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Interrogating Madness in Bessie Head's *A Question Of Power*

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It (colonialism) is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I?' (Fanon 2001: 200)

The madness of the writer was, for the other men, the chance to see being born, over and over again, in the discouragement of repetition and disease, the truth of the work of art. (Foucault 272)

Encapsulating her experiences as a refugee Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* registers her mental breakdown and her struggle back to sanity. The novel presents madness as a highly complex and creative phenomenon. Before assessing Bessie Head's treatment of madness in the novel we must take note of the idea of madness itself. According to Foucault madness is a deviation from the rationality of the society. This rationality prepares the ground for othering a man who is called 'mad'. The mad man is obliged to objectify himself in the eyes of reason, that is, the man whose strangeness does not reveal itself. Here it is important to note that Head represents madness in the context of colonialism where different strategies of colonialism have negated the subjectivity of the protagonist. The "systematic negation" (Fanon 2001: 200) of the protagonist's subjectivity is highly traumatic which prompts us to contemplate Head's treatment of madness in the novel. Keeping in mind these aspects my attempt in this paper is to interrogate madness— 'can it be regarded a sickness?', 'how does one juxtapose between insanity and sanity?', 'is it a better penetration of reality?', 'is the inability of the mad to cope with ordinary life can be seen as a witness to the social prejudices?', 'what is the cause of Elizabeth's madness?', 'is she able to overcome it?'

A Question of Power can be read as a trauma narrative, as the novel centres on an emotionally deranged protagonist whose life is a witness to the psycho-cultural traumatism and her subsequent struggle for survival. Psychological trauma occurs when an individual feels incapable of action or resistance in the face of catastrophe, aggression, violence, terror or coercion. In his book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman states that as a result of the psychological trauma the self-defense mechanisms become chaotic and even after the catastrophe is over it tends to persist in an exaggerated state. Further traumatic events affect the emotion, cognition and memory of an individual and these systems stop functioning as an integrated network. As a result, a traumatised individual may experience uncontrolled emotional responses but may fail to recall the events that result in those responses.

Within Africa various forms of cultural invasions have taken place that adversely affected those of African descent. From the Atlantic and the Arab slave trades and the colonization of Africa by the European powers to the establishment of Apartheid regime and neo-colonial nation states, sub-Saharan Africans have been subjected to social domination, economic exploitation and political marginalization. The result has been moments of political and cultural resistance as well as persistent psychic trauma.¹ In Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* madness serves as a metaphor for the disruption caused by racialised violence that results in alienation from the society. Here it is important to note that Elizabeth, the protagonist of the novel is presented as