

# THE QUEST FOR A NEW IDENTITY THROUGH THE POLITICS OF EXILE IN BESSIE HEAD'S *A QUESTION OF POWER*.

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## Abstract

*When people who are discriminated against and dehumanized in their own country refuse an imposed identity, searching for a new identity through exile can prove successful. Elizabeth, the protagonist of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, experiences that fact. Labelled as a Coloured, she is aware of her "doubleness" (being Black and White) or her "nothingness" (being neither Black nor White). That uprooted identity causing her trouble, pain and confusion represents the motive for her quest for a new identity through exile. By using different strategies to become integrated into the host community, the protagonist manages to get a new identity that is free of racial, ethnic and ideological consideration. For her, the identity that is worth promoting is what characterizes humanity. Therefore, her quest ends in what can be called "human identity". Basing on postcolonialism theory, we seek to show how the colonized or Africans manage to acquire a new self-identity through exile, and how they are willing to share it with all humans without exclusion and classification.*

**Key words:** *Dehumanized, exile, human identity, imposed identity, postcolonialism, quest.*

## Resumé

*Quand des gens soumis à la discrimination et à la déshumanisation dans leur propre pays refusent une identité qui leur est imposée, aller en exil en quête d'une identité nouvelle peut se réaliser avec succès. Elizabeth, le protagoniste de *A Question of Power* de Bessie Head expérimente ce fait. Etiquetée comme une femme de couleur, elle prend conscience de son double statut (être Noire et Blanche) ou de sa "néantisation" (n'être ni Noire ni Blanche). Ce déracinement, provoquant chez elle ennui, souffrance et confusion, constitue le mobile de sa quête pour une identité nouvelle à travers l'exile. Usant de différentes stratégies pour s'intégrer dans la communauté d'accueil, le protagoniste parvient à trouver une identité dépourvue de considération raciale, ethnique et idéologique. Pour elle, l'identité qui mérite d'être encouragée est celle qui caractérise l'humanité. Sa quête finit donc dans ce qu'on peut appeler « identité humaine ». Sur la base de la théorie postcoloniale, nous cherchons à montrer comment les colonisés ou les Africains parviennent à acquérir une identité nouvelle à travers l'exile, et comment ils entendent la partager avec tous les humains sans exclusion et classification.*

**Mots-clés :** *Déshumanisation, exil, identité humaine, identité imposée, postcolonialisme, quête.*

## Introduction

Communities as well as individuals have mainly been the subjects of identity reflection in literary production. In this context, writers have adopted a pluralist approach to identity. Thus, identity is often community-based construction but is also self-based construction. In Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*. (1974) Elizabeth, the protagonist of the novel, a South Africa-born woman faces that experience. Going into exile in Botswana, she undertakes a quest for a new identity because of her stormy identity background.

The racism and the oppression experienced by Elizabeth in her origin country, gives her the idea of being someone different in nature in comparison to the others (the oppressors). Through the predicament of the heroine of the novel and her project, the author reveals the inhuman practices of Apartheid which destroys black people's human nature.

Our study purports to show that identity is not static but rather dynamic and that going into exile can help to build another personality and even to construct a new identity. Then, how has exile proved to be an effective way for a self-reconstruction? How is the new identity constructed? What is the nature of that identity? How is it shared with other people in the world? These are preoccupations that we'll have to elucidate in this study.

Postcolonialism will be our theoretical baseline for our analysis. According to B. Ashcroft (1977), the term is first used to refer to cultural interactions within colonial societies in literary circles. Then it has subsequently been widely used to mean the political, linguistic and cultural experience of societies formerly European colonies (Ashcroft et al., 2007).). Apartheid being at the core of the protagonist's predicament, and the trigger for her quest, postcolonialism theory proves appropriate in our study.

In the course of this work, we'll firstly take a look at racial and identity setbacks in South Africa; then we'll examine the exile experience of the protagonist that helps her in the construction of her new identity.

### 1. Racial and identity setbacks in South Africa

For C. L. Innes, (2007, p.2) "post-colonialism studies are generally

concerned with the subsequent interactions between the culture of the colonial power and the culture and the traditions of the colonized people”. What is more, this theory has been found useful in examining a variety of colonial relationships which have transformed the lives of the majority of people in the world (Ashcroft et al., 2007).

Our study, reveals that in their interactions, there is a will from the white people in South Africa to dominate the black people, to impose an identity on them. There is a power relation in which the white people discriminate against black people, impose their culture to the detriment of the culture of the black people.

In this section, post-colonialism as a theory will guide us to analyze the conflict relationships between the colonized and the colonizer and mainly see how these relationships have transformed the life of the protagonist of the novel under study.

### ***1.1. Racial discriminations***

Through this confession: “she was essentially a product of the slums and hovels of South Africa. People there had an unwritten law. They hated any black person among them who was important” (Head, 1974: 26), the narrator of the novel reveals the troublesome background of the protagonist who is the victim of discrimination, hatred and marginalization. This idea shows the power relationship in the South African society where the white man imposes everything to the black man, dominates him and reduces him to silence.

Thus, the apartheid system has made her lose human characteristics and get negative ideas and visions for her fellowmen as we can notice in her reply to a doctor: “I don’t like people”. (Head, 1974:51). Such a concise answer clearly shows an inherited hatred possessing her, which has become a disease rooted inside her controlling her reflections and actions.

From a postcolonial perspective, we can consider that the protagonist’s trouble mainly stems from “miscegenation”; that is her mother broke the Immorality Act (Ashcroft et al., 2007) imposed by apartheid. Her mother’s predicament, mainly her mental breakdown, gave Elizabeth a personality that became difficult to erase. Indeed, because of the disruptive life of her mother and the consecutive insanity, Elizabeth has to bear the stigma of insanity. Although this is erroneous,

her life is influenced by that fact. The narrator reveals this unpleasant situation of the protagonist when still a child at a mission school:

Once Elizabeth struck a child during a quarrel, and the missionary ordered:  
“Isolate her from the other children for a week”  
The other children soon noticed something unusual about Elizabeth’s isolation periods. They could fight and scratch and bite each other, but if she did likewise she was locked up. (Head, 1974:16).

As we can notice, even as a child, the protagonist was treated differently from her mates. Unable to identify to her father and mother’s origins, the predicament of Elizabeth goes with the debasement of her personality. What is she in that society? It is clear that because of her background, she is unable to answer such a question and this the start point of her identity crisis. For K. Adou (2019), that kind of racialization of the multi-racial society does not give any room for people discriminated against; it forces them to hover at the margins or to be ejected from the whole society. The socio-political background of Elizabeth marked by discrimination with the apartheid system can but cause her an identity crisis.

### ***1.2. The identity crisis***

*A Question of Power* makes it clear that the source of the identity crisis of the protagonist of the novel is South Africa with the system of apartheid. Dehumanized and discriminated against, she feels no sense of belonging to a society supposed to be hers. Her identity henceforth becomes an issue she has to cope with. As Mercer puts it, “Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (M. Kobena, 1995:43). That idea rightly fits Elizabeth’s situation. Being the offspring of a white woman and a black man, it stands to reason that her identity be a serious issue which started at early age when she is classified Coloured.

Mhlahlo Luthuli, has noticed that the protagonists of Bessie Head undergo an identity issue. According to him, “the torments of Head’s protagonists depend integrally on identity. It is on the basis of their

identity that they suffer discrimination and violence” (Mhlahlo, 2002:9). Post-colonialist criticism justifies such a predicament by the will of the white man to impose his culture and erase any other “in competition”.

The identity crisis of the heroine poses her an inward conflict that she hardly finds ways to solve. This inner conflict is characterized by the impossibility for her to state what she is exactly as she is aware of her “doubleness” (being White and Black) and also her “nothingness” (being neither a white nor a black woman). She is permanently fighting against these different facets under which she appears. This situation undergone by the heroine of the novel is justified by E. Erickson (1970) who considers the term “identity crisis” as a conflict people face in development. According to him, an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself.

As a matter she has to cope with the different ways people look at her which reveal her identity crisis as we can notice in her friend Sello’s regrets when alluding their relationships: “Love isn’t like that. Love is two people mutually feeding each other...” (Head, 1974:14). This idea by Sello suggests that the heroine doesn’t show any feeling that a partner would expect from her and implies that she even begins to lose her humanity or femininity.

On the ground of that and in addition to Sello, Dan, in another episode, throws in her face: “you haven’t got a vagina...” (Head, 1974:13). In this paradoxical expression, Dan is clearly negating the protagonist’s femininity. In so doing, he makes her adhere to a strange identity (neither man, nor woman). In fact, this idea by Dan is an irony to allude the complex identity of Elizabeth.

Her identity crisis is given intensity when, in addition to a race and a gender identity crisis, she is negated her African identity as Medusa points it out: “Medusa said: “(...). You’ll only drown here. You’re not linked up to the people. You don’t know any African languages”” (Head, 1974:44). When we know that language is a fabric of a people’s identity, we can assert that her African identity is even put into question by Medusa. Here, it is implicitly indicated that she cannot be accepted as being part of the black community certainly because of some white origin.

Such episodes in the novel are revelatory of the strange and instable personality of the heroine of the novel and displays her identity crisis. They add pain to her psychology and justify her depressive attitude.

At some extent, we can opine that *A Question of Power* is an autobiographical novel. As such, the heroine's fate and her subsequent project for self-reconstruction merge into the writer's. About the latter D. Lewis says:

The related experience of social deprivation, group exclusion, geographical dislocation, racial and colonial domination and gendered subordination were central to the "living experience" that shaped her desire for independent and liberating self-definition (Lewis, 2007:19).

The will of freedom and independence and the reconstruction of a new self and another identity on which everybody may agree and which will comfort her mind, represents the resolution of her identity crisis and the inward conflict that affects her. Such an analysis is based on the post-colonial issue of "resistance" which makes the oppressed refuse what is imposed on him/her to choose his/her own way. In this respect, we go along with Goldberg when he states that "Identity is not simply imposed. It is also chosen, and actively used, albeit within particular social contexts and constraints. Against dominant representations of "others" there is resistance" (Quoted by Saman, 2015:1000).

Thus, face to an "identity disillusionment" or "identity ambiguity" (N'NA, 2008:171), Elizabeth chooses exile for as a form of resistance and self-reconstruction.

## **2. Botswana: the experience of exile and the new identity**

In this section, the post-colonialist criticism used in our study refers to the terms of "oppositonality" with their articulation of "resistance" "critique" and "counter-discourse" (C. Ball, 2003, p2); and also to the term of "referentiality" understood as a "strategy for survival in marginalized social groups" (Ibid). Post-colonialist criticism also will focus on the issue of actions undertaken by the colonized as a solution to their predicament.

The exile of the protagonist in Botswana can be considered as an answer to a national identity dilemma (to accept or to refuse) (Saman, 2005) that she must address following her imposed identity (coloured)

by the oppressor. The politics of exile that she has to prepare to face must be understood as the interrelationships between her and the host people, her insertion in the new society and the subsequent treatment she experiences on the exile land and the position she holds which will enable her to build another identity.

As a matter of fact, some critics posit that while leaving South Africa, the protagonist of *A Question of Power* has no identity; her going into exile is therefore intended to find one. One of those critics is Mhlahlo Luthuli as the following testifies:

When Elizabeth thus leaves South Africa, she is virtually identity-less and stateless in as far as she has rejected the Boers' identification of her and they have given her an exit visa. She hence sets forth into the "wilderness" as it were in search of a place that can claim her and where she can achieve/ learn an identity that she can call her own (Mhlahlo, 2002:29).

### ***2.1. The construction of the new identity***

The psychologist and theorist E. Erickson (1970) posits that identity is something that shifts and grows throughout life as people confront new challenges and tackle different experiences. The project of the protagonist of the novel of building another identity through exile following her disruptive life in South Africa, is an echo of the psychologist's idea above. As a matter of fact, she assumes that identity also is not anything static but rather dynamic. Her position is reinforced by a reflection based on Darwin's philosophy:

As Darwin had perceived in the patterns of nature: "There is grandeur in this view of life with its several powers. (...) That whilst this planet has gone cycling on, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and wonderful have been, and are being, evolved" (Head, 1974:35).

This idea of the philosopher Darwin that the protagonist takes responsibility for, reveals her becoming aware that life is subjected to evolution, change and dynamism of some sort. She has understood that

life is not set up once for all but some changes can occur. In the context of oppressed people in South Africa, the protagonist of the novel feels the duty to take up the challenge to change and better things for herself and for her people. In this respect, she assumes that her exile in Botswana is an opportunity to develop a new personality, new characteristics and to construct a new identity refusing what has been imposed to her.

From the point of view of post-colonialist criticism, the decision of the protagonist to go to exile in quest of a new identity after refusing an imposed one is motivated by the postcolonial concept of “Agency” (Ashcroft et al., 2007:6). This presents the heroine as someone who freely initiates actions showing an ability to engage and resist imperial power. Her endeavour to oppose and to resist apartheid system and her willing to go into exile for self-reconstruction suggests that, although it may be difficult for colonial subjects to escape the effects of imperial forces that “construct” them, it is not impossible.

Indeed, she will later understand that her personality needs reconstructing. The project of Elizabeth and the subsequent actions represent a discourse as M. Foucault (1971) holds it. This discourse is based on the postcolonial aspect of “critique” whose meaning is to question apartheid system and to claim freedom. This idea is shared by D. Saman (2015) who opines that the postcolonial area and subject are mainly characterized by their inclination to question colonialism and to search a real identity as an expression of their freedom.

Thus, in the host country, the protagonist tries to redefine her identity annihilating the ambiguity that characterized it. Her construction of a new identity takes place at a psychic level. The process is made of hallucinations stemming from the traumas she inherited in South Africa. These hallucinations prove positive for her as they are the source of her new personality to come. The fact that the author resorts to hallucinations in the protagonist’s relationships is a way to make her forget the hard reality experienced in South Africa. Things must happen first mentally before becoming physical or real. Hallucinations become a healing factor for her traumas and a catharsis that will trigger her new personality.

Although at a psychic level, some characters are the instruments whose connection with the protagonist will set off the process of reconstruction of the new identity and make it successful. Among them Sello appears to be the most outstanding. Thus, when he appears to the



protagonist in her hallucinations, she faces something she has never experienced before and that opens her the door to a new life. Referring to him as someone in the wake of which the protagonist has understood the “basic teaching methods of goodness” (Head, 1974:99), the narrator reveals that a process of reconstruction of her personality is on the way. The lexeme “goodness” in the quotation which contradicts totally everything that she experienced previously, signals the positive process of the reconstruction of the new identity of Elisabeth. About her, D. Lewis rightly puts forward that “she acquires the resources to identify liberation in unacknowledged human experiences, and also defines herself as the visionary source of new perception” (D. Lewis, 2007: 205).

Here, Lewis clarifies the fact that the spiritual experience that Elisabeth is acquiring through the characters in her hallucinations gives her the needed resources for her self-determination, restoration and stability necessary for constructing a new self. The apology of some values like “goodness” and “love” made by Sello in his permanent teaching her, is aimed at transforming the protagonist positively and healing her traumas brought from South Africa.

It therefore does not prove futile that she identifies herself with Sello, sharing his vision of mankind as the narrator notes it: “Maybe she had made too close an identification with Sello for her own comfort and safety” (Head, 1974:25). This idea of the narrator presents the relationships of the protagonist and Sello as a catharsis that frees the former from the bad feelings and experiences of the past. The “comfort and safety” that Sello inspires her makes him stand as a moral and spiritual teacher for her; she finds in the man what she has lost for long and that she has been looking for.

It stands to reason that in the construction of her new personality, the protagonist needs some values which contradicts the ones she experienced in her origin country. One can easily guess that the total sum of the values embodied by Sello, one of the characters she encounters in her hallucinations, is the basis of the protagonist’s new self in construction. The parallel that the narrator makes between Elisabeth and Sello displays the former’s will to merge with the latter so as to espouse the values that he embodies:

She seemed to have no distinct face of her own, her face was always turned toward Sello whom she had adored. She seemed to have only been a side

attachment to Sello. (...). There were so many impressions of Sello as the religious man that his past life had pervaded the whole earth” (Head, 1974:25).

In the quotation above, some lexemes like “adored”, “religious man” reveal that the protagonist views Sello like a god-like man, a redeeming person whose actions will restore good reputation for her after getting rid of her past life. With him, Elisabeth will be born again through the new identity she will acquire.

What we can qualify as the protagonist’s “renaissance” in the construction of her new identity goes through the internalization of some values as Sello teaches her. Inversely, she remains convinced, thanks to her experience of exile, that the internalization by man of some negative feelings, whatever the reason, is the basis of man’s own destruction as it is revealed in one of her monologues: “How a man is overwhelmed by his own internal darkness, his own evils, his power lusts, his greeds, his self-importance and these dominate him totally and bring him to the death of the soul” (Head, 1974:40).

From this quotation, the protagonist makes it clear that thinking and behaving negatively can be an impediment to her self-reconstruction, self-realization and self-salvation. “The death of the soul” mentioned in the quotation appears to be a total impediment to the process of the construction of a new identity as it is a metaphor of the failure of the project. This monologue of her shows that she has become aware that if she wants her quest for a new identity to be successful, she has to get rid of negative feelings and ideas to internalize positive values. Here from a post-colonial perspective this new posture of the protagonist meets the concept of “counter-discourse vis-à-vis apartheid against which she has negative feelings and that she fights.

Botswana appears to be the land that makes it possible for the protagonist to promote the politics of “positivity” against that of “negativity”. This is made clear in a monologue as it reads: ““Oh God” she said softly. “May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds.”” (Head, 1974:100). This extract reveals the protagonist’s will to forget her past life and to live a new one and also her will of change in her personality which must end in the achievement of a new identity. The “dead world” she is alluding may refer to South Africa and apartheid with its practices that she wants to erase from her mind and heart in order

not to repeat them in her exile experience that is opening her the doors of a new world which stands as a metaphor to her new identity.

Through the myth of Osiris, the narrator is alluding the reconstruction of the personality of the protagonist and her achievement of a new identity as inevitable following her exile in Botswana. A comprehensive survey of that myth is given to us:

He produced a brief reconstruction of the story of Osiris and Isis. He had been the Osiris who had been shattered into a thousand fragments by the thunderbolt of the Medusa. She had been the Isis who had put the pieces together again. The details did not unfold. What unfolded fully was the picture of the reconstructed man, with the still, sad, fire-washed face of death (Head, 1974:39).

The myth in question is a metaphor to a new way of life, a new personality and a new identity for the protagonist following her exile and her connection with some people like Sello. Indeed as Isis had put the pieces of her partner Osiris together to make a new man after the latter had been shattered into a thousand fragments, the protagonist will do the same for Sello who intends to sacrifice himself for redeeming her.

In the same vein, throughout the narrative, we notice a recurrent willingness of the protagonist to die and live another life in another place. This is a metaphor of her will to get rid of a negative background, of a soul marked by evils to get a new one marked by goodness and love. The death she is calling for is the “death” of her background, her past life in South Africa and her past personality.

## ***2.2. The nature of the new identity***

The nature of the new identity by the heroine of the novel is based on her experiences in life. These experiences are the key that open her the door of a new conception of identity. The analysis in this section will be considered as the result of the identity quest of the protagonist. We shall take interests in the relationships of the heroine with some characters and in her communication process as the bases which help her to draw the lessons of what seems to her as the ideal identity for her and for all the other people like her. We hold the hypothesis that it is through

a politics of humanity and love promoted by some characters who are in interaction with the protagonist that the latter has forged her conception of the nature of the new identity. The following idea by A. Dumitrescu (2014, p.142) that “every character is shaped by the actions of the others which make him/her more visible, powerful, more active and more readable” fits well the protagonist.

Thus, the nature of the protagonist’s new identity takes roots in the familiarity with the host land. If in South Africa the country-based norms of discrimination, racial classification installed in her some negative feeling like hatred, fear and rejection of her fellowmen, on the exile land she experiences some universally shared values like goodness, love, fraternity. The nature of the new identity take their basis on these values. Such a posture meets the post-colonial concept of “resistance” that makes her avoid the trap of apartheid and the colonizer who wanted to transform her in someone bad to choose another way. The post-colonial concept of “referentiality” is also important here as the nature of the new identity promoted by the heroine is a strategy for survival in the marginalized social groups she has faced from her home land to her host one. She finds mental and physical comfort with her new found identity.

The nature and the meaning of the protagonist’s new identity is introduced in the following prologue of the novel through Sello who will later stand as the one who guides and inspires her in her quest:

So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment. And yet, as an African, he seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements: “I’m just anyone”” (Head, 1974:11).

The interpretation that we can make of this quotation is that the result of the quest of the protagonist will be but what Sello embodies it means a mankind identification as Sello is her teacher. In addition to the crystal clear meaning of this sentence in the quotation: “He preferred an identification with mankind”, the last sentence , “I’m just anyone”, reveals Sello’s identity vision espoused by Elizabeth; that is, he refuses

an identity linked to any social, racial and/or ethnic group. He rather prefers an identity whose source is any human like him.

Sello encourages the protagonist to adopt some values like “goodness” and “love” which should be characteristics of her new personality. In doing so, he reveals the universality of his vision in the relationships between people. About him, the narrator laconically says: “His love included the whole universe.” (Head, 1974:11). There is no doubt that these universal values will be transferred to the protagonist as the best characteristics any human should bear. From this position, one can understand that for the protagonist of the novel, the identity that is worth promoting and that she has achieved following her quest is what characterizes human being. Such a posture contradicts the anti-social values she used to experience in South Africa where identity is emphasized by an ideological hierarchy, classification, categorization and discrimination.

When Elizabeth refers to Sello, her teacher, as “a prophet of mankind” (Head, 1974:25), she acknowledges that the core of the latter’s teaching is everything like goodness and love that will contribute to build a best future for humanity so that all humans will be happy. We can follow Sello teaching her this lesson:

Everything was wrong. Everything was evil until I broke down and cried. It is when you cry, in the blackest hour of despair that you stumble on a source of goodness. There were a few of us who cried like that. Then we said: “Send us perfection.” They sent you. Then we asked: “What is perfection?” And they said: “love.” (Head, 1974:34)

The extract above, shows that the protagonist has assimilated, in the end, the lesson that goodness and love for all people, without distinction, is the most perfect thing all people in the world should embrace and they should be the most important characteristics of human being.

Moreover the reference to Sello as a “prophet of mankind” shows that her quest has taken a religious turn revealing the same characteristic source of human being coming from God. In the wake of this, she espouses his philosophy that all human beings should be identified uniquely as God’s children. The following inward monologue of the protagonist is an evidence: “Be the same as others in heart; just be a

person” (Head, 1974:25). The lexeme “just be a person” clarifies the idea that what is worth noting in the relationships between people and that they should identify with is their humanity. As for the lexeme “heart” in this quotation, it comes as an evidence that love is for Elizabeth the dearest characteristic of human as love is located in heart. Being the same as others in heart, means that man should consider his fellowmen as himself and love them.

On the basis of that, she questions the humanity of some people who show more interest and love for things and materials than for human beings. Thus, she expresses her shock in the attitude of the Danish expatriate woman who is lacking humanity in showing great love for the house she is living in while despising the African native people as we can read in the following lapidary sentence: “Houses were loved not people” (Head, 1974:78). That attitude of the Danish expatriate towards the native population takes support from the postcolonial concepts of Race and Whiteness (Ashcroft et al., 2007) which gave rise to colonialism drawing the binary distinction between civilized and primitive, superior and inferior in a hierarchization of human types. The reaction of Elizabeth who is accustomed to the attitude of that woman, shows that she has another approach of human relations in the society. In post-colonialism perspective, with the concept of “referentiality” she adopts an attitude that is a strategy for survival in marginalized social groups. There is also a counter-discourse in the protagonist reaction vis-à-vis the discourse of the white man and the colonizer.

The protagonist’s willingness to identify herself with humanity is clear as we can notice in this joke that the heroine puts forward at the end of the novel: “There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet” (Head, 1974:206). The lexeme “man” as the name of God means that human is at the core of everything. The protagonist, the “prophet” of “Man” (God), means that she must follow God’s path and all her actions should revolve around man and humanity. The fact that such a statement by the protagonist comes at the end of the novel means that her quest has ended in an identity that can be labelled “human identity”.

The nature of the protagonist’s new identity is psychologically rooted in what J. Lacan (1997) calls “The Great Other”. A theory that defines the identity of the subject. In a contextual appreciation, it appears clear that she cannot find “The Great Other” neither in her mother (white

identity), nor in her father (black identity). What is left over is the human characteristic that can define her. Hence her promoting a “human identity”. Her refusal of a debased imposed identity, her quest and its achievement in a “human identity”, its promotion, represent a postcolonial counter-discourse (Terdiman, 1985) intended to break some binaries such as White and Black, advanced and retarded, good and evil, mainly, margin and center models of culture. This is justified by Ashcroft (2007) according to whom postcolonialism aims at developing a new language to address the problems of global culture and the relationships between local cultures and global forces.

One can notice that in the protagonist’s quest for a new identity, all the characters who take part in the construction of her new characteristics and her new personality are from all the parts of the world (Africans, Americans, Europeans and Asians). This mode of characterization by the author means that the new identity of the protagonist will be the sum of experience of all the different categories of people of mankind. Her intimate conviction is that all the people coming from God have the same source and the same value. They even have the same identity that is “human identity.”

By disagreeing with Tom the American expatriate who is defending black power in USA and asserting: “I don’t like exclusive brotherhoods for black people only”, the protagonist expresses her vision for human being and mankind. This unambiguous position of her is an additional evidence of the type of identity she has acquired which is free of ethnicity, classification and division, the source of which is exclusiveness.

It appears crystal clear that the heroine of the novel is totally against exclusiveness in human relationships. N.Y. N’na (2008) emphasizes that, this posture of the protagonist is also that of the author of novel under study. He reveals that, contrary to the West African novel which highlights the heritage of the cultural values of their areas, the novels of Head are rather critical of ethnic cultural issues. This is right as in *A Question of Power* for example the protagonist puts the stress on the fact that people should be identified by some common shared characteristics: “That’s my struggle, and that’s black power, but it’s a power that belongs to all of mankind and in which all mankind can share.” (Head, 1974, p.135). The lexeme “That’s my struggle” displays the protagonist’s vision of a new world in which all humans are equal. Such a position is shared by Mineva Silvia as she puts that: “We are what we are because of our

relation/dialogue with others. So human life is a shared life, and every identity is underlain with co-existence and the memory of this common experience” (Quoted by Kouakou 2019:368).

The identity quest of the heroine of the novel ends happily with a feeling of being accepted in a human society with some human characteristics. At the very end of the novel we can read:

She put Shorty to bed and, for the first time in three years, embraced the solitude of night with joy. (...) She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man. As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging (Head, 1974:206).

This extract constitutes the last words of the novel and are symbolic of the fruitful result of Elizabeth’s quest of self-determination and a new identity. Some values as love, goodness, brotherhood, equality between human beings which she has longed for for a long time are now recovered. At last, she has found an identity that governs her as well as other people and which meets her vision for humanity; that is “human identity”.

## **Conclusion**

Our study has purported to show that when people who are discriminated against and dehumanized in their own country refuse an imposed identity, searching for a new identity through exile can prove successful. Throughout our study, we have seen how the heroine of Bessie Head has constructed herself a new personality through exile after refusing dehumanization, oppression, racism and an imposed identity. The quest for a new identity is a reaction against the identity drifts experienced in South Africa and enables her for self-assertion and helps her to find a place in the society. K. Koné (2019, p. 575) has it that “in postcolonial contexts writers are struggling to rewrite their stories/histories”. Bessie Head with her heroine in her novel *A Question of Power* tries to rewrite the story of black people in South Africa from



the perspective of her people. The exile experience has opened her the door to new relationships and to the quest for something new characterizing her and that she wants to share with other human beings. It has also taught her another dimension of identity that is free of ethnicity and /or race. It takes into account the human dimension with some universal values such as love, goodness, solidarity, well-being of human race and an altruistic vision for the society.

The self-construction ends in the achievement of a new identity to which she gives a universal dimension. Her socio-political background added to her experience in exile has made this possible. Researcher J. Marcia (1966) justifies this idea arguing that identity achievement occurs when an individual has gone through an exploration of different identities and made a commitment to one. The course of Elizabeth's action testifies to the fact that she has actually been committed to the "human identity" that she has achieved after her quest. The new found identity of the protagonist is a form of reconciliation with herself. She will no more suffer from an ambiguous identity. If she is neither a white nor a black, neither a woman nor a man, she is at least a human being.

The novel of Bessie Head under study raises the issue of identity tragedy experienced by people who suffer from a double identity or who have lost their identity on their own land and who feel obliged to go into exile to "construct" a new identity. The author considers exile as a solution for all those people who suffer from an identity crisis on their home land by showing them the way for a new life. Head produces a catharsis on her fellowmen who suffer from a problematic identity or all people who suffer from discrimination or any other identity crisis.

If we assume that the mental confusion and torments of the protagonist of the novel are the corollary of her identity crisis, then the cure for her mental illness is her commitment to the quest for a new identity and its achievement in exile. It is assumed that those who have made a strong commitment to an identity tend to be happier and healthier than those who have not.

Purporting to transform the society to the best and instill in the mentality of people a new concept of identity, *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head is consistent with the creative approach of literature (Bungaro, 2007). By exploring new avenues for another approach of the issue of identity, the author is writing, as R. Dupleis puts it, "beyond the ending" (Quoted by Bungaro, 2007:28). With Bessie Head, we

should, from now on, talk of a “human identity” which induces in man some human and universal values. The protagonist of her novel, following her experience in exile, finds herself rehabilitated in her human nature with a new identity that goes with human dignity.

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