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Madness among Women in the Novels of Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta

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Turning Inwards

The novels of Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta make it clear that madness is a common problem among black women. Their problems are made, worse because of the patriarchy social institution which functions on the principal that "male shall dominate female".

Purpose of This Study

In a globalized world, with much talk about highly developed and knowledgeable societies, the leading edge of everything good and desirable, it is ironic that not much is heard of mad people, particularly mad woman. It is possible that the society deliberately ignores the plight of this set of people or that the society is so busy that no one really remembers these people either in real life or in literary texts. So, the purpose of this study is to focus on the plight of mad people in society, particularly the plight of mad women. The study in this light concerns itself with insanity among women both in life and in texts.

Madness

Madness always has been with us in African literary studies, particularly in women's writing. Sometimes it has been presented simply as a literal quality of mind, interesting for its own sake, but more commonly it functions as a trope for various kinds of social dysfunction.

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In the novels of Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta, the narrative voice is able or willing to articulate the speaking subject's relationship to madness. The narrative voice reveals also the influence of the slave narrative in shaping that relationship. Rather than beginning from a state of wellness, descending into behavior and ideation which are abnormal, and then returning to a state of wellness, the narrative voice in these texts blurs the lines between the mental-emotional states of wellness and madness. This blurring between wellness and madness is reminiscent of the blurring in slave narratives between the mental-emotional states of slavery and freedom.

Madness – A Recurring Theme

Madness is a recurring theme in African women writing. It has also been addressed in a number of African American women's writings. Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta and Alice Walker are among the African and African American women writers who have addressed the theme of madness in some of their writings. Due to historical and cultural differences, the theme of madness has been addressed differently depending on where the author is originally from.

Prescription and Proscription – An Overview

The term *prescription* is used in a psycho medical, therapeutic, curative sense to mean a wholesome alternative remedy for illness. Elizabeth's madness *A Question of Power* opens up a world of paradox which becomes a rite of passage, an initiation into wisdom that was hitherto unknown. Prescription for Elizabeth is a process of self-meaning friends such as Eugene. As a sequel to prescription, proscription is a process of healing, of learning to belong, especially where the prescription of conventional medicine fails. Through proscription, Elizabeth regains her sanity, begins to see things in a different and informed light, and is thus able to start living her life anew.

Points of Divergence: *A Question of Power*

As for points of divergence, some interesting issues are raised about the nature, substance, progress and detail of mental illness, and about the process of healing or prescription. It is possible to assert that the clinical details of Bessie Head's mental illness and breakdown, resulting in hospitalization in Lobatse, Botswana, are subordinated in the novel to her artistic purpose of deconstruction, the prime impulse of *A Question of Power*. In other words, it would seem fairly safe to assert that the madness of Elizabeth and that of Bessie Head are fundamentally divergent. Elizabeth's mental anguish, protracted hallucinatory agonies and recurrent, nightmarish pains are the very means by which the many demons of patriarchy are exorcised. This wide ranging deconstructive attack on establishment hierarchies, really, transcends the real life details of Bessie Head's illness. Thus Bessie Head has formulated the character of Elizabeth and fictionalized her demons in order to forge an ontological vision of the world, the nature of meaning, thereby serving her artistic purposes of deconstructing oppressive hierarchies, and this process brings about a form of therapy.

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What is also clear is that Elizabeth's healing leads to the adoption of utopian socialist farming cooperative ideals which, sadly, offered no lasting solution or prescription for either Bessie Head or for any postcolonial African state. Beyond the publication of *A Question of Power* Bessie Head's self-destructive behavior seemed to have continued, probably leading to her early death. Likewise, the failures of socialism in Africa and beyond, culminating in the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union, point to the naivety of the Motabeng agricultural experiments as a deconstruction of capitalist economic power.

A Question of Power is not an autobiography in terms of psychological verisimilitude; the text instead fulfills the need to deconstruct various essentialisms, therapeutically as life-giving prescription. In other words, *A Question of Power* is a huge, cosmic act of deconstruction which liberates Elizabeth's soul. After this liberation, Elizabeth knows that she is no longer on the margins of society. She is at liberty either to come to terms with those identities that have been imposed on her or merely reject them, seeing them as mere tool and strategies of hegemonic social structures used to subjugate those without power.

When Rain Clouds Gather

When Rain Clouds Gather, Bessie Head's first novel, is about a young South African Zulu by the name Makhaya who arrives in Botswana, running away from the injustices of apartheid in South Africa. Makhaya leaves South Africa, she also because of his active involvement in South African politics and he is therefore running away from victimization. As an exile in Botswana, Makhaya settles in Golema Mmidi, a small village with an agricultural cooperative which is run by the local people and a sizeable number of refugees. It is in this village where Makhaya and Gilbert, a British agricultural worker, strike up such a good friendship that everybody admires it, seeing it as a typical example of how human relationships can rise above parochial boundaries of race and color. Inspired by this relationship the people of the village of Golema Mmidi decide to unite against Matenge, their oppressive chief, to root out evil from their society. They besiege the chief in his house but he takes his life before anybody can lay a hand on him. This brings happiness to the people who are now able to forge a peaceful harmonious community. Thus oppression and racism of any kind have no place in the village of Golema Mmidi.

Maru

Maru, Bessie Head's second novel has been described as her most direct attack on the practice of racism, especially in terms of its fearless and honest treatment of the apartheid practiced by blacks on blacks. In *Maru*, a whole village is plunged into agitation following the revelation that Margaret, the new school teacher, is a Masarwa, a Bushman. Only Maru, Moleka, and Dikeledi warm to Margaret, much to the outrage of the villagers who were fuming with anger, not surprisingly. Anger arises from the fact that Basawa or Bushmen are treated as second-class citizens. Maru makes the bold step of marrying Margaret, even though this forces him to relinquish his kingdom for the sake of the woman. A feeling of euphoria and genuine jubilation grips the entire Basarwa tribe, an euphoria generated by the apparent obliteration of their

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stigmatized parish status in society, now that they have achieved a humanity that has been earlier denied them. This is their reaction to Maru's marriage to Margaret:

Details of Proscription

Proscription refers to various manifestations of marginality experienced by Elizabeth, the main character in *A Question of Power*, who finds herself on the fringes of society. The forms of marginality that Elizabeth identifies, caused by different domains of power over which she agonizes, include the fact that she is a woman, a product of mixed race, an exile of apartheid, and a foreigner in Botswana. Besides these, Elizabeth discovers that Sello and Dan, the phantom figures in the novel, are causes of further conditions of marginality for her. Proscription here constricts Elizabeth's power and has a limitless ability to control her thought, deny her freedom, and even stifle her speech, at times. She is hopelessly sick in her room in which she is often cloistered, colonized, as she battles with hallucinatory Sello and Dan, who are tropes for all the power behind her oppression. The proscription, which brings about her nervous breakdown, causes Elizabeth to confront and deconstruct the core metaphysical issues, as the only way of achieving self-therapy.

Until she is thirteen, Elizabeth's story is shrouded in secrecy. Born in a mental hospital in South Africa to a mentally unstable mother, Elizabeth is sent to a nursing home by the child welfare committee. Upon discovering that she is colored, the authorities return her. For a week, Elizabeth is fostered by a Boer family, which also later returns her. Apart from her grandmother, who very much wants to see her, none of Elizabeth's family members will have her. In the meantime, another woman, who is part African and part White, like Elizabeth, is paid to bring her up. Later, Elizabeth is moved to a mission where she learns snippets of the true story of her life from the principal of the mission school. At the mission, the principal breaks the news to Elizabeth of her insane white mother who was locked up when she was having the child of a stable boy, an African, a black, a native. Further, the principal tells Elizabeth that her mother was a good woman who had set aside some money for her education, and that she must be careful not to become insane like her mother.

Prescription

In madness, Elizabeth meditates on the absolute emptiness and vanity of all mundane knowledge and values as projected to her by Sello and Dan. Like Lear raving made on the heath, Elizabeth is afflicted by myriad demons which make her isolated, desperate, lonely and mad but it is this madness which later helps her gain profound insights into the reality of life.

Prescription for Elizabeth causes her to reject her proscriptive current of life, helps her regain her sanity and fires her with a crusading zeal to join the Motabeng community. Elizabeth refuses to yield to the proscriptive demands of Sello and Dan who are really tropes for hegemonic domination. The condition of prescription is partly self-inducted and partly brought about by good-natured personalities such as Eugene, Kenosi, Tom, Birgette, Mrs. Jones, the white doctor who treats Elizabeth in the mental hospital, and finally Shorty, her son. Like Foucault who,

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‘highly suspicious of claims to universal truths’, rejects nature as the foundation of truth, Elizabeth sees that Sello and Dan’s projections of their realities is mere trickery.

It must be made clear that both proscription and prescription are not systematically linear experiences, with one methodically following the other. Rather, they are on-and-off occurrences. Sometimes, moments of proscription are preceded or followed by prescription, and vice-versa. At other times the two conditions are juxtaposed. It is only after one has read through *A Question of Power* that one becomes aware of Elizabeth’s total recuperation which, interestingly enough, is followed by intriguing episodes, including the disempowerment of Sello, and Dan’s realization that he no longer wields any power over Elizabeth.

In prescription Elizabeth is fascinated by her friend Eugene’s ‘practical genius’ (61) or his pragmatic outlook on life which makes him refuse slavishly to know-how to a Western academic mode of education to the detriment of vocational training. The Motabeng farm project is Eugene’s brainchild, and his commitment to a practical, broad-based model of education that develops intellects, skills, personality, and individual empowerment beyond hegemonic domination, elitism and patriarchal influence manifested in Western forms of education becomes useful to Elizabeth. Joining the project helps Elizabeth immensely to recover from her nightmares. As Townsend succinctly suggests that it is only by entering into his world of practical commitment, and by developing a garden with fellow human beings who become profoundly meaningful to her life, that Elizabeth is gradually restored to sanity. Following Elizabeth dismissal from her teaching post at Motabeng Secondary School after an early mental breakdown, Eugene offers her a job at the Motabeng farm project. It is on this farm that Elizabeth not only finds joy and fulfillment in gardening and other practical ventures, but also begins to see wisdom in human goodness and humanity. Most of the work on this project is voluntary but it still empowers the workers who form a communistic idyll.

Relationship between the Inner and the Outer

In *A Question of Power* the relationship between inner and outer is at its most tenuous. There is virtually no causal connection between reality and Elizabeth's nightmares. Elizabeth's struggle is entirely internal. One can argue persuasively that she undergoes what she conceptualizes as an experience of evil at its roots and emerges with an affirmation of good. In certain respect Elizabeth recovers herself, her mental peace and social being, through her participation in the collective project of the vegetable garden in which people of different races and different places are involved. Despite being a difficult task, Head has successfully portrayed a character with an extremely insane, mental unstable condition.

The Art of Emecheta

Emecheta is fiercely feminist. As a woman, a mother, and a sociologist, she advances insightful perspectives on social and political realities, their origin and change that are different from those of most male African writers who write in English and of the literary and cultural critics who ignore her and the subjectivity as well as historicity of most women of Africa. Although she is

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an outspoken critic of imperialism, Emecheta refuses to sentimentalize tribal culture, to depict pre-colonial Africa, simplistically, as an Eden ransacked by Western imperialism; for the significant part of the old and untold history and the story of tribal Africa is the oppression of women.

The Joys of Motherhood has been called Buchi Emecheta's most outstanding novel. Beyond exhibiting the power of characterization, manipulation of point of view and narrative method, the novel offers a sustained exploration of the African woman's experience, a much-needed theme in current African literary discourse. The paramount issue that still needs to be considered, however, is whether the academy today has a clearer picture of the conditions of African women than it had more than two decades ago when Maryse Conde spoke out against the heap of myths rapid generalizations, and patent untruths that have clouded the personality and the inner reality of African women and called on African women to speak for themselves. I find it troubling that even as African women are beginning to speak for themselves and to write about their lives, the popular misconception of African Women as slaves, brutalized and abused by a patriarchal society, still overwhelmingly defines Western critical attitudes.

The Predominance of the Theme of Madness - *The Joys of Motherhood*

The theme of madness plays a major and predominant role in Emecheta's writings. Emecheta portrays a woman character Nnu Ego breaking into madness in her novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. The novel opens with a powerful but disturbing description of its heroine, Nnu Ego. The reader is presented with the image of a woman in despair, suffering both mental and physical agony at the death of her first child but a second marriage. Convinced of her failure as a mother, she decides to kill herself:

Nnu Ego backed out of the room, her eyes unfocused and glazed, looking into vacancy. (...) She ran as if she would never stop. Her baby (...) her baby! Nnu Ego's arms involuntarily went to hold her aching breasts, more for assurance of her motherhood than to ease their weight. She felt the milk trickling out, wetting her buba blouse; and the other choking pain got heavier, nearing her throat, as if determined to squeeze the very life out of her there and then. But, unlike the milk, this pain could not come out, though it urged her on, and she was running, running away from it. Yet it was inside of her. There was only one way to rid herself of it. For how would she be able to face the world after what had happened? No, it was better not to try. It was best to end it all this way, the only good way. (7-8).

With such a portrait of Nnu Ego, her vulnerability and emotional instability clearly evident through her physical demeanor and her mental process, Emecheta both foregrounds her narrative and initiates the reader into interrogating the principles that motivate her protagonist's action.

Why does Nnu Ego think that killing herself is a better option than meeting life's challenges? Are her actions governed by certain cultural codes of conduct, or do they imply a type of character defect?

Although there is enough sympathy for Nnu Ego's loss, the narrative clearly points out that within her world, Nnu Ego's behavior is considered not only inappropriate, but irrational. The woman who helps overpower and save Nnu Ego from drowning herself empathizes with her loss but quickly tells her that out of six pregnancies she only had two children alive, yet she was still living. This declarative statement of survival against all odds is reinforced when, three months after the failed suicide attempt, Nnu Ego's childhood friend, Ato, visits her. Contemplating Nnu Ego's surroundings, untidy and disorderly, and Nnu Ego still in a daze, Ato asks Nnu Ego, the daughter of Agbadi, what has gone wrong with you? All because you lost a child? (74). It must be noted that infant mortality was an ever-present reality of life for Nigerian women in the 1930s, the time in which Emecheta sets her novel. The ideal response, as the women in the novel demonstrate, is to contain the experience and continue with life. But for reasons that the novel consistently interrogates, Nnu Ego cannot move on.

Thus, *The Joys of Motherhood* becomes an elaborate exploration of what went wrong with Nnu Ego. And the response that the novel presents has little to do with cultural expectations.

Two Worlds in Conflict

It has been said that Nnu Ego's sense of disequilibrium is the result of the contrasts between two worlds in conflict. The old world, represented by the village life in Ibuza, was one in which men romanced their wives, women supported their families through farming, family ties were strong and emotional, and financial support was abundant. The new world represented by life in Lagos in bewildering and tiring. There is no room for extended family support, no land to be owned or cultivated, and women have to enter the world of trade to find money.

However, as Christina Davis has suggested, to read Nnu Ego's inability to cope with her experiences as a consequence of the rift between Village and City life avoids the major issues of the novel. It is apparent that Nnu Ego's problem did not start in Lagos. Actually, the novel states that she is sent to Lagos to find peace, as a last act of redemption. At Ibuza with all the emotional and financial support given to her, it was obvious to the villagers that Nnu Ego was emotionally weak. She had a singleness of purpose: Emecheta writes that wanting one thing at a time and wanting it badly. And the one thing Nnu Ego wanted "badly" was motherhood.

Conclusion

In the wake of perennial loneliness, mental turmoil, adversity and suffering, Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta turn inwards, in order to demonstrate how the human soul is able to rise above the parochial boundaries of its individuality and fixed identity, and accept humanity. The spirit is exiled from the physical body so that spirit is able to understand the workings of human society. The society the spirit investigates in and beyond the boundaries is clearly diseased. Buchi and Head proceed from an acute awareness of the condition of multiple marginality and colonization occasioned by such social totalities as race, culture, patriarchy, class, God and religion. As they investigate and make an informed appraisal of these positions, they find them

problematic and provisional. In fact, none of the notions they examined in the spiritual journey is a categorical imperative or a transcendental paradigm for defining and understanding identity.

The novels of Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta, make it clear that madness is a common problem among black women. Their problems are made worse because of the patriarchy social institution which functions on the principle that male shall dominate female. Madness is a condition that can strike even the most unsuspecting person in the world. It has not been adequately explained to be hereditary; it is not restricted to any particular economic class or cadre. Stigmatization should give way to understanding and consequently help for those inflicted with insanity whether as a result of witchcraft or heredity or whatever may have been responsible for this condition. It is by doing this that the society will attain the needed development and it is by so doing that the society can begin to utilize the different potentials of this set of people for economic development, after all, they too are the earth.

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