first is an image of Elizabeth being crowned. This is not a crown of the powerful, godly and often demonic figures in her illusory world, but one which “resembled that of earthly queens” (96). Explicit references are made to the pivotal struggles of everyday people, to the idea that it is unacknowledged and seemingly ordinary struggles that constitute meaningful oppositions to power and which become divine and spiritually liberating.

The connection between Elizabeth’s unrecognised struggle towards new perceptions and her “godliness” is stressed in her claim at the end of the novel: “There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet” (206). In this transformation of the Islamic creed, Elizabeth both questions institutionalised religious power, and affirms her spiritual salvation. She also cryptically links a spiritual liberty that, according to Hindu philosophy, ends cycles of rebirth and earthly suffering, to the birth of her own creativity. Denying inherited and authoritative teaching and institutionalised power, she acquires the resources to identify liberation in unacknowledged human experiences, and also defines herself as the visionary source of new perception. This “ending” might seem inconclusive and abrupt. Yet it marks the esoteric answer to Bessie Head’s recondite questions about subjectivity, spirituality and the foundations of creativity in the novel.

The second image refers even more explicitly to the form of Elizabeth struggles. Here Sello again shows her the “opening of the cess-pit,” the mind reflection which previously terrified her. But this time it is purged of its horrifying meanings: “It was like a crater that had opened up in the earth, and so deep, so endless was the fall to the bottom of it.
that it seemed bottomless. It was quite clean and empty now, so that its jagged stone walls seemed to be made of light. It was full of light” (97). At this stage, Elizabeth appears to have acquired the strength to accept the psychic world that previously overwhelmed her. Her mind is likened to a bottomless hole, with its emptiness and light suggesting that oppressive memories and myths have been expelled from her unconscious.

It is stressed, however, that she continues to battle with deeply engraved trauma. Even when she seems to achieve her spiritual freedom, her perception of a purged “bottomless hole” suddenly changes: “A loud slithering noise reached her ears. There seemed to be an endless procession of dead bodies, flat on their backs. One after the other they pitched in until the hole was full. She had brief glimpses of their faces as they hurtled past her. They were the people she had briefly seen in hell, who had jumped on the bandwagon of wilful evil” (97). The resurfacing of demonic figures in Elizabeth’s unconscious indicates her ongoing struggle with the idea that the mind reproduces evil. While she aspires to the possibility of serenity, she is constantly influenced by tormenting memories. That the demonic figures are dead may indicate her intellectual understanding of their ultimate impotence in view of her potential cognitive reorientation. Yet their ultimate superior power for Elizabeth is suggested by her inability to expel a deeply ingrained cultural legacy from her mind.

The baffling relations involving Sello, Medusa and Elizabeth thus configure a process in which Elizabeth’s battle to understand her “self” is graphically represented as her struggle with demonic and often ambiguous figures. While the psychic battle is externalised as a battle against two oppressive figures, essentially it is represented by Elizabeth’s internal probing of “questions and more questions, tentative propositions, with all the time and
patience in eternity to solve the riddles" (53). In her thoughts about her encounters with Sello towards the end of Part One, Elizabeth concludes “He has performed some delicate operations. He has seen that evil and good travel side by side in the same personality. He has diagnosed the evil, isolated it and ended it. There’s no more Medusa” (98). Together with Sello, therefore, Elizabeth learns to confront Medusa as a figment of the unconscious from which she cannot escape.

In her interpretation of the Medusa figure in A Question of Power, Marta Olaussen considers how Freudian and feminist psychoanalytic interpretations position Medusa’s gendered meaning differently: for Freudians, as evidence of penis envy and the lack of women; and for feminists, as threats to masculine self-fulfilment. Olaussen concludes that Medusa’s role is evidence that “Head’s writing partakes of two traditions at the same time: the Western, male tradition where the female is negatively defined and excluded and the feminist tradition which tries to rewrite the feminine” (1997:195).

As June Campbell has observed, Elizabeth’s struggles constantly lead her to confront Medusa, with whatever symbolic meanings she encodes, as the projection of the perceiver. Elizabeth is able to liberate herself from cultural habits of codifying the world and constructing symbolic figures in ways that are “tormented by dualistic hallucination” (1993:79). These habits are entrenched in Elizabeth’s unconscious. But they are engendered by a social environment, especially the Manichean legacy of apartheid, which shapes her being-in-the-world. Elizabeth’s mental struggle leads her not to conquer or appropriate Medusa, but to understand her role as a symbolic construction. In this way, she is also able to free herself from Sello—as Medusa’s source, as her persecutor and as her ambivalent teacher. Sello’s symbolic death at the end of the novel, “so shrunken that his monk’s cloth flapped
about his form like a scarecrow's rags" (96), implies that the central character acquires the psychological freedom to claim "his" teachings, persecutions and projections as her own.

The trajectory of Sello's relationship with Elizabeth traces her effort to understand her complicity with oppressive memories, images and self-perceptions. It also discloses the relevance and, ultimately, the subordination, of social powers to Elizabeth's self-analysis and transformed perception. Questions of power are translated both as struggles between good and evil, and as the perception of good and evil as polar opposites.

One of the clearest indications of ethical norms in relation to social and spiritual powers surfaces in Elizabeth's perceptions of sexuality; homosexuality and incest in particular. The novel's first reference to homosexuality is Elizabeth's recollection of her past in District Six, where "all the coloured men were homosexuals and openly paraded down the streets dressed in women's clothes" (45). At this point, she sees the homosexual coloured man as a victim, like herself, of racism. The "weak, homosexual Coloured men who were dying before her eyes" (47) symbolize the degrading effects of oppression in Elizabeth's hallucinations. But homosexuality also surfaces in relation to moral degradation. When Sello appears in one of his guises with "four grinning, smirking Asian men", his sinister power is described in terms of his homosexuality (120). Here homosexuality becomes synonymous with the "evil" that Elizabeth judges elsewhere. Descriptions of how she responds to "evil" draw attention to the way she agitatedly categorizes the world she confronts. It is often her tortuous codifying of her world that leads to her experiencing psychological trauma. The following passage, capturing Elizabeth's loathing and frenzied reflections, clearly indicates this:
It was one thing to adopt generous attitudes, at a distance. It was another to have a supreme pervert thrust his soul into your living body. It was like taking a walk on slime; slithering, skidding and cringing with shame. It was like no longer having a digestive system, a marvellous body . . . it was simply having a mouth and an alimentary tract; food was shit and piss. It was like living in the hot feverish world of the pissing pervert of the public toilet (138).

Images of incest surface in Elizabeth’s unconscious in a similar way to homosexuality. At times, references to Sello’s incestuous relationships refer to his sexual violence and abuse. Yet they also register Elizabeth’s horror of acts deemed socially taboo. This becomes especially clear in Part One, when Elizabeth is haunted by a “weird little girl who rolled her eyes and said ‘I like to sleep with my daddy.’ When Elizabeth picked her up she turned round and bit her on the hand” (64). In this reference, incest seems to transcend conventional political analysis in terms of violation and abuse, and is located in the perversion of a little girl. Maria Olaussen suggests that Head’s treatment of sexuality at this point registers her broader unease with hybridity. Arguing that Head introduces “homosexuality in relation to hybridity” and that “fear of incest seems to stem from the confusion of categories that it entails”, she concludes that “Head’s writing is . . . characterised by a fear of the hybrid status” (1997: 211). But Olaussen’s conclusion conflates Head’s perceptions with the representation of Elizabeth’s. While her reading may explain Head’s reflections on sexuality elsewhere, what is striking about Elizabeth’s perceptions in A Question of Power is her effort to liberate herself from socially conditioned ways of seeing. Elizabeth’s internal journey leads her to learn that moral states are never absolute or objective, while her spiritual distress is caused by her fixation with identifying good and evil.

This liberation in object-perception is what Sello, in the opening pages of the novel, is seen to achieve. Sello is introduced as one whose “soul was a jigsaw”. His pantheist and
self-reflective serenity leads him to say "I might have died before I found this freedom of heart" (11). Sello’s introspective musing at the start of the novel is suggestive of Maru’s at the start of Head’s previous novel: “Only Maru knew the answers. He paused awhile and looked towards the low horizon where the storm brooded ... There was so little to disturb his heart in his immediate environment. It was here where he could communicate freely with all the magic and beauty inside him” (1987: 7). Through Part One’s exploration of Sello in relation to Elizabeth, then, Head returns to her celebration of new perceptions and creativity. Together with Sello, Elizabeth learns that evil and good are often linked in a single personality. Without resolving the quandaries of her external world, she embarks on a process of self-reflection towards inner strength.

June Campbell explains the connections between Elizabeth’s spiritual struggle and the novel’s social manifestations of power in the following way: “The existential questions of being, by which Elizabeth is tormented, are shown to have both a political and spiritual dimension ... Ultimately, there is no one question of power addressed by the novel, but rather the subjection to analysis of the very meaning of power itself, through all its various manifestations in Elizabeth’s life” (1993: 78). At the end of her journey with Sello, Elizabeth’s spiritual recovery is stressed: “She had been forcefully thrown into a state of death, alongside Sello, battered and smashed about, but she instantly sprang to life again, laughed and flung her hands into the air with a bounding sense of liberation” (100). The implications of her self-exploration and “bounding sense of liberation” for her creativity are emphasized in her triumphant affirmation at the end of Part One: “May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds” (100).
Dan’s power in the novel is also the source of his destruction. Head often shows that his authority is dependent on specularity, narcissism, voyeurism and pornographic scrutiny. Dan’s power rests solely on his ability to project women as the debased objects of his controlling gaze. Constructing his myths of authority in relation to pornographic images, he exults in the power that he derives from Elizabeth’s seeing him as he wants to be seen. Elizabeth is compelled simply to acknowledge the spectacles of mastery he orchestrates. A similar mastery is established through his voyeuristic and pornographic scrutiny of women, including Elizabeth. Here he possesses the power of the all-seeing observer, one who has the power to look at and oppressively codify others. Yet Elizabeth’s passivity is not always a position of victimization.

Charles Larson comments that “Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Elizabeth’s multiple sexual fantasies is that she is never a participant in them. Rather she is a voyeur, watching the others in a kind, fascinated way but not involving herself” (1974: 169). Larson’s reference to Elizabeth’s “voyeurism” and “sexual fantasizing” imply appetites that the text emphatically associates with Dan. Yet the idea that Elizabeth remains distanced from, and most importantly, witness to a world in which Dan is ascendant, is crucial. Elizabeth is seen to possess an elusive threat that Dan feels compelled to control. Her independent resources allow her to position herself not only as the object of Dan’s gaze, or witness to his supremacy, but also as a watchful observer who returns his gaze. By watching Dan she contests her position as object, and therefore also his position as a superior subject. Forced to acknowledge his illusory power, Dan confronts his own fundamental weakness. Elizabeth’s reflective scrutiny of one who embodies oppressive violence demonstrates
Head's own treatment of power. Like Head, Elizabeth conquers power not simply by indicting or contesting it, but by exposing it to itself, by unravelling how it works.

Dan and Sello illustrate different facets of the looming male presences in Bessie Head's oeuvre. This separation emerges in the frequently contrasting male figures in *Maru*, as well as in the ambiguities that each, especially Maru, exhibits. *A Question of Power* deals with two notions of subjectivity through Dan and Sello and with two, frequently contradictory notions of power and, evil. Equating Dan's power with the worldly powers of characters like Moleka, and, at certain points, Maru or Johnny, Bessie Head invokes the idea of evil in relation to drives that lead a dominant subject to victimize others, and ultimately to his own destruction. This probing of power is conveyed in Bessie Head's claims about *A Question of Power*: "I argued that people and nations do not recognise the point at which they become evil; but once trapped in its net, evil has a powerful propelling motion into a terrible abyss of destruction. I argued that its form, design, and plan could be clearly outlined and that it was little understood as a force in the affairs of mankind" (*A Woman Alone*, 69).

In contrast to Dan, who represents the worldly powers from which Elizabeth must free herself, Sello is an embodiment of the potential spiritual greatness configured in her other fictions. *A Question of Power* consistently unveils the transcendent notions of subjectivity, power and consciousness that permeate Bessie Head's perception of politics, of personal and social liberation and creativity. These transcendent views dominate in relation to Sello. It is through Sello that Elizabeth discovers "The elegant pathway of private thought [that] stretched ahead of her, shimmering with light and undisturbed by the clamour of horrors" (206). This pathway leads her away from the corrosive effects of experienced
and apprehended social evils, on the unconscious, on daily existence and on conscious perception. June Campbell has rightly observed that, “by envisaging the human mind as a location for the resolution of all struggles, personal, social and political, Bessie Head shows that the individual may unlearn an inherited cognitive arrangement. In particular, she shows that the mind can be freed from socially driven thought that suppresses, excludes and distorts. This liberation not only leads to enlightenment and serenity; it also allows the individual to develop mutual and receptive relationships with other human beings and a surrounding environment” (1993: 68).

As she does with certain affirmations of freedom and creativity elsewhere, Bessie Head associates Elizabeth’s recovery with serenity and tranquillity. These calm moments are captured when she intermittently establishes sustaining contacts with village life. Like Bessie Head’s other novels, *A Question of Power* shows that the liberating world Elizabeth discovers is one that the character invests with independent and transforming meanings. Motabeng, where Elizabeth lives, is described as barren, its name meaning “place of sand” (19), yet she renames it “The Village of the Rain-Wind, after a poem she had read somewhere” (20). In her mental journey, she vacillates between accepting a real and oppressive Motabeng, and acquiring the ability to reinvent it. She constantly catches glimpses of the sources of a potentially liberating perception of her surrounding world and the figures that people it. Her main struggle involves her ability to make re-creating gestures.

Towards the end of the novel, the hallucinatory figures of Sello and Dan still relentlessly intrude, but by this time Elizabeth seems assured of her potential power to free herself from inner and external torments. Her new power stems from a serenity that allows
the free flow both of known and experienced horror, as well as a belief in good. It is also emphatically creative, and suggests a consciousness that, while confronting destructive social myths, relations and events, imagines ideals beyond them.

The end of the novel captures Elizabeth’s discovery of this creative space: “At sunset, when work was over and everything was peaceful slowly sipping a cup of tea, she began to jot down fragmentary notes such as a shipwrecked sailor might make on a warm sandy beach as he stared back at the stormy sea that had nearly taken his life” (204). Elizabeth does not create something entirely of her own, but recalls a D.H. Lawrence poem, “Song of a Man Who Has, Come Through”, which holds a distinctive meaning for her. On one level, this appears to indicate that she is only on the verge of her “own” creativity. On another level, the rewriting of Lawrence’s poem indicates the composite creative process that Elizabeth can pursue. Her writing cannot divorce itself from previous texts, memories and images, but can, because of her new found spiritual freedom, reposition and redefine past memories and fictions.

A similar affirmation surfaces in relation to Elizabeth’s encounters with Kenosi’s textual world. Significantly, it is mainly when Kenosi’s pragmatic activity is translated into writing that Elizabeth discovers a rejuvenating creativity. When Elizabeth reads Kenosi’s record of her gardening, she seems to be captivated by the way her friend, a Tswana-speaker, claims and rewrites the English words: “‘The spelling oh, the spelling was a fantastic combination of English and Setswana: ‘Ditamati 30c’, she wrote. ‘Pamkin 60c, Dibeeteruti 45c, Dionions 25c, Dibeans 20c, Dispinach 15c, Dicarrots 25c’” (203). Bessie Head links Elizabeth’s serenity at this stage to her recognition of this power. But the passage also suggests another pattern. Elizabeth is captivated by Kenosi’s “fantastic combination of
English and Setswana”. She seems to recognize that this combination offers a model for her own hybrid re-creation of “inherited languages”,

Discussing recurring references to writing and language in *A Question of Power*, Margaret Tucker writes that Elizabeth’s notebook, in which she records her gardening activities, “appears several times in the book, with increasing significance as the text progresses” (1988: 180). She goes on to show that, from the time when the insensitive and critical Camilla grabs it, it “travels from silence to meaning to poetry” (1988: 180). The cycle described in this formulation suggests Bessie Head’s transformative uses of language in relation to her personal and artistic struggles.

The novel dwells on internal struggles with cognitive orientation and perception. Bessie Head is as deeply concerned with liberating ways of seeing the world as she is about ways of transforming it. In confronting ways of seeing, she re-visions many of the familiar opposition that structure socially regulated life, oppositions such as right and wrong, good and evil, subject-perception and its object. By perceiving oppositions not as exclusive domains of experience, but as the effects of destructive forms of perception, and therefore as a continuum, the mind “wander[ing] in all sorts of dreamy pathways” (148) is able to comprehend the breadth and richness of human experiences. The reorientation of thought and perception, the unlearning of inherited cognition that compartmentalises, suppresses and misconstrues, can establish the foundations for a substantively liberating creativity. References to the freedom linked to transcending dualities are constantly implied in the enduring or intermittent serenity of characters in *The Cardinals, When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*. 
In *A Question of Power*, however, Bessie Head probes the difficulties of acquiring this enlightenment, as well as the quandaries of how spiritual struggles address social injustices in general, and racial and gender domination in particular. The questions raised in this novel seem to have led her progressively to rethink some of the fundamental determinants of existential being. Novels such as *The Cardinals*, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power* all dwell on autobiographical characters whose being-in-the-world is crucially shaped by their persecution in various social worlds. It could be argued that later fictions redefine relations between social subjects and their physical and cultural worlds by emphasising the individual’s radical ability to redefine an external world, and also to reassess a conventionalised separation from it. Craig Mackenzie offers the following model for categorising Head’s fiction: “The work of Bessie Head can usefully be divided into two sections: an ‘inwardly directed’ phase . . . followed by a period of more ‘outwardly-directed’ or ‘socially-oriented’ work” (1989: 19). While this model captures Head’s shift from autobiographical protagonists to social and communal foci, it may neglect the extent to which her “socially-oriented work” explicitly inscribes subjective perception and autobiographical representation. At the end of *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth places a “soft hand” over “her land” in a “gesture of belonging” (206). This peaceful gesture anticipates the way subjectivity and individual creativity reverberate within Head’s social, historical and ethnographically-oriented writing.

*A Question of Power* can be put alongside *Beloved* as a novel of transgenerational haunting where the woman becomes the repository of an unspoken and unspeakable history. The personal drama - the mother’s incarceration, insanity as stigma-passes into the daughter where it reemerges as the history of a race, which it always already was: “People cried out
so often in agony against racial hatred and oppressions of all kinds. All their tears seemed to be piling up on her, and the source or roots from which they had sprung were being exposed with a vehement violence” (53). Neither hidden from history nor invisible to history (the more familiar feminist vocabulary), the woman in Bessie Head's novel is instead the place where the hidden and invisible of history accumulates; she is the depot for the return of the historically repressed. From loss to infinity: to the precise extent that history has been robbed or diminished starts to expand infinitely in the mind: "Each individual, no matter what their present origin or background may be, is really the total embodiment of human history; I view my activity as a writer as a kind of participation in the whole world.” In this case, therefore, history and universality are not antagonists. The second draws its energy from, spills or runs out of, the first.