

## Rethinking Working Class Fiction: A Revision of Bessie Head's life-writing, *A Question of Power*, by Breaking through the Canons

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### Structured Abstract:

**Purpose:** Working class writings demand a new theoretic analysis in the context of contemporary geo-political and economic changes. New studies place them between the colonized and the postcolonial peripheries in order to examine the meaningful fissures within. Literary texts are re-read for engaging readers and critics into a 'compelling reading' of multifarious aspects of working class writing after globalization. The under theorized portions of plebian history and the history of class-discrimination now need to be rethought in the context of post-globalist scenario. The critical study also brings the shifting terrains of 'reality of difference' and the politics of representations into the light. Subaltern studies has undergone and sustained some glaring changes and issues. Working class solidarity, the engulfing pattern of colonial subjugation, positive notion in subaltern ethics, narratives of dislocation, agony of displacement, territorial differences due to migration, identity crisis of diasporans and discriminating labour politics-all these serve to the formation of the new ambit of 'working-class writing' with the backdrop of globalization and post globalist sphere. Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974) is such an elusive life-writing that invites special mention in this discussion. The concept of 'class' and its evolution through different formations down the ages, the issues of class-consciousness and the conflicting agonies of an immigrant are the key subjects of the text. The journey of the protagonist has been portrayed here in its reversal. The text is cerebral as the readers witness a critical psycho-geographical journey on the part of the protagonist. The protagonist leaves her urban space of South Africa for some rural village in Bechuanaland (now Botswana). It is something very unusual indeed. It's a different expedition all together. South Africa born stateless writer Head here tries to understand certain glaring things of national and international politics- "What makes a class? Which structure of feeling and ethical narratives gives shape and meaning to class as a unity-in-dispersal? What constitutes working class writing apart from, or in addition to, alibis of origins and identity politics?" Sonali Perera's book *No Country: Working Class Writing in the Age of Globalisation* (2014) provides a theoretical framework for projecting this prospect. Perera, in this context, by referring the observations of Post-Marxists, Hardt and Negri, shows a new urge to understand how working class writing evolves from colonial to post-colonial era. Perera shows how the concepts of 'class' and 'proletarian writing'

undergo sea changes. My paper will interrogate the vacillating trajectory of border and borderlessness. Through this interrogation, it will try to understand African Working Class Consciousness.

**Methodology:** The paper here proposes an interpretative approach. This approach is engaging different theoretical nuances from different areas like working class fictions, postcolonial studies, life-writings, diasporic literature all through the corpus of this paper. It refers certain psycho-geographical aspects of displacement that foregrounds the basic thrust of the article. Besides these, my paper analyses the core of writer's language of crises.

**Findings:** The study exposes working class writings' demand of a new theoretic analysis in the context of contemporary geo-political and economic changes. It shows the importance of new studies on the colonized and the postcolonial peripheries in order to examine the meaningful fissures within. How literary texts need to be dissected to engage multifarious aspects of working class writing after globalization, is one of the major issues here. One of the findings is how the limitation of general categorizing of the term 'class' hinder the way to achieve a well nuanced study of 'working class writing'.

**Value:** The relevance of this write-up lies in the fact that it questions the straight and simplified notion of 'class' and 'working class writing'. The paper asks for re-reading of the under-theorized ambit of 'working class literature' as 'world literature'.

**Keywords:** Plebian, Diaspora, Immigrant, Globalization, Post Globalist Era, Class, Proletarian Writing.

Bessie Head's novel *A Question of Power* (1974) has got one of the most powerfully complex narratives. Head published her several creations between 1969 and 1974. Her three novels are *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. *The Collector of Treasures* is a collection of short stories while *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* is a portrait of the village where she settled in Botswana. And the fictionalized history of Southern Africa is *A Bewitched Crossroad*. She is one of the most influential African writers. Bessie Head (1937-1986) belonged to a 'mixed racial background'. She was born to a white mother and a non-white father, in a mental hospital, she was later raised in a 'coloured' family as her first foster 'white' parents disowned the brown infant Bessie. Around the age thirteen she was sent to a missionary orphanage. Her mother died in the mental hospital in 1947 and she never familiarized with her father. She was extremely fond of books. She was keen, observant, determined but was always placed on the instabilities of life. She eventually trained herself as a primary school teacher but as an ambitious one later pursued her career as a journalist. But soon the flux of life flowed her out to Botswana on an exit visa to take up again the post of a teacher. In the 1960s, when Apartheid legislation was being implemented in South Africa, she thus migrated to Botswana to set a renewed struggle some journey of life, both physically

and psychologically. *A Question of Power* (1974), the third novel of Bessie, tells the story of Elizabeth, a single mother with a similar background. The novel describes the painful displacement in living of Elizabeth and her struggle to get assimilated a new community in a foreign country, Botswana. The novel also projects the agony of the protagonist, which is followed by the simultaneous deterioration in her mental health, leading to a breakdown and the loss of her job of teaching. She later engages herself in a local development project as a gardener and suffers another breakdown and reaches a mental hospital.

Thus this novel is described as “totally autobiographical” by Head. She weaves its narrative with the “tremendous disturbance” she experiences in her whole life as a non-white immigrant from a city to a country. Like her two previous novels, it deals with the complex ‘interplay of gender, race and class’ in South African and in Botswanan socio-cultural platforms. The novel minutely reminds us of the impact of this complicated fabric of societies, cultures, economic and political tumults on the author as she joins this communities both being an insider and outsider too. She asserts the autobiographical note very strongly,

My third novel, *A Question of Power*, had such an intensely personal and private dialogue that I can hardly place it in the context of the more social outward looking work I had done. It was a private philosophical journey to the source of evil. (Head 15)

Sonali Perera's book *No Country: Working Class Writing in the Age of Globalisation* (2014) functions very critically here in the context of prioritizing the autobiographical mode of Head's narrative. She is of the opinion that most of the readers and scholars overstressing ‘the strange circumstances of her birth and the sensationalist details of her “false start” in life.’ She rightly puts the assertion further and says,

I would argue that this biographical lensing of her work does it an injustice....Such selective biographical detail as is generally summoned up to “set the context,” while immediately engaging interest, too easily overdetermines Head's literary, historical, and philosophical contributions to the history of ideas. Head's contemporary critics, especially those with “pure political credentials,” attempted to read her subjectivity and ideological investments in these regressive, retrograde ways. (Perera, pp. 124-125)

*A Question of Power* presents both, the complex power relationships shared by sexes just like that in Maru and the thriving of an agrarian community under the influences of cooperative farming which is the key focus of her first novel *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The novel also

shelters a 'comprehensive account of the means to social and economic liberation which Head sees as the prerequisite for a nation free from any form of colonial and postcolonial constraints.' The physical and mental dislocation pushes the protagonist of the novel to a mnemonic darkness. She exposes the stringent socio-political norms and her traumatizing state of personal sphere. *A Question of Power* has got such a well-knit narrative structure that displays 'the fault lines of colonial and decolonizing politics of race and gender.' It talks about the protagonist, Elizabeth and her status as a non-white woman, an 'other' in both, native and hostland. Her identity as a woman of colour prevents her from achieving any position in furcated racial and national communities. The reading of the novel suggests that somehow the attempts of postcolonial subjects to reclaim their positions back and are disruptive in and of themselves. Elizabeth's beruffled mental condition is a consequence of the ever-shifting pains and pangs that the life offers to a displaced person. Sometimes, protagonist's involvement in a community work garden proposes a very different alternative to the disturbed life she bears all through. This serves a utopia on a 'troubling erasure of difference and desire.' The protagonist fully engages herself in such an agrarian initiative in order to instill some pride in the land of the host country. Thus her work and her labour pave the way for economic progress in the village Motabeng. By the side of this agrarian possibility, the constant breakdown, mental waverings, and insanity accompany Elizabeth throughout the course of the novel. The entire narrative of *A Question of Power* is woven through the consciousness of Elizabeth. It depicts how she gets tormented by the emotional crises in life following her exile along with her son, how she manages to get through her mental breakdown, hallucinations of two men, Sello and Dan, that continually haunt her, how she passes uncertainties while choosing her career. It seems that she has always been torn apart on the liminal space and with the expulsion, her life poses for her. The novel gradually unfolds the story of a non-white woman in Africa and the biases she has to face under the complex socio-cultural trajectories. The novel thus, tries to delineate the similarities in the manner of living for both, the author Head and her character Elizabeth. Their inner and outer worlds collide, coalesce and trouble them incessantly. The novel foregrounds how Elizabeth confronts her 'mental struggle for autonomy' while voicing against social disparities in Africa. The psychological struggle, philosophical contributions and the laboring life of Head should be scrutinized while comprehending the tide and ebb turns of her narrative. Head left the 'cities and townships of South Africa' for 'the village of Serowe in Bechunaland'. She left her career as a teacher and later as a journalist in South Africa. Arriving to Botswana

(previously Bechunaland) she began her life as a primary school teacher, and later 'along with other volunteer trainees of the Swaneng project, studied sustainable farming techniques.' But the associations and baggage of the previous life in South Africa burdened her a lot and distressed her future journey too. She had to face a lot while crossing the borders of nations. Here Perera rightly points out the scenario,

Head left South Africa in the fallout of the Treason Trial period ... Despite her repudiation of organized left-party politics, she was denied a passport because of her connections to the PAC ... but managed to secure a one-way visa. (Perera, pp. 122)

In order to exemplify the factors of globalization and the post globalist peripheral thrusts and further significance to the concept of 'working-class writing', *A Question of Power* has been selected here primarily. Subaltern studies has undergone and sustained some glaring changes and issues. Working class solidarity, the engulfing pattern of colonial subjugation, positive notion in subaltern ethics, narratives of dislocation, agony of displacement, territorial differences due to migration, identity crisis of diasporans and discriminating labour politics- all these serve to the formation of the new ambit of 'working-class writing' with the backdrop of globalization and post-globalist sphere. Time has come to map the history of such writings and to rethink about this plebian study as it tends to shift from national to international ambit. The novel of Head expresses the dominant fervour around the politics of identity and its representations. Head re-examines her identity while being on the contact zone of different transitions in her life. Her self-chosen exile forces her to face the dilemma and angst of life in and outside certain borders. Sonali Perera aptly suggests, 'In Serowe she was officially designated a stateless person and remained a refugee for fifteen years- even as her writing began to attract international attention.'

Head reevaluates the life on transitions. She accepts the liminality critically and tries to re-theorize the drama and "practice of diaspora". She writes to the Ugandan monthly journal *Transition*:

To me, at least, Transition is a kind of home. It seems to be fighting neither for communism or capitalism. I am rather out of things and slick slogans and I do not feel, as a communist has to, that I could have all the solutions to end starvation and fix the world right-nor as a capitalist, who feels pretty wonderful and secure with a million dollars. (Head, pp. 43)

Now it's a powerful statement on the part of the author. Her philosophizing about social tenets and conditions can be underscored subtly. The novel, *A Question of Power* revolves around Head's ideologies and her Pan-Africanist political views. The close readings of her works as 'thematically and generically transgressive texts', proposes a new formulation of socialist ethics from the trajectories of the Marxist imaginary. The well nuanced book interests the readers to observe Neo-Marxist approaches to contemporary transnational literature. Evolved around Elizabeth's consciousness, *A Question of Power* arranges a series of disrupting, disorienting, recurrent moments of hallucinations and realities that, apparently, trace Elizabeth's periphery in and out of sanity and insanity after emigrating from South Africa to Botswana with her son Shorty. In the meanwhile, she communicates with different people from the village of Motabeng. Elizabeth continues 'a prolonged and erratic dialogue about the nature of good and evil and power with two mysterious men, Sello and Dan.' The novel moves back and forth through times. It eventually emerges that the two characters Sello and Dan are inhabitants of Elizabeth's imagination, paralleled by two real men in the village. *A Question of Power* strongly and unequivocally defies the essence of Dan, 'the figure of power-hungry nationalism and violent sexual exploitation'. Towards the end the Sello who 'seeks his enlightenment in the murder of another man's wife is not the same as the white robed monk Sello with whom Elizabeth finds her way out of insanity and towards "the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man"' (QP 206). By the side of the character Dan, 'who polices racial purity and demands feminine sexual compliance, these two Sellos (of the novel's many) seek a mode of enlightenment that depends on the erasure of the female-gendered body'. Moreover, these visions of human community are the one that Elizabeth and the novel, *A Question of Power* projects as 'a utopian alternative to the violence and trauma that drive Elizabeth into madness'. The paper here contains the shifting terrains. The reading of the novel here is detailed and against the apparent direction of the novel. Here in this turn, an interrogative understanding poses its utopian affirmation of the 'impossible quandaries of identity'. As a utopian alternative to the political visions, asserted by both Dan and Sello, *A Question of Power* displays the Motabeng Community Garden as the only space instrumental in withstanding the unraveling violence of the racist and sexist ideologies of South Africa under the regime of the legislation 'apartheid'. It expose the system specifically and postcolonial ambivalence more generally. *A Question of Power's* 'garden is regulated, clinically reproduced, and asexual, evacuated of all difference and all desire, and it voids all markers of identity and desire from its utopia in favor of a homogenizing and transcendent

sense of “be[ing] ordinary” (Head 39). An explicit validation of the ‘garden’s disembodied subjectivity’ needs that ‘Elizabeth strip herself of her identity as either a raced and female-gendered subject’ as the condition of recognition to this idealized future. Bessie Head’s use of the image ‘garden’ is that strong and fascinating as it unfolds the layers of actualities in the context of South Africa and the milieu of decolonization. The garden thus redefines the complex relationships between society and inner self of individual. The ever-changing power politics, the dynamics of social structure and the socio-political representations of identity with the postcolonial backdrop urge the colonized ‘other’ to recreate their position and to appropriate their voice and understanding of the multidimensional social strata. Thus the background firmly accelerates the pace of the author to privilege ‘figures and forms in transit, under erasure-asymptotic lines approaching the limit case.’ Though Head scholars stresses that Head returns to the vision of ‘power hungry’ and ‘exclusive’ Africa time and again due to her insecurities being a mixed race woman, here we will be re-read her writings and the raised issues critically. The undervalued, undertheorized aspects of her writings thus can be opened wide so to prove her immense contributions to the ‘literature of labor and to a philosophy of socialist ethics.’ In this prominent way, Head has become an visionary figure who illumines the ‘blind spot’ in the overarching notions of Marxism, postcolonialism, culture and globalization studies. She untangles the knots of popular societal views and re-theorizes ‘the social space of the rural.’ Here in this context one has to point out that how the characters of her fictions and the author herself reverse a very familiar trope. In the literature of labor-in-globalization as well as in the working class literature, we see ‘metropolitan immigrant’ as Raymond Williams refers to “a wave of working-class novels ... included that form ... walking towards the city with all your life ahead of you” (186). But here Head charts the route out for the migrants who consequently leave city for the country. It’s a reversal of journey. Head as well as her characters face such displacement and its agony. Head was compelled to leave South Africa to reappropriate her voice against social discriminations she faced in city. Just like her protagonist of the novel, she wanted to reclaim her position and identity in her host country-land. As an ‘immigrant refugee-writer’ she faced trials and tribulations in a racially torn society. Government denied her grants to study agriculture and also delayed her claim for citizenship. She had to move different countries for a legal citizenship. As Perera rightly shows,

Head-born in South Africa ... reverses and displaces archetype. At different times, there were plans afoot (some real, some imagined) for Head to move to Britain, India,

Israel, Kenya, Norway, Sweden, the United States, and Zambia. None of these materialized. In 1973 the Norwegian government offered her citizenship. She first accepted, but then retracted her acceptance three months later, ultimately electing to stay and write in a place where she was denied sponsorship. (Perera, pp. 126)

Head's novel *A Question of Power* has got some strong points to offer. 'In the context of the tabulation of different trajectories of labour history - industrial, migrant, rural', Head foregrounds the necessity to shift the focus from the empirical generalization of working class and the theorization of 'social classes tied to the factory floor' to the unorganized and unrated labour across the country. She posits questions about 'labor power' and 'socialized labor'. Her reflections upon this cross territorial labour policies and socio-economic rules should be kept ablaze. The work is not only engaging an author as 'wildly innovative, risk-taking' but also as a 'political philosopher of the ontology and subjectivity of work.' The focus of this text Marxist in a irrefutable way. As in her essay "Socialized Labor and the Critique of Identity Politics" Perera says about the approach of the text,

Its approach is dialectical, tentative, open-ended, and ceaselessly critical of its own founding presuppositions ... in my own allegory of reading, I hope to show how Head extends the interruptive, disruptive ideals of the itinerant Marx to other spaces and places - psychic and otherwise - that he could not imagine .... My reading aims to show how *A Question of Power* brings into relief a curious, puzzling Marxist subtext – a theory of anti-essentialism grounded in the labour theory of value, one which also bears upon the historical antiracist class struggles of which Head is a Part. (Perera, pp. 127-128)

Working class writing has been emerging through the mediation of 'reality of difference'. There are differences in opinions and observations along with the ever-widening parameters of subaltern studies. Marxists define and enunciate the concept of 'class'. But they cannot fix the definition. The concept of 'Class' remains ambiguous. The usage and position of the term 'subaltern' remains disputable. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak strongly debates with the nature and concept of the term. She is of the opinion that this term has often been used inappropriately. Subaltern Studies Group adds many connotations and differences to the ideas of subalternity. Every era has got different theoretical construct for plebian ideologies. Post-Marxist philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri while theorising various aspects of imperialism and postmodern construct of empire, nation states, multitude, Commonwealth,

democracy, war etc. philosophizes the terrain of class and some glaring issues like identity politics, economic inequality, constitutions, the art of resistance etc. Workerism as a political theory gets delineated eventually in this regard. Working class writings by authors belonging to both, working class and other social strata further problematize the discussion. The perspectives and literary executions differ but the struggle and procedure of subjugation somehow connects them. The present text seeks to map identical issues of plebian affinity or polysemic coalitional labour solidarity, singularities of subaltern ethics and a radical cognitive universe predicated on colonial subjugation, displacement, stigmatized division of labour and counter currents of resisting subjectivities. It wants to see how these issues reaffirm Marx's observation. Thus the present text with its matrix of narrative justifies what Head writes, "I think my work at Boiteko is more valuable than working in a factory." (Head, pp. 122)

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