

Psychoanalysis: A comparative study of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and Xenophobia in Post-apartheid South African society

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Abstract

The correlation of literature with medicine still generates varieties of academic interests. This is not surprising though if one considers the elements of drama that are involved in the interdisciplinary discourse as medicine is based on empiricism while literature is concerned with imagination. This paper examines Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974) and the recent xenophobic attacks against immigrants in South Africa concerning the causes and implications of depression both on South African society and fictive characters in the novel. At the same time, the paper reveals the extent to which literature, like medicine, guarantees physiological equilibrium. The main finding of the research is that a patient's expression of injuries which could go to negative extremes such as the contemporary xenophobic attacks on fellow Africans in post-apartheid South Africa may reduce the patient's symptoms of the post-traumatic disorder to achieve better chance of healing. We conclude that psychoanalysis remains a reliable source of healing therapy for depression whether for the fictional heroine or the indigent black populace of South Africa.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, xenophobia, healing, *A Question of Power*,

Introduction

We begin this paper by attempting a definition of medicine as given by notable scholars and critics. Ilvan illich (as cited in Haralambos *et al* 2008) defines medicine as,

The activities and conditions that might otherwise be ignored or seen as a social problem or a normal part of life, as have all come to be defined as medical issues which fall under the expertise of the medical profession.

This implies that illness apart from being a social problem must have been medically certified as existing and based on the symptoms that may be perceived by the 'body' and or he who acquired the culture (Benthall and Pothemus, 1975). In the same vein, Summers *et al* (2006) believe that medicine or medical jurisprudence, which is derived from the 17th-century Latin words, *medicine* or *medicallis* is the study and practice of treating or preventing diseases and injuries. From the given perspective on the science of cure or treatment of patients by drugs, e.t.c. as opposed to surgery, the science of medicalization, relationships exist between patients, doctors and forms of knowledge. In other words, social interaction which is located within the 'body' can be understood in terms of how they help the body and the society to function effectively.

In order to balance our discussion and extend issues logically across interdisciplinary boundaries, it is necessary to briefly define the concept, of literature. Akporobaro (2008), asserts that “Literature is an elusive term, we hear it applied to advertising, historical tracts and novels, poems and plays.” This extract confirms the elusive nature of literature and locates it specifically within the popular genres of drama, prose and poetry while not ignoring its relevance across disciplines. Also, Oyegoke (2009:67) says, “literature is a far more productive hatchery for new lexicographical semantic and grammatical linguistic additions than the conversational medium.” We understand from the perception of the Nigerian critic that literature is capable of linguistic regeneration. It is on this basis that we express the critical opinion of Omobowale (as cited in Virtanen & Owonibi, 2008:86) thus,

The symbiotic relationship between medicine and literature has been acknowledged since the classical age, although the effort to harness the resources of this unique relationship did not gain prominence until recently.

The passage illustrates the complementarity of medicine and literature. The fields of study are seen as diametrically opposed because medicine is based on empiricism while literature is largely rooted in imagination. Predictably, the extent to which medicine and literature guarantee psychological and physiological equilibrium has excited and still generates varieties of general and academic interests and research.

Textual Analysis

The present research interest is with aim to either refute or confirm the issues raised. Although, it appears we are more interested in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* for the reason that the South African writer discusses depression, the emotional state generally referred to by the average African as insanity, both at the level of the society and characters. The novel in brief is about, Elizabeth, a protagonist, whose despair arises from human subjugation in South Africa. Elizabeth is a victim of the inhuman racial laws in South Africa that forbids marriage and or love relationships between ‘whites’ and ‘blacks.’ Unfortunately, Frieda Joubert and a ‘coloured’ man, Errol Philander are characters caught naked, arrested and prosecuted for contravening the Immorality Act, which prohibits sexual relationships between black and white in the land. Elizabeth is the product of the illegal affair in Head’s *A Question of Power*. South African society had isolated her mother from society and rehabilitated her in psychiatry for suffering from schizoid. As a result, mother and daughter suffer from trauma in different ways and for different reasons. Elizabeth’s mother is in a mental home, but the protagonist suffers depression from the pain of the search for her mother while both mother and daughter suffer disorders for the reason of the South African racial problem. These doubled and/or tripled the characters’ problems. The teenage girl lived with a surrogate mother while her mother is confined to psychiatry. Unknown to her, the woman she had loved as a teenager is partly African, partly English. The widow sells beer in a beer home that is patronized by prostitutes and soldiers demobilized from the wars.

At last, she is secretly taken away from the beer home and enrolled in a mission school. She chanced on a letter which her mother wrote from solitary confinement. The novel reads:

It was a letter written by Elizabeth's mother from a mental hospital in South Africa. Still, she could not relate it to herself in any way. She really belonged emotionally to her foster mother and the story was an imposition on her life... "Tell me about my mother! The foster mother looked at Elizabeth for some time, then abruptly burst into tears (pp.16-17)

The search by Elizabeth for her biological mother and the information she seems to get, though remotely unimaginable to the protagonist, gives her physical and emotional torture. Coupled with the circumstances of her birth and upbringing is the mental experience of her black racial identity in a racist culture. The principal of her mission school reveals her true story at the age of thirteen. This thickens the protagonist's 'thought disorders' that intrude into her consciousness. She moves between worlds of sanity and insanity and uses drugs to be able to sleep. Viewed from these perspectives, we prefer to discuss Bessie Head's novel from a neurological perspective by a search for the symptoms of psychopathology that dominate the society and fictive space of its characters such as Miss Cropper, Miss Wiggly Bottom, Miss Sewing Machine, especially Elizabeth and her surrogate and biological mother. Other characters including the racial perpetrators as well as the priests who support racism stylishly also deserve to be in a mental asylum and ... go for medicalization. The level of racial depravity seen in the novel is obvious in the invective reference to a grown-up black as a "boy" as well as the practice of homosexuality among the whites which is degradable to humanity in general. The shock Elizabeth feels at the discovery of herself including her mental state forces her into depression and then psychical probing. In the words of Bessie Head:

.... life of all black people in South African ... was like living with permanent nervous tension because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you. (p.19)

The implication of the tension that is created in the loveless world of racial conflict in South Africa has been revealed in the passage as "nervous tension". The colour prejudice may be the overriding theme of the novel, but its effects on characters who are victims, exiles and refugees or are involved with their souls is pathetic, though they emerged spiritually and emotionally liberated. At the end of the novel, Elizabeth triumphs over the violation of her psychic. This is optimistic of an end to the oppressive apartheid policies which came to pass in 1994. This is evident in her declamatory statement, "There is only one God" (206); an indication that God is superior to every racial power anywhere in the world.

Indeed, "Bessie Head is a crusader for sexual and social justice for men and women," (Virginia Ola (as cited in Ojukwu; 2006.). The South African novelist and critic, Nadine Gordimer 1981:39) reveals:

The greatest single factor in the making of our mores in South Africa was and is and will be the colour question whether it's the old question of what the whites are going to do about the blacks or the new question of what the blacks are going to do about the white or the hopeful question of how to set about letting the whole thing

go and living together, ...

We agree with the position of Gordimer who seems to have correctly predicted the problematic or uncertain future of blacks and whites in South Africa, especially extremism in the contemporary xenophobic attacks and killings of fellow Africans including Ghanaians and Nigerians in post-apartheid South Africa.

These are partly the reasons we attempt to rate the novel high in the representation of social issues and every other thing in South Africa. Aflera II, Gordimer (1988:45) has said:

Many South African novels draw their force from the fact that they are written from the stand point of one particular situation, *history with a combination of experience* (italics mine).

The critic here seems to talk about the experience as the content's creative force. Lukacs (1989) asserts that "... a writer in imaginative creation and the intuition that comes with it cannot go beyond the potential of his own experience."

Xenophobia

Xenophobia is the fear or hatred of that which is perceived to be foreign or strange. Xenophobia can involve perceptions of an 'ingroup' towards an 'outgroup' and can manifest itself in suspicion of the activities of others, and a desire to eliminate their presence to secure a presumed purity and may relate to a fear of losing national, ethnic or racial identity. According to UNESCO, the terms xenophobia and racism often overlap but differ in how the latter encompasses prejudice based on physical characteristics while the former is generally centred on behavior based on the notion of a specified people being averse to the culture or nation (Wikipedia)

Xenophobia in South Africa

Starting gradually against fellow citizens of member countries of the Southern African Development Community, SADC, between 1984 and the end of the apartheid regime or commencement of majority rule in 1994, xenophobic attacks against Mozambicans and Congolese refugees/immigrants were an unanticipated by-product of a nation-building project embarked upon by the African National Congress (ANC) government in its attempts to redress the injustices of the apartheid era and build new forms of social cohesion (Wikipedia, *Xenophobia in South Africa before 1994*). A survey of citizens in SADC countries revealed that 21% of South Africans favoured a complete ban on foreign entries into their country while 64% wanted strict limitations on the number permitted (Wikipedia, *Xenophobia in South Africa after 1994*). Anti-immigrants' xenophobic attacks against Malawians, Burundians, Zimbabweans, Somalis, Ethiopians, Senegalese, Ghanaians and Nigerians have since raged through years 1995 to 2015¹ (when taxi drivers on October 21 attacked shops owned by Pakistani, Somali, and Bangladeshi and Ethiopians' resident in Grahamstown in Eastern Cape district). America-based Pew Research Centre poll¹ conducted in 2018 (after a recorded increase in the immigrant population in South Africa from two to four million between 2010-2017) revealed that 62% of South Africans saw immigrants as a burden on their society by taking their jobs and social benefits while 61% believe

that immigrants were responsible for growing the crime rate. Protests and riots continued in South African cities and provinces in 2016 (*2016 Tshwane riots*), 2017 (Wikipedia, *2017 Anti-immigrants protest*), 2018 and in 2019 anti- African immigrant riots took place on March 25 in Durban (Wikipedia, *2019 Durban Riots*).

The violence unleashed on Elizabeth's psyche by the apartheid policies of the racist regime is similar to that experienced by African immigrants in South Africa. The violence is unleashed both on physical and psychological fronts. Albeit while the apartheid era was perpetrated by whites on the majority black population, the ongoing one is by black South Africans on their fellow African immigrants/ refugees. A report by the Pretoria-based Human Sciences Research Council² identifies the causes of xenophobia as:

- relative deprivation, specifically intense competition for jobs, commodities and housing;
- group processes, including psychological categorization processes that are nationalistic rather than superordinate;
- South African exceptionalism, or a feeling of superiority in relation to other Africans; and
- exclusive citizenship, or a form of nationalism that excludes others.

PSYCHOANALYSIS

Psychoanalysis is defined as a set of psychological theories and therapeutic techniques that have their origin in the work and theories of Sigmund Freud. The core idea at the centre of psychoanalysis is the belief that all people possess unconscious thoughts, feelings, desires, and memories. Psychoanalytical theories and therapeutic techniques which relate to the study of the unconscious mind may together form a method of treatment for mental-health disorders (Wikipedia).

Freud's psychoanalysis insists that patients should be made to speak out (*or act out?*) their ailments to bring into the conscious mind all repressed conflicts and fears so as to make trauma less harmful. (Freud, 1915).

This means the unconscious part of the mind has a very strong influence on the conscious. Primary to psychoanalysis is the belief that repressed material can be given a sublimated expression when expressed with either a physician, friend or in the form of writing. Writing may not provide a panacea to illness but can reduce the symptoms of the post-traumatic disorder. In other words, the more the injury is expressed, the better the chances of healing and recovery. A patient's worry about the unknown which would have been hazardous to ill health and would have caused greater damage if concealed within were let out to give way to healing of the mind, the first and most important aspect of healing (Chomsky 1997, Allen and Santrock 1993).

Despite the criticism of psychoanalysis and the argument that its therapeutic power is limited, it remains a major reference point in the discourse of therapy. The present study is premised on psychoanalysis which is discussed as a way of strengthening the medical issues in Bessie Head's novel. We have also been able to extend them to the contemporary ailment called xenophobia in

post-apartheid South Africa. Head's novel is set in South Africa under the apartheid system where violence was perpetrated by a white minority regime which feared the dominance of the black majority. In xenophobic South Africa, the perpetrators of violence are blacks who fear the immigrants whose number continues to increase and threaten the socio-economic security of the indigenous people.

Conclusion

Although the paper is more concerned with the neurological effects of depression on the fictive characters in Bessie Head's novel, and the majority of blacks in South African society, we see these (including xenophobia) as consequences of the violence and abuses in the space, fictive or contemporary, of the society created for education and information.

Bessie Head's work examined in this paper is one of commitment in the sense that it applies to psychoanalysis. From the perspective of its theme, the novel could be said to be Head's literary contribution to the Apartheid literature of the Southern African people. The novel is blunt in pointing out the evils of racial discrimination everywhere in the world, and in the fashion of a preacher, she condemns the negative effects of man's inhumanity to man in whichever guise, somehow requesting a change of attitude. This change is essential in today's Africa, to be more specific, today's xenophobia-ridden South Africa if there must be any national and or continental transformation. Just like Elizabeth, there is a need for African immigrants and refugees to triumph and have a psychic victory over the oppressive xenophobia that now ails South Africa. For healthy social interaction to find space within the South African society (taking the totality inclusive of refugees/immigrants from other African countries into South Africa) which is the 'body' healing that country, (South Africa) of xenophobia will help it function effectively. It is therefore not yet Uhuru until the South African government, according to Dewa Mavhinga of *Human Rights Watch*, can implement "The National Action Plan ... intent to fight xenophobia, racism, and all forms of discrimination and prejudice... to stem the dangerous tides of intolerance for good." This will be the psychoanalysis therapy to nip the depression that ails the black majority populace resulting in xenophobia and incessant xenophobic attacks on immigrants.

Notes

1. Reports, studies and researches reveal the following:

- a. 1995 - Armed gangs marched 'undocumented' migrants from Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique living in Alexandra township to police stations to 'clean' the city of foreigners. Known as Buyelekhaya (translated as 'go back home') the attack lasted several weeks. (*Human Rights Watch*, 1998).
- b. 1998 - September 1998, a Mozambican and two Senegalese were thrown out off a train by a group of black South Africans who blamed foreigners for unemployment, crime and the spread of AIDS (Wikipedia, *Xenophobia in South Africa after 1994*)
- c. 2000 - Seven foreigners were killed in Cape Flats over a five-week period in what was termed xenophobic murders motivated by fears that outsiders would claim property belonging to locals (Wikipedia, *Xenophobia in South Africa after 1994*).
- d. 2001 - October, residents of Zandspruit informal settlement accused Zimbabwean citizens of several crimes and gave them 10 days to leave the area after which they were

forcefully evicted and their shacks were looted and burnt.

e. 2005-2006 – In the last week of 2005 and the first week of 2006 four people including two Zimbabweans were killed in Olievenhoutbosch settlement when foreigners were blamed for the death of a local. The locals burnt foreigners' shacks and demanded that the police evict them from the area.

f. 2007 – at least a dozen xenophobic attacks were recorded in 2007.

g. 2008 - In January 2008, two Somali shop owners were murdered in the Eastern Cape towns of Jeffreys Bay and East London. In March of that year, seven people including Zimbabweans, Pakistanis and a Somali were killed after burning their shops and shacks in Atteridgeville near Pretoria.

In May, riots started in Alexandra, north-east of Johannesburg with locals attacking migrants from Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe killing two and injuring over 40 others (Wikipedia, *Xenophobia in South Africa after 1994*).

h. 2009 – 2012 – November 2009, a community of 1500-2500 Zimbabwean farm workers was forcibly evicted from their homes in the informal settlements of De Doorns in Western Cape.

2. Pew Research Poll conducted by the Washington-based Pew Research Centre in 2018. Quoted *Human Rights Watch* report on the South African government's launch of a 5-year plan to tackle Xenophobic attacks against African immigrants and refugees pointing out the areas that need to be addressed to tame the evil act. <https://www.pewresearch.org/>. Retrieved on June 22.

3. Report on XENOPHOBIA Causes, responses, policies, (2019). A Review by Pretoria based Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/> Retrieved on June 22.

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