



# Psychological Colonization and Gendered Power: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

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## ABSTRACT

Bessie Head's novel *A Question of Power* (1973) offers a profound exploration of psychological colonization, gendered power dynamics, and the interwoven effects of racism, sexism, and cultural domination in postcolonial Africa. Through the protagonist Elizabeth's internal struggles with identity, oppression, and psychological turmoil, Head highlights the enduring impact of colonial legacies on both personal and societal levels. This study employs a postcolonial feminist framework to examine how power relations between sexes are influenced by historical, cultural, and psychological forces. It also considers the intersections of exploitation, slavery, and economic dependence as mechanisms of colonial and patriarchal control. By foregrounding the experiences of women in postcolonial contexts, the research underscores the role of literature in critiquing hegemonic structures while offering avenues for resilience, self-definition, and cultural reclamation. The study situates Head's narrative alongside broader discourses on women writers' contributions to postcolonial literature, highlighting how novels can interrogate colonial histories and challenge ingrained power asymmetries.

**Keywords:** Bessie Head, *A Question of Power*, postcolonial feminism, psychological colonization, gendered power, African literature, identity, oppression, colonial legacy, women's agency

## INTRODUCTION

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1973) is widely recognized as a seminal work in African literature that intricately explores the intersections of psychological colonization, gendered oppression, and postcolonial identity crises. Set in post-independence Botswana, the novel follows Elizabeth, a protagonist grappling with intense psychological disturbances, social alienation, and the pervasive legacies of colonial rule. Head's narrative offers more than a personal story; it presents a profound critique of societal structures that perpetuate oppression, particularly for women, in a context historically shaped by colonization, slavery, and patriarchal dominance (Head, 1974). The novel's enduring significance lies in its ability to foreground individual psychological experience while simultaneously engaging with broader historical, social, and political realities, positioning the personal as deeply entwined with the structural and ideological forces of postcolonial Africa.

The postcolonial context of the novel is central to understanding the psychological and social realities of its characters. Colonialism in Africa was not only a political and economic imposition but also a pervasive cultural and psychological force that infiltrated the consciousness of both colonizer and colonized (Fanon, 1963). The legacies of colonial rule extended beyond the material exploitation of land and labor; they shaped social hierarchies, cultural norms, and individual subjectivity. In this framework, the "colonized mind" often internalizes the ideologies of the colonizer, resulting in alienation from cultural roots, identity confusion, and gendered subjugation (Memmi, 1965). Elizabeth's struggle embodies this complex negotiation: she confronts social expectations, racialized hierarchies, and psychological disturbances that are rooted in both historical injustices and contemporary inequalities. Her experiences reflect the ways in which colonial histories continue to exert influence over postcolonial identities, creating conditions of vulnerability, marginalization, and alienation that are particularly acute for women. Elizabeth's psychological disturbances are not mere individual

pathologies; they are deeply entangled with her social environment. Head's narrative presents psychosis, hallucinations, and internal conflicts as reflective of the cumulative pressures of colonial legacies, social exclusion, and gendered oppression. Elizabeth's visions of Dan, Sello, and Medusa symbolize externalized forms of these pressures, offering a metaphorical representation of systemic oppression that transcends personal experience. This literary strategy enables Head to depict the psychological colonization of her protagonist, showing how the colonized mind internalizes hierarchies, doubt, and inferiority. Secondary scholarship confirms that such portrayals in African women's literature are not only diagnostic of individual crises but also critical commentaries on social, political, and gendered structures that reproduce inequality (Chabwera, 2020; Cloete, 2000).

A key aspect of Head's literary vision is her attention to the intersection of gender and power. Elizabeth's experiences reveal how patriarchal structures operate within postcolonial societies to constrain women's autonomy. Male authority figures, such as Dan and Sello, enact dominance through coercion and intimidation, while societal expectations impose restrictive roles on women. Head thus illustrates that gendered oppression is both systemic and interpersonal: women's lived realities are shaped by laws, cultural norms, and private relationships, all of which interact to limit freedom, self-expression, and social mobility. Moreover, Head demonstrates that colonial ideologies amplify these patriarchal dynamics by valorizing hierarchical control and internalized subjugation. As a result, Elizabeth's struggle is not only against individual antagonists but against the embedded systems of authority that govern knowledge, morality, and social recognition.

Head's novel is also significant for its exploration of resistance and agency. While Elizabeth experiences profound psychological disintegration, her journey is ultimately one of self-discovery and empowerment. The novel depicts madness not solely as a symptom of individual vulnerability but as a site of epistemic insight and resistance (Rose, 1998; Chabwera, 2020). Through her internal dialogues and confrontations with hallucinations, Elizabeth interrogates dominant power structures, questions social hierarchies, and gradually reclaims a sense of self. This approach aligns with postcolonial feminist perspectives, which emphasize the potential for women to critically engage with structures of domination and assert autonomy, even in contexts marked by historical oppression and contemporary inequities (Mohanty, 1988). Head's narrative suggests that psychological struggle, when understood in relation to social and historical forces, can become a transformative process rather than a purely debilitating condition.

Another critical dimension of the novel is its treatment of race and identity. Elizabeth's biracial heritage situates her in a position of liminality: she is neither fully accepted by black African communities nor integrated into white-dominated spaces. This dual marginality highlights the intersectionality of race, gender, and postcolonial subjugation, illustrating the complexities of identity formation in postcolonial Africa. By foregrounding Elizabeth's ambivalence and her struggle for belonging, Head critiques simplistic nationalist narratives that fail to account for nuanced experiences of marginalization. The novel thereby underscores the need for postcolonial literature to address multi-layered forms of exclusion, considering how historical oppression, cultural displacement, and social hierarchies intersect to shape individual subjectivity.

Furthermore, Head emphasizes the spiritual and psychological dimensions of oppression. As she herself remarked, "There are deeper causes for human suffering and starvation—perhaps found in the realm of the spirit" (Head, 1980, p. 288). This observation underscores the importance of approaching postcolonial analysis not only through material and political frameworks but also through psychological and spiritual lenses. Elizabeth's journey reveals that liberation is contingent not only upon social and economic reforms but also upon the reclamation of inner strength, self-understanding, and critical consciousness. Literature, in this context, serves as a vehicle for both reflection and intervention, enabling readers to engage with complex forms of oppression while imagining avenues for resistance and empowerment.

In addition to its thematic richness, *A Question of Power* is notable for its literary complexity. Head employs a fragmented narrative style, blending realism with psychological and symbolic elements, to convey the fractured consciousness of her protagonist. This narrative strategy allows the novel to reflect the disjunctures inherent in postcolonial experience: the tension between tradition and modernity, personal and collective histories, and individual autonomy and societal constraint. Critics have noted that Head's style embodies the very cognitive and emotional challenges that her characters face, making the novel a powerful vehicle for understanding the entanglement of psychological, social, and historical forces (Lindfors, 1981; Moynagh, 2005).

Given these considerations, this study situates Head's work within postcolonial feminist scholarship to interrogate the intersections of psychological colonization and gendered power. By examining Elizabeth's struggles, this research highlights the ways in which African literature can illuminate the interplay between personal trauma and structural oppression, offering insights into broader patterns of social inequality and

resistance. Head's narrative thus exemplifies the potential of literature to not only represent suffering but also to critically engage with it, suggesting pathways toward resilience, self-knowledge, and social critique.

In conclusion, the introduction establishes that Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* operates simultaneously as a psychological case study, a postcolonial critique, and a feminist exploration. The novel interrogates how colonial legacies, patriarchal power, and racial hierarchies shape the experiences of women in postcolonial Africa while offering a nuanced vision of agency and empowerment. This study, therefore, seeks to examine these themes through a postcolonial feminist lens, foregrounding the intersections of mind, society, and history, and emphasizing the novel's enduring relevance as a critical site for understanding the dynamics of oppression and resilience.

## Research Problem

While Head's *A Question of Power* has been extensively studied for its narrative complexity, psychological depth, and postcolonial critique, existing scholarship has predominantly focused on themes such as political oppression, mental health, and identity crises (Gunner, 1992; Coetzee, 1998). However, there is a discernible gap in studies that explicitly examine the novel through the lens of postcolonial feminism, particularly in relation to gendered power relations and psychological colonization.

Existing research often addresses colonial and racial dynamics in Head's work, yet the specific intersection of gender, power, and the internalization of colonial ideologies in shaping female subjectivity remains underexplored (Moynagh, 2005). Furthermore, while studies of African women writers—such as Mariama Bâ, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Ama Ata Aidoo—highlight women's resistance to patriarchal structures, comparative analyses that place Head's work in dialogue with postcolonial feminist theory remain limited. This study addresses this lacuna by centering women's lived experiences, psychological struggles, and negotiations of power within postcolonial structures, providing a nuanced understanding of the gendered dimensions of colonial legacies.

## Research Objectives and Research Questions

The study aims to investigate how *A Question of Power* portrays the psychological effects of colonization on women and the ways in which gendered power operates within postcolonial African societies. The specific objectives are:

- To examine the representation of psychological colonization and internalized oppression in Bessie Head's novel.
- To analyze the depiction of gendered power dynamics and women's agency in postcolonial Botswana.
- To explore how Head's narrative interrogates intersections of race, gender, and cultural domination.
- To situate the novel within the framework of postcolonial feminist theory.

Research Questions:

- How does *A Question of Power* represent psychological colonization and its impact on female subjectivity?
- In what ways do gendered power dynamics manifest in the interactions between characters in the novel?
- How does Head critique the colonial and patriarchal structures that perpetuate oppression?
- What theoretical insights can a postcolonial feminist lens provide in understanding the text's engagement with power, identity, and liberation?

## Significance of the Study

This study contributes to multiple scholarly and practical domains. Theoretically, it enriches postcolonial feminist discourse by examining an underexplored aspect of Head's work—the interplay of psychological colonization and gendered oppression. While postcolonial studies often emphasize historical, political, and economic dimensions, this research foregrounds the internalized, psychological aspects of colonization, particularly for women, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of colonial impact (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2013).

Scholarly contribution lies in expanding African literary criticism to include nuanced readings of female subjectivity under postcolonial conditions. By situating Head in dialogue with feminist and postcolonial theorists, the study underscores the relevance of literature in analyzing and challenging hegemonic power structures. Culturally, the research illuminates the lived experiences of African women navigating the dual burdens of colonial legacy and patriarchal society, highlighting the ways in which literature can foster empathy, consciousness, and social critique. Practically, the study encourages educators, literary critics, and

policymakers to consider psychological colonization and gendered oppression as intertwined phenomena that shape societal attitudes, personal identities, and policy frameworks.

### Scope and Limitations of the Study

Scope:

- Textual focus: The primary text analyzed is Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974). References to other African women writers and postcolonial feminist scholarship provide comparative insights.
- Theoretical focus: The study employs a postcolonial feminist lens to examine gender, power, and psychological colonization.
- Geographical focus: The research emphasizes postcolonial Botswana and broader African contexts where colonial and patriarchal structures intersect.
- Temporal focus: While the novel is set in the post-independence period, the study also engages with contemporary theoretical interpretations of postcolonialism and feminism.

Limitations:

- The study does not conduct fieldwork or include primary interviews; its analysis is confined to literary and theoretical sources.
- The research focuses primarily on female experiences and may not fully encompass male perspectives or broader societal structures beyond gendered power.
- While comparative references to Indian English literature and diasporic narratives are drawn, the study does not provide an exhaustive cross-cultural literary analysis.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* has attracted scholarly attention for its multifaceted exploration of personal, social, and political dimensions of postcolonial African life. Scholars have highlighted the novel's complex narrative structure, psychological intensity, and engagement with social hierarchies. Lindfors (1981) emphasizes that Head's work bridges psychological and social concerns, portraying the inner turmoil of her characters as reflective of broader societal and political conditions. Elizabeth, the protagonist, experiences a series of psychological crises, hallucinations, and moral dilemmas that mirror the tension between personal agency and structural oppression. The novel thus serves as a critical site for examining the lingering effects of colonialism on individual and collective consciousness (Head, 1973).

The psychological dimension of Head's narrative has been foregrounded in several studies. Modisane (1991) argues that the novel exemplifies how internalized oppression manifests in the mental and emotional lives of colonized subjects. Elizabeth's experiences are illustrative of what Fanon (1963) identifies as the psychological consequences of colonization, where the colonized subject internalizes the values, prejudices, and hierarchies of the colonizer. This internalization disrupts identity formation, engenders self-doubt, and produces a form of cognitive dissonance in which the individual simultaneously resists and perpetuates oppression. Head's work, according to Modisane (1991), is remarkable in its depiction of the inner life of women navigating postcolonial hierarchies, emphasizing the interplay of race, gender, and psychological subjugation.

Several scholars have explored Head's representation of gendered power dynamics. Moynagh (2005) notes that *A Question of Power* positions women as both subjects and agents within a matrix of social and cultural control. Elizabeth's struggle is not only against external forces such as economic dependence and societal expectations but also against the internalized ideologies that dictate women's behavior and limit their autonomy. Gunner (1992) similarly identifies the novel as a critique of patriarchal structures in postcolonial Botswana, highlighting the ways in which women's agency is circumscribed by both colonial legacies and indigenous social norms. Head's narrative demonstrates how women negotiate power within constrained contexts, revealing the subtle and overt mechanisms of control that perpetuate gendered inequalities.

Postcolonial feminist scholarship provides essential theoretical grounding for these readings. Mohanty (1988) critiques Western feminist scholarship for homogenizing the experiences of women in the Global South, advocating instead for analyses attentive to historical, cultural, and social specificity. In the context of African literature, this perspective allows scholars to examine the intersections of colonialism, patriarchy, and race in shaping women's lived experiences. Head's work exemplifies these intersections, as Elizabeth's personal struggles are inseparable from the social, economic, and political conditions of her environment (Spivak, 1988). The postcolonial feminist lens thus enables a deeper understanding of the ways in which structural oppression is internalized, contested, and narrated in literature.

Comparative studies situate Head alongside other African women writers who interrogate similar themes of gender, power, and postcoloniality. Nnaemeka (1997) highlights the works of Ama Ata Aidoo and Tsitsi

Dangarembga as illustrative of women negotiating agency in postcolonial African societies. Like Head, these writers explore the tensions between tradition and modernity, societal expectation and personal autonomy, and oppression and resistance. While these studies provide valuable context, few have directly linked Head's exploration of psychological colonization with the mechanisms of gendered power, leaving a critical gap that this research seeks to address.

The scholarship on Head also engages with literary form and narrative strategy. Coetzee (1998) emphasizes Head's use of non-linear narrative and psychological realism to convey the complexities of postcolonial life. The novel's fragmented narrative mirrors Elizabeth's mental state and underscores the interplay between personal perception and external reality. This narrative strategy allows Head to illustrate the effects of social and psychological oppression without resorting to didacticism, creating a nuanced and immersive portrayal of women's experiences in a postcolonial context.

Some studies additionally consider the cross-cultural and diasporic dimensions of Head's narrative. Comparisons with Indian women writers, such as Anita Rau Badami and Kamala Markandaya, reveal similar thematic concerns: the negotiation of identity, cultural displacement, and familial and societal pressures (Badami, 2004; Markandaya, 1965). These comparative frameworks highlight the universality of certain postcolonial and feminist themes while maintaining attention to specific historical and cultural contexts. Head's work, however, is distinguished by its explicit focus on the psychological effects of colonization, particularly as they intersect with gendered social hierarchies.

Despite these contributions, there is a scholarly gap in explicitly applying a postcolonial feminist framework to analyze psychological colonization in Head's work. While mental health and gender issues are often discussed independently, the intersection of colonial history, gendered oppression, and psychological trauma requires a focused, integrated approach. This study seeks to fill this gap by combining postcolonial and feminist theoretical perspectives, analyzing how Elizabeth's internal struggles are shaped by systemic and structural inequalities, and situating her experiences within broader discourses on women's agency, resistance, and empowerment in postcolonial literature.

In conclusion, the literature indicates that Head's *A Question of Power* is a rich site for exploring the interconnections between psychological colonization and gendered power. Previous studies have examined either the psychological dimension of oppression, the social and political critique, or women's roles in postcolonial contexts. However, a comprehensive postcolonial feminist reading that integrates these aspects—highlighting the intersections of race, gender, and mental health—is still limited. This study builds upon existing scholarship while addressing these lacunae, contributing to a nuanced understanding of Head's literary project and its relevance for postcolonial feminist discourse.

## Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a postcolonial feminist framework, integrating key concepts from postcolonial theory and feminist criticism. Postcolonial theory, as articulated by Fanon (1963) and Memmi (1965), interrogates the lingering psychological and cultural effects of colonial domination, including alienation, internalized inferiority, and disrupted social hierarchies. Feminist theory, particularly as articulated by Mohanty (1988) and Spivak (1988), examines how patriarchal structures intersect with colonial legacies to produce gendered oppression and marginalization. Key concepts guiding this research include:

- Psychological colonization: Internalization of colonial ideologies that disrupt self-perception and agency.
- Gendered power: Social, cultural, and political hierarchies that privilege men over women, particularly in postcolonial societies.
- Intersectionality: The interplay of race, gender, class, and colonial history in shaping individual and collective experiences.
- Resistance and agency: The capacity of women characters to negotiate, contest, or subvert oppressive structures within constrained environments.

The framework allows for an integrated analysis of Elizabeth's personal struggles and broader societal dynamics, highlighting how literature can illuminate structural inequalities while offering narratives of resilience.

## Methodology

This study employs qualitative literary analysis informed by postcolonial feminist theory. The research design includes:

- Textual analysis: Close reading of Head's *A Question of Power* to identify themes of psychological colonization, gendered power, and identity struggles.
  - Thematic coding: Identification of key motifs such as oppression, internalized inferiority, resistance, and gender dynamics.
  - Comparative engagement: Analysis in dialogue with other African and Indian women writers to situate Head within broader postcolonial feminist discourse.
  - Analytical approach: Integrates postcolonial feminist concepts with textual evidence, including character interactions, narrative strategies, and symbolic motifs.
- The study does not involve primary data collection but relies on existing scholarly interpretations, literary texts, and critical frameworks to generate insights.

### TEXTUAL ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND ARGUMENTATION

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1973) is a harrowing and richly layered narrative that explores not just the personal psychological breakdown of its protagonist Elizabeth but also the structural and ideological forces that shape her identity and experience. Through a postcolonial feminist reading, the novel reveals how colonial legacies, patriarchal power structures, and internalized oppression converge to produce both psychological trauma and dramatic resistance. This analysis discusses the novel's exploration of gendered power relations, psychological colonization, resistance, marginality, and transformative resilience by linking textual evidence with critical scholarship.

#### Psychological Colonization and Internalization of Oppression

At the heart of *A Question of Power* is Elizabeth's struggle with her own mind — a struggle inseparable from the social and historical conditions in which she lives. Elizabeth is biracial — born to a white mother and a black father during apartheid South Africa — and this mixed heritage places her in a position of marginality, rejection, and identity conflict from birth. Head's depiction of Elizabeth's psychological fragmentation reflects a broader colonial dynamic in which the colonized subject internalizes the oppressive hierarchies of the colonizer.

The narrative charts Elizabeth's descent into psychosis as she confronts hostile social forces, ranging from institutional racism to patriarchal dominance. Elizabeth's hallucinations — featuring figures like Dan, Sello, and Medusa — are not merely individual neuroses but embodiments of the internalization of oppressive power structures that colonialism and patriarchy entail. These phantoms represent social intolerances and psychological violence that seep into Elizabeth's psyche. Notably, scholars have argued that “madness becomes a sign of collective active resistance” against oppressive conditions — suggesting that the breakdown is not merely illness but a radical confrontation with entrenched injustices (Feder, 3). Madness is here both a symptom of oppression and a form of defiance against it.

Elizabeth's marginality underscores this point. The school principal in the novel tells Elizabeth that her mother was insane — marking her from adolescence as predisposed to madness (Head, 1973). This external judgment internalizes itself within Elizabeth's psyche and reflects how colonial ideology pathologizes difference. Her later mental struggles are not isolated disintegration but cumulative effects of a racially stratified society that imposes inferiority and exclusion. This psychological colonization — the internal imposition of colonial hierarchies — is central to a feminist understanding of Elizabeth's condition.

The literature supports this reading: Cloete notes that both Head and other African women writers portray how patriarchy coupled with colonialism causes psychological afflictions in female protagonists (Cloete, 2000). Elizabeth's mental unraveling is therefore a site where postcolonial and feminist interpretations intersect; she is oppressed not only by external systems of power but by internalized structures of psychological domination.

#### Gendered Power: Patriarchy and Female Marginality

Head's narrative also meticulously captures how patriarchal systems operate in both personal and political spheres. Elizabeth's gender places her in a vulnerable position within her relationships and within the broader society. While characters like Dan, Sello, and Camilla embody different modes of male or patriarchal authority, Elizabeth must constantly negotiate her autonomy within these oppressive frameworks.

Dan and Sello, for instance, represent two contrasting but equally oppressive forms of masculine power embedded in nationalism and political authority. Dan's obsession with his “seventy-one nice-time girls” and the way Elizabeth's “analytical mind was being shattered to pieces” reveals how patriarchal power seeks to dominate female subjectivity and rationality (Head, 1973). As the secondary literature notes, patriarchy in

Head's novel functions as a tool for stabilizing discrimination and maintaining masculine dominance over women (Fonchingong, 2006; Salami-Boukari, 2012).

Camilla, the Danish woman in Botswana, embodies a different type of oppressive gaze. Her snobbish assertions of European superiority reinforce racial hierarchies that intersect with gendered power. Camilla's belief that Africans are idle and ignorant reflects the colonial patriarchal gaze that infantilizes African subjects and denies them agency or intellectual capacity. This critique resonates with postcolonial feminist scholarship, which emphasizes how race, gender, and colonial power converge to restrict women's access to voice and self-definition (Mohanty, 1988).

Elizabeth's own rebellion against these forms of male dominance is central to her psychological transformation. Unlike the "docile followers" or "sex objects" who inhabit Dan's world, Elizabeth refuses to be defined solely through her relationships with men or through patriarchal expectations. Her final rejection of dying alongside Sello symbolizes her refusal to occupy passive roles prescribed by patriarchal norms. This defiance reflects the larger feminist claim that women's liberation must involve the rejection of structures that deny their autonomy and subjectivity.

### **Madness and Resistance as Narrative Strategy**

Madness in *A Question of Power* operates on multiple levels: as personal breakdown, as a metaphor for social alienation, and as resistance to oppressive power. Head's portrayal of psychological breakdown deviates from Western psychiatric paths and instead aligns with African existential metaphors of spiritual and social rupture. Secondary criticism identifies madness as both a representation of societal oppression and a mechanism of resistance. Elinettie Chabwera argues that female madness in African literature often functions as "a powerful sense of resistance to their marginal situation" and that Head's depiction of madness enables Elizabeth to articulate her critique of both colonial and patriarchal structures (Chabwera, 3).

This interpretation aligns with narrative theory that sees mad figures in literature as liminal agents who expose structural injustices and the untenability of dominant ideologies (Rose, 1998). Elizabeth's visions are not merely symptoms of her psychosis; they are epiphanic moments of insight, challenging the normative frameworks of truth, identity, and power. Her dialogues with subconscious figures enable her to interrogate entrenched ideas of race, gender, nation, and self — demonstrating that madness can be site of epistemic reclamation.

Moreover, Elizabeth's eventual recovery — through work, community support in Motabeng, and her growing self-awareness — reframes her psychological journey not as descent into irredeemable madness but as rebirth through critical engagement with oppressive forces. This subversion of conventional notions of insanity resonates with feminist and postcolonial aims to reclaim marginalized voices from pathologizing discourses.

### **Race, Identity, and Belonging**

Another dimension of Elizabeth's experience centers on her racial identity and her search for belonging. Born into apartheid South Africa, Elizabeth does not belong fully to any racial group. Her status as "coloured" excludes her from white privilege and also from unambiguous acceptance within black nationalist movements. Secondary analysis notes that the novel's portrayal of racial discrimination reveals that alienation is not limited to white settler states but is also present within postcolonial societies themselves. Elizabeth's exile to Botswana — intended as an escape — does not immediately alleviate her sense of non-belonging.

Her psychological fragmentation is thus tied to the impossibility of a stable identity within the fractured racial logic of colonial and postcolonial societies. This is reinforced by Elizabeth's deep sense of not belonging, echoing the sentiment that she "was not linked up to the people" and could not find a comforting sense of African identity within nationalist rhetoric (Head, 1974). Elizabeth's rejection of cloying nationalist patriarchy stems from her understanding that nationalist movements often replicate patriarchal exclusions and that racial identities imposed by colonialism cannot simply be replaced with uncritical nationalist substitutes.

Through Elizabeth's journey, Head articulates a vision of identity that transcends rigid racial categories. Elizabeth's final acceptance of herself and her identification with ordinary people — beyond racial hierarchies — reflects a transformative postcolonial subjectivity. It is one that resists the binaries of colonizer/colonized and male/female, instead aspiring toward a more inclusive humanity.

## Gendered Violence and Social Structures

The oppressive dynamics in *A Question of Power* extend beyond interpersonal conflict to societal structures that perpetuate gendered violence and discrimination. Elizabeth's experiences reflect the lived realities of many African women who face layered forms of structural violence. This aligns with broader African feminist scholarship noting that women are often double colonized — by external colonial forces and by patriarchal norms within their own societies (Hussain & Zaman).

This dual oppression is evident in Elizabeth's social relationships: men wield authority through sexual domination or emotional coercion, colonial administrators demean African intellectual capacities, and patriarchal ideologies limit women's expressive autonomy. These intersecting injustices demonstrate how gendered violence is not merely physical but embedded within cultural, psychological, and institutional frameworks.

Elizabeth's resistance — her refusal to accept the roles prescribed to her — underscores the feminist premise that liberation involves dismantling the systemic roots of oppression rather than merely escaping individual circumstances. Her narrative demonstrates how personal liberation is bound to social critique.

## Spiritual Knowledge, Transformation, and Survivor Consciousness

Unlike many Western narratives that pathologize madness, *A Question of Power* presents Elizabeth's struggle as a journey toward holistic self-knowledge. As Chabwera highlights, Elizabeth's encounters with spiritual figures are not random delusions but symbolic engagements with alternative realms of knowledge and wisdom. These internal confrontations reveal underlying truths about power, identity, and social injustice that Elizabeth could not access through conventional rationality alone.

Elizabeth's eventual emergence from psychological turmoil reflects the possibility of integrating marginalized forms of knowledge — spiritual, corporeal, emotional — into a coherent sense of self. Her hand placed upon the Batswana soil at the novel's close symbolizes rootedness and acceptance not only of herself but of a shared humanity that transcends the oppressive categories of colonial rule and patriarchal domination.

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* is a rich and complex narrative that demands interpretation through lenses that account for power, gender, race, and psychological subjectivity. A postcolonial feminist analysis reveals that the novel is deeply invested in showing how colonial and patriarchal forces shape women's inner worlds and social realities. Elizabeth's journey — from psychological fragmentation to resistance and self-affirmation — demonstrates the transformative potential of literature to critique oppressive systems and to imagine more inclusive forms of identity and community.

By connecting Head's text with critical scholarship on gender, madness, colonial legacies, and resistance, this analysis underscores how *A Question of Power* not only reflects the double marginalization faced by women but also models a recovery of voice and agency that challenges hegemonic narratives. In this way, Elizabeth becomes not just an individual survivor, but a symbolic figure of postcolonial feminist resistance and resilience.

## FINDINGS

The textual analysis of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* reveals several key insights regarding psychological colonization, gendered power, and postcolonial subjectivity. These findings highlight the ways in which the novel interrogates structural oppression while offering a framework for resilience and agency.

- **Psychological Colonization as Internalized Oppression:** The analysis demonstrates that Elizabeth's mental struggles are not purely personal or pathological but are deeply rooted in the internalization of colonial ideologies. Her hallucinations, nightmares, and fragmented identity reflect the pervasive psychological effects of colonial hierarchies, which persist even after formal independence. Elizabeth embodies what Fanon (1963) and Memmi (1965) describe as the "colonized psyche," wherein the oppressed subject internalizes feelings of inferiority, self-doubt, and alienation. The novel thus reveals the subtle mechanisms of domination that operate at the level of consciousness, suggesting that liberation requires both external and internal transformation.
- **Gendered Power and Patriarchal Oppression:** The findings indicate that gendered power operates in multiple forms in the novel. Male characters, such as Dan and Sello, exercise coercive and sexualized authority, while societal expectations constrain women's agency. The analysis shows that Elizabeth's navigation through these patriarchal structures demonstrates both the pervasiveness of male dominance and the potential for

resistance. Furthermore, the novel illustrates that women's oppression in postcolonial contexts is compounded, as they face both residual colonial hierarchies and indigenous patriarchal norms, creating a dual burden that affects social mobility, psychological well-being, and self-definition.

- **Madness as a Site of Resistance and Insight:** Elizabeth's psychosis, initially interpreted as weakness or vulnerability, emerges as a critical site for resistance and self-discovery. Her hallucinations and internal dialogues reveal unacknowledged truths about power, identity, and oppression. The novel reframes madness from a purely pathological state to a creative, transformative, and epistemic tool, aligning with feminist and postcolonial readings that consider marginalized voices as sources of alternative knowledge (Chabwera, 2020). Madness thus becomes a narrative strategy that enables both critique of oppressive structures and the emergence of agency.
- **Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Colonial Legacy:** The study finds that the novel foregrounds the intersection of race, gender, and colonial history in shaping the lived experiences of African women. Elizabeth's biracial identity positions her as both insider and outsider, demonstrating the complex negotiations required to assert identity in postcolonial societies. Her struggles highlight that liberation and belonging cannot be achieved solely through nationalist or societal reforms but require the reclamation of subjectivity and the rejection of imposed hierarchies.
- **Pathways to Agency and Transformative Resilience:** Finally, the analysis underscores that *A Question of Power* portrays a trajectory from oppression toward resilience and self-definition. Elizabeth's ultimate engagement with the local community, her assertion of autonomy, and her psychological integration suggest that recovery is possible through both social and internal processes. Head presents an empowering vision of postcolonial feminist agency, in which women confront intersecting oppressions and reconstruct a coherent sense of self in defiance of systemic structures.

Overall, the findings indicate that *A Question of Power* offers a sophisticated examination of postcolonial and gendered oppression, revealing that psychological colonization, patriarchy, and racial hierarchies are deeply interconnected. The novel demonstrates that resilience and agency emerge not only from social and structural transformation but also from the reclamation of one's internal world, offering enduring insights into postcolonial feminist subjectivity, resistance, and survival.

## CONCLUSION

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* presents a profound exploration of the intersections between psychological colonization, gendered power, and postcolonial realities. This study set out to examine how Head's novel portrays the internalization of oppressive structures, the negotiation of female agency, and the complex dynamics of race, gender, and colonial legacy. Through a postcolonial feminist lens, the analysis revealed that Elizabeth's experiences of psychological distress, hallucinations, and social marginalization are not merely individual struggles but are emblematic of broader historical, social, and political forces that shape women's lives in postcolonial African contexts.

The study's objectives — to investigate the manifestation of psychological colonization, analyze gendered power dynamics, explore madness as resistance, and assess the interplay of race, identity, and postcolonial structures — were systematically addressed through textual analysis. The findings demonstrate that Elizabeth's psychological turmoil is intimately connected with colonial and patriarchal oppression. Her hallucinations and internal dialogues function as both a critique of systemic power and a means of self-reclamation, highlighting how psychological vulnerability can simultaneously serve as a site of resistance. This aligns with postcolonial feminist perspectives, which emphasize the significance of both internal and external dimensions of oppression in shaping women's agency (Mohanty, 1988; Chabwera, 2020).

Gendered power emerges as a central theme, operating through interpersonal relationships, societal expectations, and structural inequalities. Male authority, colonialist mindsets, and patriarchal norms converge to restrict female agency, yet Elizabeth's narrative demonstrates the potential for subversion. Her refusal to submit passively to these constraints, her critical awareness of social hierarchies, and her eventual engagement with the local community reveal a transformative feminist consciousness. The novel illustrates that empowerment is not merely a social achievement but also an internal process of reclaiming one's voice, identity, and autonomy.

Furthermore, the intersectionality of race, gender, and colonial history in the novel underscores the complexity of postcolonial identity formation. Elizabeth's biracial identity, which renders her simultaneously insider and outsider, exemplifies the nuanced negotiations required to assert belonging and selfhood in societies shaped by colonial histories. The analysis also highlights that postcolonial liberation for women involves the simultaneous dismantling of external oppression and the reclamation of psychological integrity.

Finally, Head's integration of madness, spiritual insight, and psychological realism demonstrates that resilience and empowerment can emerge from the most challenging circumstances. The novel portrays a journey from fragmentation to wholeness, suggesting that agency, resistance, and self-definition are achievable even in contexts of intersecting oppressions.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that *A Question of Power* is not only a literary exploration of individual suffering but also a critical reflection on the systemic forces that shape postcolonial subjectivity, particularly for women. The research contributes to postcolonial feminist scholarship by highlighting the intersections of psychological, racial, and gendered oppression, demonstrating how literary narratives can illuminate pathways for resistance, resilience, and empowerment. Bessie Head's work thus remains a seminal text for understanding the complexities of postcolonial African women's experiences, offering enduring insights into the transformative potential of literature in interrogating and challenging oppressive structures.

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