

Discovering Selfhood in a *Question of Power*: The Traces of Bond Between Bessie Head, (Author) And Elizabeth, (Protagonist)

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploration through Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* with the intention of discovering traces of bond between Bessie and her protagonist Elizabeth or the author's selfhood in Elizabeth. The finding of the study validates Houston's (2012) arguable assertion that all fiction is autobiographical in some way because it undoubtedly contains elements of the author's actual experience. For, in spite of the fact that Bessie puts her novel under fiction literature, her selfhood and experience explicitly manifest in her heroine. The entire work is structured thus: introduction, background of the author, synopsis of the novel, analysis of the text, summary of the work and conclusion.

KEY WORDS: fiction, autobiographical novel, selfhood, self-reflection, introspection

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I. INTRODUCTION

Autobiographical-novel is defined as a form of novel using auto fiction techniques, or the merging of autobiographical and fictive elements. The term is employed to distinguish the genre from an autobiography or memoir by at least, the stipulation of being fiction. (Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autobiographical_novel Accessed 25-07-2021 @ 2:35 pm)

It explains further that the autobiographical novel is partially fictional in the sense that the author does not require the reader to expect the text to fulfill the "autobiographical pact". This is because names and locations are often altered and events are recreated to make them more dramatic; but the story still bears a close resemblance to that of the author's life.

The same view is shared by Houston (2012), who identifies a fine line between a fictionalized autobiography and autobiographical fiction. In both cases, the author includes tidbits about his or her life, but what separates the two is the extent of inclusion of his or her life. To Houston, fictionalized autobiographies are mostly a truthful telling of the author's experience with sections fictionalized to "protect the innocent", filling gaps where memory fails, and occasionally rearranging events for maximum narrative effect. He, however, describes autobiographical fiction as primarily comprising made up events and characters that may be based on the author's own experience and self. In such a novel, it is common to find a protagonist modeled after the author, who invariably re-enacts the author's life doing at least some of the things the author has actually done in his or her life. In this sense, (Houston, 2012) concludes arguably that all fiction is autobiographical in some way, because it undoubtedly contains elements of the author's actual experience.

Raynor (2014) who shares similar sentiment (as Houston, 2012), explains that authors might choose autobiographical fiction to enable them to distance themselves from the events they are writing about, to make major changes for the sake of the story, or in order to hurt people who appear in their writing. In other words, by incorporating the author's own experience into the narrative, an autobiographical novel allows the author to both rely and reflect on his or her own experience. The reading of such a novel nevertheless, needs not always be associated with the author himself; rather, it can be treated as distinct fictional work (Bragg, 2009). According to Douma (1997), the autobiographical novel has occupied an important place in the history of modern fiction all over the world. The authors employ "novelistic disguise" in times when writers were more reluctant to be candid about themselves and their acquaintance. And there always remains, of course, the need to be reserved about living people, if not out of decency, at any rate out of respect for the laws of libel". (Pascal, 1959).

Therefore, in recent times, these novels present just a span of their author's lives and display isolated and fragmented lives of the protagonist. (Douma, 1997). In the light of this, Wikipedia (2006) suggests that for a novel to be classified autobiographical, it must have a protagonist modeled after the author; and a central plotline that mirrors events in the author's life.

This paper therefore seeks to examine the life of the protagonist, Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* in the light of the author, Bessie Head's life and experiences: Its major concern is to identify the traces of bond between Elizabeth and Bessie Head.

A Brief Background of the Author: Bessie Head

Bessie Head (1937-1986), a South African writer, born in South Africa to a white mother and black father, was placed in foster homes and orphanages as a child. After 1964, she lived in exile in Botswana. Her candid writing voiced her strong concerns about racism, economic stagnation, and the status of women in her adopted country. Bessie's novels apart from *A Question of Power* include *Maru* (1971) and *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* (1984). She has also written a collection of stories such as: *A Collection of Treasure* (1977) and the acclaimed oral histories; *Serowe: The Village of the Rain Wind* (1981). (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2016)

Summary of the Text

In this autobiographical novel, written while the author was under severe mental strain and as she recovered from psychotic breakdown, Head tracks the protagonist Elizabeth's struggle to emerge from the oppressive social situation in which she finds herself, and from the nightmares and hallucinations that torment her. Elizabeth, like Bessie Head, was conceived in an out-of-wedlock union between a white woman of social standing, and a black man—a union outlawed by her country of birth, South Africa.

Elizabeth leaves South Africa with her young son – but without her husband, from whom and the country, she is fleeing – to live in neighbouring Botswana, a country that has escaped some of the worst evils of colonial domination. Elizabeth suffers not only social isolation but intellectual deprivation as well. Thus she is plagued by tribal suspiciousness, terrifying dreams, economic hardships, and two hospitalizations for mental breakdown but she endeavours to survive this ordeal.

Traces of Bond between Bessie Head and Elizabeth

Agyemang (2011) states emphatically that Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* is a novel running parallel with the author's life and perhaps documenting the tragic and traumatic life of one of Africa's unrequited and most ill-treated authors. In other words, Bessie Head injects herself and her experiences in Elizabeth, a fictive heroine, to put her (Head's) message across. This is in conformity with Bragg's (2009) observation that autobiographical novel incorporates the author's own experience into the narrative allowing the author to both rely on and reflect on his or her own experiences. The major concern of this section is to trace the injection of Bessie Head's self and real life in her protagonist, Elizabeth in the selected novel.

Common parentage and childhood experience between Bessie and Elizabeth.

Generally, scholars identify Bessie Head's mother as Bessie Amelia Emery, a white woman committed to a mental asylum while pregnant with a black servant and who committed suicide at the asylum six years later. (Pucherova, 2011), Altman (1997) and Brennan (2001). In the novel, the principal of the missionary school cruelly discloses to the protagonist, Elizabeth: "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" (p.16). Head and her fictive Elizabeth thus share a bond of common parentage and nationality, as South Africans.

Again, both the author and the heroine were raised up, at infancy, under foster parenthoods. According to Eilersen (1995), Bessie's mother, a patient at the Fort Napier Mental Hospital, was too ill to raise the child. Therefore, infant Bessie was first entrusted to a white family for adoption. They soon realized that Bessie was not 'white' and returned her. The baby was then put into the care of Nellie and George Heathcote, a "coloured" couple who were devout Catholics. She grew up in their home believing that Nellie was her real mother. Altman (1997) Pucherova (2011) records that a coloured adoptive family was found for Bessie Head, whom she considered to be her biological parents until age 13, when the circumstances of her birth were related to her in a cruel manner by an orphanage teacher. Similarly, in the novel, it is read that seven years following Elizabeth's enrolment in school, when she has become a primary school teacher, she returns to the small town where her foster mother lives to ascertain the truth of what the principal revealed to her about her mother. The foster mother responds:

First they received you from the mental hospital and sent you to a nursing home. A day later you were returned because you did not look white. They sent you to a Boer family. A week later you were returned. The woman on the committee said: "What can we do with this child" His mother is white" My husband came home that night and asked me to take you. I agreed. (p. 17).

Another childhood trace of bond shared by the two personalities (author and heroine) is early education. Bessie attended a mission orphanage (Altman, 1997) and after standard 4, at age 12, she was taken from Nellie's home and sent to St. Monica's Home near Durban (Eilersen, 1995). In the same way, enrolled in a

mission school as in "... Elizabeth ... was secretly relieved to be taken away from the beer-house and sent to a mission school As soon as Elizabeth arrived at the mission school" (p. 16) Undoubtedly, Elizabeth's childhood experiences and education reflect that of Bessie herself.

Another bond of trace identical with the author and her protagonist is self-exile by way of escapism to become refugees. Escapism is explained in terms of an effort or attempt to escape an unpleasant situation or experience by any alternative possible. Both Bessie and Elizabeth escape South Africa's racism and political dominance. Biographical information about Bessie Head indicates that early in 1964 Head dreamed of leaving South Africa altogether. She had spent almost 6 years in the turmoil of the country's largest cities and felt defeated. Therefore, Head, thinking that a free African country would offer her a new inspiration for her writing, resolved to abandon South Africa for Botswana, and sought asylum sensing that her peripheral involvement with Pan-African politics put her life at risk. She managed to obtain a one-way exit permit, meaning that she could not return to South Africa. For 15 years of stay in Botswana changing one settlement after another Head was without citizenship and remained stateless until she was later granted citizenship right, (Eilersen, 1995). Thus, Bessie, a single mother, travelled with her only son, abandoning the husband and her country. Like Head, Elizabeth obtains an exit visa to Botswana to escape a bad relationship and the Apartheid-ridden South Africa. This is amply represented in the novel thus:

It might have been the court case which eventually made her a stateless person in Botswana. Women were always complaining of being molested by her husband. Then there was also a white man who was his boyfriend. After a year she picked up the small boy and walked out of the house, never to return. She was forced to take out an exit permit, which like her marriage, held the 'never to return clause. She did not care. (pp.18\19).

Janti, (2013) observes however that the single mother migrant's efforts to settle in a new country and community in *A Question of Power*, are interwoven with intricately in experience of intense poverty and a mental breakdown (the latter is discussed in detail later). Head's biographical information discloses that she had no passport for 15 years and her finances were often desperate. Her situation pushed her into debt and desperation for money for several years. Elizabeth's situation is not different. A few days following her arrival, at Motabeng, as a single parent, with her son, the reader is hinted about her unpleasant economic condition: "The chair, a bed and a small table were the only pieces of furniture she had in her hut. After a while she became more accustomed to the extreme dark and quite enjoyed blowing out the light and being swallowed up by the billowing darkness". (p. 21). Apart from hardship, Elizabeth (like Bessie) seems to experience some amount of disillusionment at the initial stage of her arrival in Motabeng. For instance, in rural Motabeng, Elizabeth is once again faced with a constricting social system as the Botswana villagers are suspicious of her urban ways and frown upon her individualistic behaviour. Further, they bear her ill will on racial ground because she is light skinned like the "Bushmen" who are a despised tribe there. Later however, as Elizabeth gets so deeply involved in the community, through the local-industries project she somehow overcomes the racial challenges in the village. (Houston, 2012)

Moreover Bessie Head employs Elizabeth in the novel to project her own experience of mental derangement. The account of Bessie's life discloses that, at the time Bessie arrived in Serowe in 1969, she brought with her high optimism and advance copies of 'Rain Clouds'. But, the move proved very difficult as Bessie became the subject of gossip; and even drugged to court by the owner of her rented house who demanded that she moved out but Bessie had declined. A mental breakdown ensued, probably, from what she might consider to be an act of victimization, and she was briefly hospitalized consequently. Head's biographical account by Snodgrass (2010), records that, at times, Bessie suffered mental health problems and on one occasion put up a public notice making bizarre and shocking allegations about then President Sir Seretse Khama, leading to a period in Lobatse Mental Hospital. The account concludes that Bessie's mental setback had two positive outcomes. Firstly, the villagers who had resented her before then accepted her as crazy and left her alone, their gossip therefore subsided. Secondly, Bessie's anger against the village disappeared, as she became calm and creative once again.

In *A Question of Power*, Bessie injects her mental ordeal in Elizabeth. On two different occasions, the protagonist suffers mental derangement, each time her madness results apparently from the incessant and repetitive nightmares in which Sello and Medusa, on one hand threaten her with poverty, hatred and death and Dan on the other, with his sexual harassment constantly imposing their authority over her. In the first instance of her mental incapacitation, she ends up collapsing in a shop during the first school holidays following her arrival at Metabeng (p.51). She was taken to the Metabeng Mental Hospital. The night before this incidence, Elizabeth is confronted in a nightmare by Sello, as the narrator intimates:

Her loud wail had only the logic of the inner torment, but it was the same thing; 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. (p. 57).

On the same page, after the narrator's remarks, Elizabeth confides in the narrator thus:

I'm not sure I'm quite normal any more...but I never thought it would happen to me. I could swear I've been dead sane all along, for all my life, till now... because so many fantastic images surround me... when they address me I burst out... as though I am living with a strange 'other self'... you know Sello? He has a terrible Medusa, hidden away in his subconscious. She's so real to me that I live in terror of her all my days. That's why I broke down.(p. 57, 58).

Some critics such as Jantti, (2013) and Agyemang(2011), believe that Elizabeth's 'madness' like that of Bessie, is perhaps the effect of the cruel principal's haunting words to Elizabeth in her infancy: "Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman." (p. 16) and, truly, Elizabeth (just as Bessie) becomes mad.

Seven years after, when Elizabeth gets the chance to Nellie to ascertain the truth for herself, she thereafter goes to the hospital where her mother was confined and stirs at it, "The last thing Elizabeth did in that small town where she had been born was to walk to the mental hospital and stare at it ... her own life was closely linked to its life." (p. 18). No wonder Elizabeth, (just as Bessie) becomes mad.

The two mental breakdowns experienced by Elizabeth, according to Jantti (2013), have two distinct functions in the novel. The function of the first one is to make Elizabeth lose her position as a teacher, probably, to reflect similar experience in the author's real life. In her teaching career at TshekediKhama Memorial Primary School, Bessie had a nasty incident with the school Principal. She bit the principal when she thought the latter had made a sexual advance to her. When the school authorities ordered Bessie to take a sanity test, she felt humiliated and angry and therefore abandoned the teaching job. Apart from making Elizabeth lose her teaching, the first part of the mental turmoil initiates her integration in the development project that eventually leads to her becoming a village gardener and a valuable member of the community. The second which is however longer madness, brings about her hospitalization and marks a rupture in her integration (Jantti, 2013). She is removed from the context of her everyday life, her son and meaningful activities. The outcomes of the two separate parts of Elizabeth's mental setback correspond to the two consequential outcomes of Bessie's mental challenges mentioned in the preceding in her biography (Brief Biography, 2006). The evidence therefore proves clearly the author's self-representation in her protagonist, Elizabeth.

Besides, Jantti (2013) believes strongly that what holds Elizabeth together throughout her mental disorganization is her conviction that her victim position grants her knowledge of the functions and mechanisms of power. Paradoxically, this conviction also paralyses her agency at the face of her perpetrators. Like Bessie Head, throughout her madness Elizabeth is invariably capable of mothering her son whose presence is depicted as an important counterforce to madness. Kindness, work and friendship, management of her own home as well as caring for others, among others, are the things that hold Elizabeth together, in addition to moment when "demons rampage within" Elizabeth's experience reminds the reader of *A Beautiful Mind*, a movie in which John Nash, the Nobel Laureate in Economics, is a schizophrenic.

Racism is yet another experience identical with the author-protagonist relationship in *A Question of Power*. Bessie's biographical account again indicates that on her arrival in Serowe, Botswana, she soon became a subject of gossip and felt victimized and often discriminated against by the natives. For 15 years her effort to secure Botswana citizenship had been futile. Among other causative factors to this drawback is racism. Even Bessie's son, Howard would come from school reporting of 'troubles' for his being 'coloured'. This disappointed Bessie in that she had envisaged Botswana free of racial discrimination unlike her home land South Africa from which she escaped.

Bessie Head possibly sees writing as a means to correct or at least attack this enemy of humanity: racism. As in her other novels such as *A Woman Alone*, Bessie injects her own experience of racism in her characters, predominantly, the protagonists making them victims of racial discrimination with its attendant alienation or isolation.

In the first place, Elizabeth reflects on the endemic and devastating nature of racism in her home- land, South Africa:

So many people ran away from South Africa to forget it or throw it off. It seemed impossible then, the recurring, monotonous song in her head: 'Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death...' it broke her instantly. She could not help but identify with the weak, homosexual coloured men who were dying before her eyes. One day of it set her nervous system screaming. A week of it reduced her to a total wreck. (p. 47).

Then in Motabeng village in Botswana, Elizabeth becomes so "absent-minded and" has such a "blind spot" in matters of public or social awareness that the narrator comments:

Definitely, as far as Botswana society was concerned, she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be in or on their things. She had to look back and say to herself: 'Hey, now why did they say that, and why did they do that?'

'Colour' and 'language' are the pivots of racism and, more often than not, racism breeds alienation or isolation in individuals or group of people's lives. Elizabeth experiences racism and isolation at birth. Her mother's family together with two foster families rejects her on grounds of her 'colour'. (p. 17). She is

discriminated against and isolated in the mission school in South Africa on the same basis, “Isolate her from the other children for a week” (p. 16). In Botswana, her escapism effort seems to have little success, at least for racism, since it persists: “I don’t care whether people like me or not, I am used to isolation”. (p. 56). And, again, the narrator reiterates:

There had never been anyone near when she had stood alone on street corners in South Africa and stared forlornly at a life without love. There wasn’t anyone near her in the solitary, unfolding mental drama of torture in Motabeng village. (p. 58)

Also, in a conversation with Birgette, involving race, Elizabeth so candidly expresses her sentiment thus:

The victim of a racial attitude cannot think of the most coherent and correct thing to do to change the heart of evil. He can scare them with violence. He can slaughter them; but he isn’t the origin of the poison. It is like two separate minds at work. The victim is the most flexible, the most free person on earth. He doesn’t have to think up endless laws and endless falsehoods. His jailer does that. His jailer creates the chains and the oppressions. He is merely presented with it. He is presented with a thousand and one hells to live through them all. (p. 84).

Thus, Elizabeth’s experience and reaction to racism typify that of Bessie Head who, according to Rob Nixon (cited in Pucherova, 2011) was a “generation Coloured” orphan raised in a missionary orphanage in Natal. To Nixon, Bessie was unable to claim affinity with the Cape Coloured, the largest South African mixed-race community rooted in and around Cape Town who could trace its ancestry to seventh-century Dutch seamen and Khoi women”. Nixon continues that “Head’s language was English rather than Afrikaans, the language of the Cape Coloured. Although she arrives in District Six, Cape Town’s vibrant multiracial community until its destruction in the late 1960s at age twenty and lived there for three-and-a half years, she never became part of its milieu”. In an interview, Bessie Head is reported to have intimated, “As a new comer to the Cape I thought I had found the ideal place for my mixed-race soul. But I quickly and painfully learned that if you were not fully grounded in the colour brown, you would have to be excluded from the community’s business and be ready to endure insult” (Pucherova, 2011). The above intra and extra textual information is indicative of the extensive reflection of Bessie Head’s experience of racism and isolation in Both South Africa and Botswana which she profusely injects in Elizabeth.

Furthermore, there is a trace of bond between Bessie Head, author and Elizabeth, heroine of *A Question of Power*, in relation to career and its inherent dynamics. Head, a professional teacher resigned from teaching in South Africa, decided to become a freelance reporter but resumed teaching in Botswana for a few years and abandoned teaching. Later, she became a gardener with the Bamangwato Development Association and worked in its farm as she also worked, as a typist in Palapye, always committing herself in private life to writing.

In the novel, Elizabeth becomes a teacher after her training in South Africa thus, “seven years later . . . she had become a primary school teacher . . .” (p. 17). Then in Motabeng the reader realizes that, “it was the beginning of the school holidays. She had no work to do”. (p. 40). The two instances here, assert Elizabeth’s initial career, as a teacher just like Bessie, in South Africa and Motabeng respectively.

Again, Elizabeth takes on gardening work with the local-industries project in Motabeng. She introduces herself and her mission to one of the labourers:

My name is Elizabeth. Mr. Grahame sent me here to take notes. He said you would tell me everything. I should also like to do some practical work. You’ve heard about the Local-industries project Eugene is starting in the village near the school? It has a vegetable garden, and we want to copy some of the new methods you are using here for the garden. (p. 73). Impliedly, Elizabeth’s involvement in the local industries project allows her to rid herself of isolation and partake of rural life of the village of Motabeng.

The fact that Elizabeth, like Bessie, engages in writing, in her private life is hinted on page 204 of *A Question of Power*:

At sunset when work was over and everything was peaceful, slowly sipping a cup of tea, she began to jot down fragmentary notes. . . .” and when Shorty (Howard) arrives from school and asks his mother what she is doing, her answer is, ‘I’m writing poetry’.

Bessie Head thus injects her selfhood as a teacher, gardener and writer in Elizabeth in the world of *A Question of Power*.

Yet another selfhood Bessie injects in Elizabeth, the heroine of *A Question of Power* is her (Bessie’s) usual combativeness and unstable-mindedness. Bessie’s biographical account reports that she was famous for her quarrels as well as her writing. She had a combative spirit; often times, she was rude and even hateful toward other people. Bessie was aware that she had an unstable mind, which she referred to as “my curse”.

These attitudinal traits of Bessie are quite expressive in Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*. For example, her rudeness and combativeness find expression in the narrator’s words below:

Elizabeth was a voluble talker who gesticulated wildly when she talked. If some idea excited her, she’d spring to her feet and wave her arms about. She’d often swing around to the chair and point directly at it, talking

all the time and vigorously including its occupant” (pp. 23/24). When amanonce interrogates her about Sello, the narrator informs the reader about Elizabeth’s reaction: “She kept silent, pretending not to know Sello at all. She screwed up her face with a puzzled frown and the man walked off”. (p. 27).

Again, the combativeness of Elizabeth shows up overtly in her irritable reaction to Shorty’s childish stubbornness as they are getting ready for the shopping at the beginning of the school holidays, “You’d like to be slaughtered, hey? Shut your mouth, you damn little nuisance”. (p. 49)

Again, one Sunday evening, in her exhaustion, the omniscient narrator entered Elizabeth’s mind and tells the reader of the latter’s thought about Sello, “Sello, after all, is just a fool. And he looks like a monkey”. (p. 48).

In connection with Elizabeth’s unstable mindedness, the narrator says, “Her mind functioned in wild leaps and bounds, overlooking many details” (p. 29) and on page 49 the narrator further comments about Elizabeth’s apparent mental disorganization:

People only function well when their inner lives are secure and peaceful. She was like a person driven out of her own house while demons rampaged within, turning everything upside down”. (p. 49)

Thus, the above instances portray the extent at which Bessie’s personality and disposition are present in Elizabeth, her protagonist in *A Question of Power*.

Not that alone but also Elizabeth’s political and religious ideas mirror that of her author, Bessie Head. From Snodgrass (2010), Bessie Head’s work focused on the everyday life of ordinary people and their role in larger African political struggle. Besides, religious ideas feature prominently at times. Even though Head was initially nurtured as a Christian, she was later influenced by Hinduism (through her intimacy with the Indian community in South Africa).

Again, Eilersen (1995) records two vital statements of Bessie Head that reassert her religious and political inclinations. On religion Bessie says, “I have built up a kind of people religion that is rooted in African soil”. Also, her political philosophy is represented by the words below:

My world opposes the world of politicians They plan for and dictate to the people. In my world people plan for themselves ... it is a world full of love, tenderness, happiness and laughter.

In the novel, *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth, like her author, questions the vulnerability of the poor ordinary people, especially her own black Africans, in the face of the prevalent white religious and political dominance over ‘the poor’, idolized in Sello, Medusa and Dan:

‘Things I’d never have thought of get to dominate my mind and create neurotic fears... the soul was really open territory easily invaded by devils. They just move in, carry on, mess around, and when a man has cleaned up his house, ten thousand more move in. If I had to take up residence in somebody’s house I’d be polite and enquire after their health. Devils don’t do that. They just walk in and smash everything up and then they grin...’ (p. 192).

Again, nothing sums up the idea of dominance, arbitrariness and victimization, religious or political, than what is revealed in one of Elizabeth’s reflections below:

Here was a world, now, where there were no questions, only pre-planned, overpowering statements that choked ... and an incredibly malicious man in a brown suit with a women too shocking to comprehend. She could not say whether Medusa was human or animal. Medusa had human form and, regardless of anything she said or did, she remained her competent, confident and smiling – self.(p.47)

At the end of the story Elizabeth’s candid observation about and dream for humanity, after going through painful experiences of alienation, rejection, oppression and disturbing nightmares, culminate in: “since man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed: If there were any revelation whatsoever... it seemed to be... ‘There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet’ (p. 206).

All the above quotations from the novel provide comprehensive evidence of bond of selfhood between Bessie and her Elizabeth.

The Narrative point of view of *A Question of Power*: its appropriateness and usefulness

In chapter 7 of his book ‘The Autobiographical Pact’ (p. 5). Philippe Lejeune limits the autobiography proper to a story whose author, narrator and protagonist are identical. Lejeune moves on to point out that the identity of the narrator and the principal character assumed in autobiography is marked most often by the employment of the first person (‘I’) described otherwise by Gerard Genette (cited in Lejeune, 1975) as autodiegetic narration. Similarly, Opoku-Agyemang (1989), Odoi (2010) and Anderson (2011) assert that for a true or proper autobiography to emerge there must be a convergence of three discrete selves: the author, the narrator and protagonist. Despite the fact that Anderson (2011), Porter and Wolf (1973) agree to the common identity shared in an autobiography, which usually culminates in the use of the first person, they also agree that the common identity could be similar, but, not necessarily identical.

It is important also, to note that Berryman (1999) points out that many literary scholars often disagree on how inclusive the category of autobiography should be. Berryman, for example, is of the view that there are characteristics that are common to the majority of autobiographical works which among other things include the grammatical perspective (first person narrator) of the work, the identity of the self or self-reflection and introspection of the author. The discussion in this paper so far is undoubtedly suggestive of Bessie's heavy presence in Elizabeth in particular, making *A Question of Power* deeply a self-reflective and fairly introspective novel.

Bates (1937) in fact, perceives no dividing line between autobiography and fiction. This view of Bates is shared by Doubrovsky who posits that "the blurring of fiction and truth characteristic of autobiography has even led to the creation of a subdivision within the genre of autobiography that deals with fictionalized self-accounts" (Doubrovsky, 2004.70). He (Doubrovsky) thus categorizes this style of writing that blends features of both fiction and autobiography as 'autofiction' (autobiographical): which, Hughes (2002), understands as "a narrative modality that inhabits the referential space likewise colonized by autobiography proper, but at the same time, offers a patently enriched and treated, hence fictionalized, and metamorphic, version of the life-story of the autofictionneur" (p. 569).

In *A Question of Power* Bessie Head makes use of the third person omniscient unlimited point of view to probably avoid creating an impression that she is depicting her real life. By so doing Bessie consciously or unconsciously sets out to produce a novel that is autofictional or autobiographical in the sense described in 'The Genre of Autobiography: Definition and characteristics' (updated 2016) thus:

The difference between traditional autobiography and the genre of autofiction is that autobiographers are attempting to depict their real life while writers of autofiction are only basing their work upon real experience.

In other words, Bessie is possibly trying to say, as Hughes (2002. 570) would say "c'est moi et ce n'est pas moi" ('It's me and it's not me').

Again, by using the third person narrator Bessie fulfills a fictional requirement for her novel. As she narrates the events through the omniscient eye she distances or dissociates herself from the characters and events of the story and thus achieves a high sense of generality ridding her readers of any possible prejudice. According to Lyons (1984), when a writer generalizes about him or herself, he or she invariably demonstrates a degree of detachment about his or her own life. By using the third person narrator, Bessie Head succeeds in detaching herself from her narrator, who also detaches him or herself from the protagonist and other characters. The novel and its characters therefore achieve the sense of broad categorization with which its audience can associate. Again, it is more probable that by choosing to avoid the use of formal autobiography narrative point of view, Bessie Head demonstrates an overt disinterestedness in producing an autobiographical novel: she merely might wish to draw upon her personal memories to support and clarify her statement about or re-enactment of the Apartheid system in her homeland, South Africa and its cruel effects.

However, in doing so Bessie appears to have more or less landed in an autofiction than pure fiction by which the novel has been categorized. That notwithstanding, one can hardly deny the fact that Bessie Head's use of the omniscient narrator is appropriate and useful. After all, the experience the novel seems to recap is not peculiar to Bessie Head alone but that common to the general African population under apartheid and slavery in general. More so, (Houston, 2012) argues that all fiction is autobiographical in some way because it undoubtedly contains elements of the author's actual experience.

Instances of disparity in the bond between Bessie Head and her Protagonist, in *A Question of Power*

The fact that Bessie heavily injects herself in Elizabeth does not make the reader expect that everything in Elizabeth's life mirrors the exact realities of Bessie's life. A critical reading of the text reveals a few instances where Bessie alters settings and events to ensure that the story meets its fictive requirement, since she set out to make fiction. In actual fact, all the characters she develops in the novel appear to be imaginary and representatives, including the protagonist. Apart from the characters, the town or village in which Bessie settled on her arrival in Botswana is 'Serowe'. However, in the novel Elizabeth and her son settle at 'Motabeng'. (p.20) Besides, whereas the biography of Bessie Head recounts that it was 'Serowe' that Bessie privately re-named "The Village of The Rain Wind", in the novel it is 'Motabeng' that Elizabeth privately re-names "The Village of The Rain Wind". (p.20) Moreover, whilst Bessie's biography indicates that she taught in 'Serowe' at Tshekedi Khama Memorial Primary School, the novel relates that Elizabeth teaches in a primary school at Motabeng (p. 49). These few and several other alterations occur between Bessie's life and that of her fictive Elizabeth. What account for these disparities is best explained by Houston (2012) that when converting truth to fiction, it is best to cull only the essential and ignore the unessential. Fiction writers thus, have complete license to keep only the best tidbits of the story, and that keeping only the juiciest bits and tossing the less-than-interesting parts into the compost is a smart way to use a piece of truth to its full fictional advantage. After all, Houston (2012) feels that even though autobiographical novel merges autobiographical and fictional techniques,

the novel's places and names in the book are typically altered and events are recreated to give the story more of a dramatic arc. Stated in another sense, the events in the author's life may be altered and thus the writer may exploit his or her "fictional license" to his or her optimum purpose and advantage.

II. CONCLUSION

Bessie Head's novel, *A Question of Power*, though generally regarded as a difficult novel, as a result of the protagonist's "complex" social and mental situation emanating from her mysterious religious and political experience, it is overwhelmingly acclaimed to be one of the best African novel dealing with South African Apartheid theme and insisting on freedom of the individual. Presumably, by injecting herself and her experiences so much in her heroine, Elizabeth, Bessie Head wants to inspire her readers and encourage them not to give up on their struggles in life. She uses Elizabeth to teach her audience "how we must battle with ourselves if we are the hindrance to our own progress and threat to our own lives" (Agyemang, 2011) Bessie Head demonstrates, in what she calls "fiction literature", the practicality of attaining one's freedom and goals and thus proves her mastery of fictionalizing in the realms of fact or fiction.

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