



Ethical Recuperation vs. Ontological Trauma in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

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Abstract

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* intricately weaves existential philosophy into the tapestry of its narrative, so that the novel becomes a suitable venue to apply Emmanuel Lévinas' philosophy of Self-Other relationship. The novel unfolds against the tumultuous backdrop of apartheid-era South Africa, with Elizabeth's journey serving as a poignant exploration of Lévinasian concepts. Lévinas, a philosopher of profound influence, posited that true ethical growth arises from direct encounters with the Other. This exploration dissects crucial aspects of Lévinasian philosophy mirrored in Elizabeth's trajectory across interconnected parts. One part contrasts Lévinasian ethics with Kantian and Hegelian philosophies, emphasizing the transformative power of encounters with the Other, evoking a "traumatism of astonishment" and calling for the embrace of otherness. The other section delves into Elizabeth's ethical journey, scrutinizing her struggles and moments of growth through the lens of Lévinas' concept of transcendence. Finally, the last part explores Elizabeth's transformative journey to Botswana, examining her encounters with the face of the Other and the symbolic dismantling of oppressive binaries within the Lévinasian framework. This analysis unravels how Head's narrative can mirror Lévinasian philosophy, unveiling the philosophical intricacies interwoven with the novel's literary fabric. As we embark on this journey through philosophy and literature, we peel back the layers of Elizabeth's narrative to reveal how it is possible to apply Lévinasian ethics on identity, connection, and the pursuit of transcendent wisdom to her painful interpersonal maturity in a world marked by division and inequality.

Keywords: A Question of Power, Bessie Head, ethical recuperation, Lévinas, negative ontological trauma, positive intersubjectivity

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Introduction

In *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head masterfully weaves together the complexities of identity, trauma, and ethical encounters, explaining why the novel's analysis in the light of a Lévinasian framework can be quite rewarding. Elizabeth's journey from internal turmoil to ethical engagement mirrors the transformative potential of Lévinas' philosophy. As Elizabeth navigates the intricacies of apartheid-era South Africa and finds solace and redemption within the Botswanan community, the novel echoes Lévinas' call for ethical transcendence that rises above hierarchical structures and fosters interconnectedness. Through Elizabeth's evolution, we can claim that the novel reflects the profound implications of Lévinas' philosophy—a philosophy that invites us to recognize the face of the Other, embrace vulnerability, and work towards creating a more just and empathetic world. In *A Question of Power*, the interplay between self-discovery and ethical engagement reveals the power of encounters to reshape individual identities and forge communal bonds—a testament to the enduring relevance of Lévinas' ethical insights in the realm of literature and beyond.

A Question of Power traverses the intricate realm of identity, responsibility, and transformation of the protagonist's unique exploration of grappling with negative subjectivity, confronting her preconceptions to forge authentic connections with others. This paper delves into the narrative's evolution from a Hegelian perspective of otherness to a Lévinasian philosophy of ethical transcendence, illuminating the protagonist's journey towards interconnectedness, acceptance, and self-discovery.

Literature Review

As *A Question of Power* is a multilayered novel to be approached from different perspectives. The novel has garnered significant attention from literary scholars and critics since its publication in 1974. The book explores themes of race, gender, power dynamics, and mental illness through the story of a mixed-race South African woman named Elizabeth. Numerous essays and books have been written on *A Question of Power*, offering various interpretations and analyses of the novel. One notable work is "Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in *A Question of Power*" by Louise Yelin. Yelin examines the ways in which Head challenges societal norms and explores the complexities of identity through her protagonist.

Another influential essay is "The Politics of Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*" by Dorothy Driver. Driver delves into the portrayal of mental illness in the novel, arguing that it serves as a metaphor for the oppressive social conditions faced by black women during apartheid. In "Bessie Head: Writing Against Silence," Jane Wilkinson explores how *A Question of Power* reflects Head's personal experiences as an outsider in both South Africa and Botswana. Wilkinson argues that the novel can be read as a critique of colonialism and racism.

Additionally, several books have been published on Bessie Head's works as a whole, including *A Question of Power*. One such book is *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears* by Gillian Stead Eilersen. This comprehensive study provides an

overview of Head's life and works. Overall, the literature on Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* offers diverse perspectives on its themes and significance. Scholars and critics have explored the novel's exploration of race, gender, power dynamics, and mental illness, shedding light on Head's personal experiences and her broader social and political commentary. Although Hegel's ideas have been dealt with in a number of studies on Head, such as "The Cape Gooseberry Also Grows in Botswana: Alienation and Commitment in the Writings of Bessie Head," "Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Hell: The Rhetoric of Universality in Bessie Head," and even a brief reference has also been made to Lévinas in the following book chapter: *Between Minds and Bodies—The Location of Pain and Racial Trauma in Works by Bessie Head and JM Coetzee*, the present study, we argue, is novel in its in-depth reading and paralleling Elizabeth's intermental evolution and Lévinasian ethical appreciation of the Other.

Theoretical Framework: Negative Intersubjectivity: Hegel and Kant vs. Lévinas

[T]he other is in no way another myself, participating with me in a common existence. The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place; we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery. (Lévinas, 1969)

The ideas which prevailed in the Enlightenment are still of moment in our world. Separation of subject and object with the self-sufficiency of the former has had numerous implications whereby colonialism, patriarchy, and violation of the Other's rights have always been justified. Despite the appearance of some cynical if not pessimistic movements like postmodernism, deconstructionism, and poststructuralism which believe in the impossibility of prioritizing one over the other in binary oppositions and inaccessibility of final truth, in practice, modern societies are completely stratified. Kantian and, later on, Hegelian division of subject and object—with the latter's emphasis on the mediation through negation and the former's calls for a reductionist transcendental and metaphysical worldview, reducing the Other to a mere object of recognition—has paved the way for hierarchical relations between I and non-I, which in turn have contributed to subjugation, oppression, classification and in-exclusion. Later on, existentialism, especially ontological phenomenology, with its belief in the loneliness of human beings emphasized loneliness and even despair of the modern man.

In the face of issues like these, Lévinas can be considered as a post-secular writer whose philosophy can explain the human aspiration for a better future. Lévinasian ethics offers a profound critique of traditional Western philosophy's focus on individuality and cognition. It calls for a shift towards an ethics of encounter and responsibility towards the Other, emphasizing empathy, vulnerability, and dialogue as key components of ethical relationships. Lévinasian ethics also emphasizes the importance of language and communication in ethical encounters as language allows us to recognize and acknowledge the Other as a separate individual

with their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences to begin to understand and empathize with the Other's perspective.

Furthermore, Lévinasian ethics challenges traditional notions of autonomy and individuality. Instead of viewing ourselves as isolated individuals seeking self-fulfillment, Lévinas argues that our identity is shaped by our relationships with others. Our ethical responsibility towards the Other is what gives meaning to our existence. His philosophy, thus, offers hope for a more inclusive and compassionate society. Lévinas rejects the idea of “metaphysical divisions”¹ that claim to provide absolute and abstract knowledge. For him, the Other cannot be fully known or understood because of their uniqueness and distance from the Self. However, the Self is capable of learning from the Other *without this knowledge being inherent to itself*.

Lévinas contrasts his perspective with Enlightenment philosophy, existentialism, and ontological hermeneutics, which focus primarily on the individual's existence in the world; he critiques their focus on the Self or “egology”. In contrast, he emphasizes the importance of social life and highlights concepts such as responsibility, mercy, and uniqueness. He criticizes Western philosophy for justifying oppression, slavery, and exploitation as necessary stages in historical development; instead, he emphasizes the importance of human relationships and argues that every individual deserves respect and recognition and is worthy of protection and love. In this framework, face-to-face encounters without preconceived judgments or conceptualizations can be fulfilling and beneficial for communities.

In contrast, Kantian I-It binary opposition, where “it” is the object of the knowledge of the “transcendental” and metaphysical “I” has made it / Other less human and reduced it to a mere object of cognition. “I” as a knowing subject tries to grasp “the thing-in-itself.” The concept of *disinterestedness* in Kantian philosophy is distinct from the Lévinasian notion of *distance*. The Lévinasian Other is an incomprehensible being whose very incomprehensibility reveals the weaknesses of the Self. Knowledge for the Self arises from a face-to-face encounter or physical interaction with the Other and is born out of a “traumatism of astonishment” (Lévinas, 1969, p. 66). This knowledge is external to the Self but has a transformative effect on it. It leads to a sense of responsibility, reduced violence, and increased mercy towards the vulnerable yet unique Other. This is how Lévinas calls for the embrace of otherness through humiliation.

Lévinas introduces the concept of *substitution* to emphasize the responsibility and *facticity* present in direct encounters with strangers. Substitution does not mean identification or pity, but rather taking on the responsibilities of the Other and putting oneself in their place. It involves unsettling one's own sense of self for the sake of understanding and protecting the Other. Lévinas rejects allegorical treatment of non-I and transcendence beyond immediate experience, but he uses the allegory of family to explain how one should take on a protective role towards others. This means humbling oneself and allowing oneself to be affected by others, rather than maintaining a detached perspective.

Hegel's Self-Other dialectic is less radical than Kant as he affirms that in binary oppositions "the subject becomes objectified and the object becomes subjectified" (Kellner & Lewis, 2007, p. 407) and gives a historical dimension to this dialectic, in his philosophy also; nevertheless, it is an internal synthesis through negation that leads the subject to final truth. Lévinas does not believe in metaphysical divisions as such which claim to lead the subject to absolute and abstract knowledge. For him, the Other cannot be the object of our knowledge because of its uniqueness and subsequent distance but he is vulnerable to the Self's violence towards what is non-I; simultaneously though, the subject can learn from the Other without, and this learning is not inherent to the Self—unlike the transcendental Self of the Enlightenment, or the solipsistic Self of existentialism or ontological hermeneutics which are only concerned with "the question of being-in-the-world" (Selden, 1995, p. 262)—but external to it. It is due to this indebtedness to an Other beyond our apprehension that we have to acknowledge our responsibility towards him; in contrast, western philosophy, for instance "Hegel's," usually justifies "oppression as well as slavery and exploitation as necessary stages in historical development" (Kellner & Lewis, 2007, p. 407), or emphasizes perfection through negative intersubjectivity. Lévinas, however, emphasizes the importance the social life of human brings along. For him, philosophy in this way can support and exalt the deprived. This very knowledge is external, unsettling but constructive so that the subject feels less violent and even more merciful towards the vulnerable but unique Other.

A Question of Power: Elizabeth's Dual Journey

Bessie Head's novel follows the life of Elizabeth, a colored orphan who is born in an asylum, who later discovers her parentage in a mission school. Her white mother has an affair with an African man, resulting in Elizabeth's birth. However, her mother is locked up as insane and eventually commits suicide. Elizabeth grows up in apartheid South Africa as a member of a "shame family." She eventually leaves her husband after discovering his sexual perversions. In search of a new life, she responds to a newspaper advertisement about teaching opportunities and decides to leave South Africa with her son, Shorty, and live in Botswana.

In the small village of Motabeng, Elizabeth's life becomes divided into two parts. During the day, she experiences the everyday life of the outer world. However, when night falls and she is alone in her bedroom, she is haunted by nightmares from her inner world. In these nightmares, she encounters a soul personality named "Sello the Monk," who initially appears as an African man dressed in a white robe with highly spiritual characteristics. As time goes on, Sello transforms into a torturer and becomes "Sello of the Brown Suit." He is accompanied by another soul personality named Medusa, who is described as a wild-eyed woman. Together, they torment Elizabeth for her perceived shortcomings and feelings of inferiority. These nightmares are intertwined with Elizabeth's memories of her past life in South Africa.

Elizabeth's mental health deteriorates over time. She meets Eugene man, a white South African who takes her to an asylum and cares for her son while she

receives treatment. After being discharged from the hospital, Elizabeth gives up her teaching career. Eugene introduces Elizabeth to the "garden group," which provides temporary comfort for her. The first part of the novel ends with the symbolic death of Sello and offers some respite for Elizabeth's troubled mind. In the second part, in her real life, Elizabeth sees Tom (a carefree American man), Kenosi (the silent Botswana), Small Boy (a Botswana boy), Camilla (the Danish woman), and the other members of garden group. In her dream world, she comes across Dan Molemo the "millionaire nationalist" who is a friend of Sello. In her bedroom, Dan (another soul personality), his "seventy-one-nice-time girls" (Head, 1974, p. 164), and Medusa torture her incessantly through sexual and racial images: "we don't want you here" (Head, 1974, p. 37), "you are inferior" (Head, 1974, p. 47). Though Elizabeth is hospitalized once more in an insane asylum, at last, she decides to build a garden. In this way, she not only helps the poor economy of Motabeng, but also (re / de)constructs her shattered identity in *direct contact with common people*. In the end, she partly gains her mental stability and feels belonging to her land: "As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging" (Head, 1974, p. 206).

Being or Becoming: Moving from Trauma to Traumatic Astonishment

Head's portrayal of Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* aligns with a Lévinasian perspective by emphasizing the importance of recognizing the individuality and worthiness of others. The novel explores themes of relational intersubjectivity, empathy, mercy, love, and self-transcendence within the context of Elizabeth's character development and experiences. It also explores both constructive and destructive encounters with otherness while highlighting the transformative power of human relationships.

In *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head portrays Elizabeth's mental and physical journey as she seeks initiation, endures suffering, and experiences ethical disillusionment. As an *initiant*², Elizabeth must challenge the generalizations and stereotypes imposed on her and embark on a quest to find ordinariness and recognize the grandeur of the Other, who can uplift and heal her. This portrayal of Elizabeth's suffering and transformation as well as her experiences in her garden and in Botswana serve as spaces for distant yet constructive encounters with otherness although admittedly the novel also includes prevalent moments of destructive encounters. Elizabeth's suffering stems from her obsession with dualities such as heaven and hell, man and woman, good and bad, even God and man, making her entangled in the paralyzing and destructive hierarchies.

The "symptomatic reading"³ of the novel can shed light onto how Elizabeth undergoes a painful journey to discard her Hegelian worldview and accept vulnerability and difference of the Other. The novel presents two different images of Elizabeth: Elizabeth the educated teacher from South Africa and Elizabeth the suffering gardener, who can finally partially belong in a community. These two *faces* represent different approaches towards those living in her neighborhood. In the novel, Elizabeth is constantly faced with the task of choosing, comparing, and studying others. This goes against Lévinas' idea of pre-conscious encountering of the

Other, where one is supposed to accept the Other without judgment or analysis. Elizabeth's struggles can be seen as a representation of a lonely and suppressed colored woman trying to break free from the strictly dualistic worldview she was born into.

Interestingly, one of the recurrent motifs in the novel is love, an important ethical concept, which is apparently absent from Elizabeth's incubuses where proper names are almost absent and people have been reduced to labels and titles, an indicator of Elizabeth's inability to see and understand the ordinary life and real people in her vicinity. While for Lévinas, love for the Other is an important ethical concept, it is a concept which is totally missing in Elizabeth's dreams, where personalities are extremely violent, heartless, and simultaneously stereotypical. Despite her apparently subdued personality, influenced by the apartheid State allegorically presented in her dream world, Elizabeth sees the Other (others) as mere flat and reduced objects of her early judgmental ego. Her search for transcendence through religious or supernatural beings prevents her from overcoming the trauma of her birth and race. Instead of experiencing "traumatic astonishment"⁴ that could lead to the transcendence of the Other, hence ethical growth, she is burdened by memories that hinder ethical openness in her interactions with different people.

The origin of such behavior can be traced back to the conditions Elizabeth was born into, which provide the Self with certain "conceptualizations" or images which can stop the process of "sensibility and affection" towards certain non-Is.⁵ She is forced to *learn* to predict and master the Other unconsciously even when she is in search of common man and love. Growing up in a society plagued by apartheid and nationalism, she is constantly reminded of her mixed-race heritage and the prejudices associated with it.

This hierarchical Self-Other relationship and the claim for total knowability of the Other is so prevalent in her life since childhood that the principal at her school tells her she will become insane like her mother because she is the child of a white woman and a native stable *boy*⁶: "The principal said: 'We have a full *docket* on you. Your mother was insane [...] you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. She had a child by a stable *boy*, who was a native'" (Head, 1974, p. 16).

These experiences gradually shape Elizabeth's worldview and contribute to her lack of tolerance, not only towards the white world but also within the black community to which she belongs. Even, nonwhite movements, such as the Black Consciousness Movement, arising as a response to apartheid, promote a sense of fraternity among black individuals but often excludes those who do not fit their specific criteria:

'They said: Never think along lines of I and mine. It is death.' But they said it prettily, under the shade of Bodhi trees. It may have no impact on mankind in general. It was for an exclusive circle of followers. Black people learnt that lesson brutally because they were the living victims of the greed inspired by I and mine and to hell with you, dog. (Head, 1974, p. 134)

Thus, as long as Elizabeth is living in apartheid South Africa, she is doomed to negative subjectivity incapable of empathy and understanding the Other. This mindset hinders her ability to form genuine connections with others; nevertheless, throughout the novel, though slowly, Elizabeth undergoes backbreaking tortures to complete her quest towards Otherness.

To delve deeper into Elizabeth's transition, it is worthwhile to notice Lévinas' concept of "substitution", a term which highlights the "factuality" and "responsibility" present in direct and *unmediated* encounter with the *stranger*. "Substitution does not mean identification or Substitution is not the psychological event of pity or compassion, but a putting oneself in the place of the other by taking responsibility for their responsibilities" (Critchley & Bernasconi, 2002, p. 240). To substitute an Other for the Self means to humiliate and unsettle the "I" for myself with the "I" for the Other and to have the Other "in-one's-skin" (Lévinas, 1991, p. 14). Thus "the subject" plays a "protective role" towards the Other. Lévinas further uses the allegory of the family—although he strictly rejects the idea of allegorical treatment of the non-I. For him, the relational intersubjectivity is analogous to father-son dyad and, later on, ethical "maternity" (Lévinas, 1991, p. 78) in which parents feel responsible towards the child but do not expect him to compensate for their sacrifice in return. Elizabeth, despite mothering a child in reality, under the mounting pressure exerted by Medusa is accused of being a woman without a vagina and a womb while Medusa herself is presented as a woman with "seven thousand vaginas in one" (Head, 1974, p. 64). Although this lack can be interpreted based on psychology, feminism, or even body politics, in terms of Lévinasian ethics, however, it implies Elizabeth has not been a sympathetic character and is still an egoistic figure. This symbolic lack may mean lack of mercy not biological ability to mother someone because she is a biological mother. As Burggraef observes, "there is a close parallel in Hebrew between *rekhem* (womb) and *rakham* (mercy) [...] *Rekhem* denotes brotherly or motherly feeling, while *rakham* signifies steadfast love." "Hence," he concludes, "to have the Other in one's skin, is to be merciful to them" (Mkhwanazi, 2013, pp. 140-141).

When Elizabeth is suffering from negative subjectivity, her ideas about the non-Is are analogous to "the Hegelian dialectic of otherness," where "the other always falls victim in the encounter, where the mastering self has an appropriative movement towards the other" (Mischke, 2013, p. 330). This exclusionary mindset is evident in Elizabeth's internal dialogue, where she categorizes certain groups of people as surmountable blameworthy generalities; she refers to them as "soul personalities," "seventy-one-nice-time girls," "masses of poor people," and even mythical figures like Medusa (Head, 1974, p. 164). This condescending attitude flatters Elizabeth to separate herself from society:

It was a Saturday morning when she arrived at the loony bin [...] She was a big surprise. It was strictly for *poor and illiterate Botswana*, who were *treated like animals*. They seemed to be the only people who went insane in Botswana. (Head, 1974, p. 184)

By dehumanizing these individuals, Elizabeth separates herself from society and reinforces her own superiority.

Thus, Elizabeth's early thoughts resonates metaphysical existentialism, ontological hermeneutics, and phenomenological "egology" since in terms of man's relationship with others, she unconsciously adheres to the idea that "the subject" is "for-itself," while she should acknowledge that every individual, irrespective of their circumstances, deserves respect and recognition, and is worthy of protection and love. In this framework, face-to-face encounters without preconceived judgments or conceptualizations can be both individually fulfilling and communally beneficial. Likewise, as the story gradually unfolds, multifaceted modifications are surfaced: Elizabeth, her garden, and Botswana (located on the edge of the Kalahari Desert) turn out to be a zone for *distanced* contact of constructive otherness.

Since the onset of the novel, the reader is exposed to a text where rigid thought frames are introduced to emphasize the distance—not a Lévinasian exalting and transcending *distance*—between I and the non-I, whereby a version of alterity similar to Hegelian dialectic is introduced. This subjectivity is merely an internal projection used to justify what is unjust. The tortures Elizabeth has to undergo in her nightmares exhort her to believe in what is beyond everyday reality, what is induced through trauma, hierarchy, and exclusion defined by white / black institutions like Colonialism, Christianity, institutional religions, the Black Consciousness Movement, Black Fraternity, and even Nationalism. In terms of Lévinasian ethics, Elizabeth seems to be unable to redeem herself from the State and its rules she has been born into or go beyond traumatic unsettlement as the first step in encountering with an Other.

Ethics for Lévinas is struggle, a kind of moving forward or transcendence which does not take place in a vacuum or generalization but in direct encounters with other people. It is both against self-sufficiency and generalization of the individuals. As Zunshine (2010) rightly mentions: "Hegemonic 'universals' [...] are not, ultimately, claims of universal commonality. Rather, they are claims of group difference made to appear as universals" (p. 39). Generalization also implies a process of reductive codification and can imprison the person in a timeless present and here. To proceed in her quest, Elizabeth should return to the world of proper names and real people and get herself rid of abstractions. Unlike those who people her dream world, women like Kenosi and Camilla whom she is acquainted with are all active and unique breadwinners. They are human beings with all their complexities and incomprehensibilities. Where they are is a realm of "future fecundity" and productiveness (Bergo, 2015, p. 11). They are neither *mother earths*, nor *yellow women*, nor raped *mother countries*.⁷ They are human beings capable of mistakes and goodness.

Elizabeth's main problem on her way to meet ethical grandeur is her failure to acknowledge "the unbridgeable distance between myself and the other," and the "he-ness" or "Illeity" (Bergo, 2015, p. 15) of "the poor," "the Ku Klux Klan," and "the nice-time girls" (Head, 1974, p. 205). Unless she is willing to have a direct encounter with the Other who gives the Self an opportunity to sympathize with the

non-I without identifying with him, she resorts to generalizations about him and acts as a self-proclaimed spokesperson of the one about whom she has no knowledge. Generalizations, rules, and stereotypes are more likely to shatter in direct and everyday encounters while transcendence and grandeur of each individual is more possible to be guaranteed.

The intended Lévinasian “transcendence” follows a five-step process starting with “the onset of the other [and] ‘me’'s openness ‘to goodness,’ the self’s ‘engage[ment in] the first act of dialogue,’ creation of ‘discourse,’ ‘unfolding of discourse [,] ethical investiture and self-accounting,’ and finally ‘conversation and teaching’”(Bergo, 2015, p. 12). The question raised here is whether Elizabeth reaches this transcendence. Head’s heroine should go through these steps, commencing with her exile from the strictly segregated “State” of South Africa and her examination of what has been agonizing her for so long. She should not believe in allegorical treatment of the Other, but accept everyday existences. As “soul personalities” (Head, 1974, p. 9) do not stand for their real counterparts, the traumatic encounter with them is not fruitful and does not lead Elizabeth to recuperation. For Lévinas, “transcendence is the intersubjective quality of sensibility” (Bergo, 2015, p. 20). Elizabeth should *learn* that believing in the “immediacy” and “existence” of all the human beings can liberate the oppressed. She should respect anthropology more than ontology: “The everyday facticity of face-to-face encounter destabilizes transcendental versus pragmatic distinctions. Transcendental is anthropological, a human affair or nothing” (Bergo, 2015, p. 12). Thus, upon acknowledging ordinariness and sublunary transcendence, she has to *learn* that it is not possible to claim transcendence as a monopoly of power, the way it is absorbed and appropriated by the rhetoric of political institutions; otherwise it will be another *repressive apparatus*. So on the manner of Lévinasian ethics what she should appreciate is immediacy not conceptualization.

In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth’s main concerns is initially to be a god or a “prophet of mankind” to judge between white and black, heaven and hell, man and woman, and even mind and womb. In her dreams, despite all her tortures, it is “the other [that] always falls victim in the encounter, where the mastering self has an appropriative movement towards the other” (Mischke, 2013, p. 330). The “soul personalities” can be viewed as the lingering effects of segregation and apartheid that have deeply traumatized her. In her everyday life, however, the real male counterparts she encounters are distinct from her dream visions. For instance, Elizabeth learns from a doctor that Sello, one of the male personalities “had eight children. In case she did not believe him, he brought them all to the hospital one Saturday morning and introduced them to her [...] He was so proud of children” (Head, 1974, p. 185). As the novel proceeds, Elizabeth is drawn to concrete encounters with other fellow beings in Motabeng. If in her dream world and, later on, in the asylum, she has to suffer from traumas with their roots in pre-written dockets and fates, in this new community, she starts to see inchoate signs of life and goodness among ordinary people of different races and origins. As Bergo further theorizes,

“Transcendence is, above all, relational: it is a human affair [...] An event that can be characterized as a force that introduces a decisive break into the historical *status quo* and redirects it in function of its own magnitude.” While “history of the State” tries to generalize and overlook “particulars’ alternative history,” personal encounters are able to “inflect” it and leave their momentary “traces.” “But this is not history found in the textbooks. It is more like a history of isolated acts or human ideals (justice, equity, critique, self-sacrifice).” (Bergo, 2015, p. 12)

Elizabeth's journey towards ethical transcendence encapsulates the paradoxical nature of humility and recovery. Lévinas argues that humiliation, borne from the recognition of one's inadequacy in the face of the Other's uniqueness, is a catalyst for genuine ethical growth. Elizabeth's gradual acknowledgment of her limitations fosters a process of recovery from her solipsistic tendencies, leading to a heightened sensitivity to the experiences and needs of others. This journey mirrors Lévinas' assertion that "only beings capable of war can rise to peace" (Lévinas, 1969, p. 222) underscoring the transformative potential of embracing vulnerability and recognizing the profound interdependence of human existence.

As performance, rather than pure reason or utilitarian philosophy, is what ultimately captures the essence of the State's history, Elizabeth finally realizes that she cannot find fulfillment through teaching and instead turns to gardening as a means of seeking transcendence in everyday life. Elizabeth painfully, yet gradually, comes to learn that what momentarily wins over pure reason and the utilitarian philosophy behind the State's history is performance. Ergo, she cannot recuperate through teaching and should embark on gardening instead. Lévinasian transcendence in everyday life is what Elizabeth is looking for; she is aware of insufficiency of “solipsistic” existence. Thus, physical encounters should not be focused on control and mastery, as exemplified by institutionalized education,⁸ but rather on a more distant coexistence that allows for differences and progress. Accordingly, her struggle for recognition in Hegelian philosophy can gradually be replaced by a struggle for transcendence through appreciating differences and embracing particularity, a kind of distanced coexistence that can pave the way for more strife and ethical encounter of a subject with another subject not with an object. The struggle for transcendence and maturity through appreciating differences and particularity is presented in the form of the garden group which is multicultural and suffused with an attitude of acceptance and inclusion. The gardening venture is egalitarian and celebrates the humble and the ordinary:

[T]he Eugene man totally blurred the dividing line between the elite who had the means for education and the illiterate who had none. Education was for all. The gardening project counteracts the racial elitism of the two most exploitative figures in the book, Dan and Medusa. (Young, 2010, p. 236)

Lévinas' rejection of conceptualization and his emphasis on the immediacy of ethical encounters find resonance in Elizabeth's evolving interactions. The novel positions the garden as an arena for lived experience, where the tactile, sensory aspects of encounters override abstract intellectual constructs. Elizabeth's

engagement in laborious activities within the garden dismantles the artificial barriers that reductive conceptualizations impose. Her immersion in the immediacy of nurturing life echoes Lévinas' call to embrace the "wisdom of love" rather than the distancing effects of abstract knowledge. In doing so, she embraces a form of transcendence grounded in the here-and-now.

In addition, the novel dexterously depicts a movement from hatred towards brotherhood (fraternity) and *Illeity* (the quality of being an individual). This movement is accompanied by Elizabeth's continual evaluation turning into unsettling disillusionment and astonishment. Analogous to Lévinasian transcendence, Elizabeth realizes that love and justice can only be achieved through direct encounters with fellow human beings rather than abstract concepts like an elusive and abstract Reason.⁹ Elizabeth shifts roles from a teacher to a learner as in ethical intersubjectivity the focus is on learning and the *wisdom of love*. She should acknowledge her limitations in evaluating and judging others, and embrace a sense of humility that goes beyond her own ethics, humanity, and selfhood. This perspective suggests that Elizabeth, as a teacher, should also embody the qualities of a gardener. The idea here is that she should move away from a tendency to unify and generalize traumatic experiences. Instead, she should embrace a mindset of "traumatic astonishment" that recognizes the unknowable and unique nature of each individual. This shift aligns with her spiritual as well as physical journey from focusing on superficial aspects of people to engaging with concrete and everyday reality, and from school / South Africa to garden / Botswana. Obviously, the movement from science towards wisdom concurs with Elizabeth's departure from "soul personalities" (Head, 1974, p. 9) and "surface realities" (Head, 1974, p. 64) and her moving towards concrete and quotidian reality. This transformation is best embodied in the novel commencing with themes of death and abyss, symbolizing the challenges and limitations of human existence and culminating in transcendence as Elizabeth reads Shorty's poem about flying in the sky. This moment signifies a move towards wisdom and a departure from scientific understanding alone:

The man / Can fly about the sky, Sky butterflies can fly, / Bees can make honey, / And what else can fly? / Sky birds, sky aeroplanes, sky helicopters, / A fairy man and a fairy boy / Can fly about the sky. (Head, 1974, p. 205)

The South Africa Elizabeth vs. The South Africa-Botswana Elizabeth: Asymmetry and Embracing Traumatic Astonishment

Elizabeth's sojourn to Botswana becomes the crucible of her transformative journey, offering a parallel narrative of ethical transcendence guided by the philosophies of Emmanuel Lévinas. As she steps onto foreign soil, the novel metamorphoses into an intricate exploration of human encounters that mirror Lévinas' concept of transcendence. Botswana's landscape, its people, and their relationships serve as the canvas upon which Elizabeth's metamorphosis unfolds. The dynamics of Botswana's society, replete with third-party presences, form the foundation upon which Lévinas' philosophy is actualized. In this process, the profound implications of face-to-face encounters become manifest, underscoring the

potential of genuine human connections in dissolving preconceptions, dismantling stereotypes, and nurturing authentic empathy.

Lévinas' emphasis on "traumatic astonishment" finds expression in Elizabeth's journey of self-discovery. The encounter with the Other often elicits feelings of vulnerability and humility, challenging the Self's preconceived notions and certainties. Elizabeth's confrontations with "soul personalities" (Head, 1974, p. 9) and her eventual immersion in the garden group mirror this transformative process. Trauma, rather than obstructing ethical growth, becomes a catalyst for reevaluation and connection. Through the "face of the other," Elizabeth confronts her own limitations, paving the way for a more inclusive and empathetic perspective.

While the concept of "infinite responsibility" (Lévinas, 1969, p. 17) is proposed in relation to the Other and acknowledging the domination of the Other over oneself, the presence of third parties and neighbors in society helps maintain a balance between individuals. These third parties do not mediate relationships but serve as reminders that everyone is an ordinary person deserving respect and sympathy. As long as Elizabeth has entangled herself in the binaries exerted so rigorously in the apartheid era, she cannot release herself from presuppositions and categorizations. The result of this balance and reminder is love and justice (itself a byproduct of love). When responsibility and love are emphasized and promoted in society, ethical relationships are ensured. Living in Botswana provides Elizabeth to be aware of third parties (physical, geographical, and racial) and hence, of her *unique* ordinariness:

It was quite the opposite in Africa. There was no direct push against those rigid, false social systems of class and caste. [In Motabeng,] she had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the *brotherhood of man*, because when a people wanted to be *ordinary* it was just another way of saying man *loved* man. (Head, 1974, p. 206)

Notably, Elizabeth's lack of a distinct face in her interactions with Sello shows that she has not yet achieved this level of understanding. Thus, Head continues to say Elizabeth "seemed to have no *distinct face* of her own, her face was always turned towards Sello, whom she had adored" (1974, p. 25). According to Lévinas, the face of the Other is expressive and powerful, evoking emotions and interrupting our everyday language. The faceless Elizabeth is, accordingly, incapable of freeing herself from baseless beliefs, in her encounter with others, nor can she cause the other Selves to respect her uniqueness and "*facticity*," nor is she able to genuinely love and respect the non-I. "The face of the other is firstly expressiveness. It could be compared to a force. We must, of course, use everyday language to translate these affective interruptions" (Bergo, 2015, p. 4). It is through this encounter with the Other's face that she can develop a sense of empathy and respect for people's "*facticity*," embodied in the frequency of proper names in the novel.

Bessie Head may have driven Elizabeth into exile in order to teach her that these new connections can teach her to love and be loved without prejudice or

evaluation. For Lévinas, also, ethics must have a “precognitive core” based on “emotion” and “sentience” than cognition to contribute to “sensibility and affectivity” (Bergo, 2015, p. 4). As soon as Elizabeth learns to love and respect, and emotionally respond to the Other's face, she can develop sensitivity and affectivity towards them. If Elizabeth can recognize herself as a human being and be recognized by others, not only will she be awed by others, she can elicit a sense of awe in the Other. This awe arises when Elizabeth realizes that the expression resulting from physical encounter in real contexts is greater than she can comprehend. As Lévinas suggests,

[T]he Subject may understand, and even treat itself as being equal to all others. As one among equals, the Subject has the right and privilege to be at the receiving end of responsibility or love. The Subject becomes one of the many, who are neighbours to the Other. (Mkhwanazi, 2013, p. 143)

By recognizing her neighbors, colleagues and friends as Others, she finally fosters a sense of common love, which gradually assists her to move from Kantian autonomy to Lévinasian heteronomy, realizing that the Other is not her enemy or a limit to her freedom, nor are they the nightmarish intruders putting her mental and physical well-being at stake: “[T]he other” is not “my potential enemy, or [...] a limit to my freedom” (Tangyin, 2008, p. 163).

In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth's experience of othering is a result of her hybrid identity, which makes it difficult for her to be classified as either a subject or an object. This othering is intensified by exclusion, racism, exile, and homelessness. However, Elizabeth's elusive and interracial origin also allows her to disrupt the white / black binary and impose humiliation on the oppressor. “Dismissing the father,” according to Lewis (1996), “Head forges a determined orientation toward a mother figure silenced by master narratives of apartheid, psychiatrics reports, and the prejudice of her family” (p. 73). Elizabeth's dismissal of the father figure represents a rejection of the State or institutional authority. Instead, she turns towards a silenced mother figure who represents humanity as a whole. This can be seen as a metaphorical shift from reason to emotion, from the realm of the State to the realm of human connection. In this interpretation, living “for” others in a state of sisterhood and brotherhood replaces living “with” others in the State or institutional family. The idea is that an ethical community can be formed where individuals take on a mother-like role for each other, nurturing and caring for one another. This third party acts as an unmediated but responsible Other who can help put an end to the asymmetrical power dynamics.

Transcending Conceptualization: A Garden in Nowhere

The Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, where the Other becomes a mere object of domination, is shattered within the framework of Lévinasian ethics. Elizabeth's journey from South Africa to Botswana represents a symbolic departure from the Hegelian paradigm. Her immersion in the Botswanan community, characterized by mutual support and acceptance, signifies a dismantling of oppressive binaries. The garden group, which transcends racial and social divisions,

serves as a tangible enactment of Lévinas' vision of ethical encounters that surpass the confines of dialectical struggle. Elizabeth's newfound sense of belonging stems from her willingness to engage with others beyond the constraints of mastery and appropriation.

Lévinas' emphasis on the face-to-face encounter as the locus of ethical transformation finds resonance in Elizabeth's evolving relationships in Botswana. The concept of the "face" takes on a metaphorical significance, symbolizing not only the physical countenance but also the depth of individuality inherent in every person. Elizabeth's recognition of the "face" of the Other, unburdened by preconceived notions, becomes a pivotal juncture in her journey towards ethical transcendence. Her interactions with Sello, the doctor, and various members of the gardening group, illustrate the progression from the initial fascination with metaphysical profundity to the profound wisdom gleaned from ordinary human interactions. Through her engagement with the gardening group, Elizabeth navigates an egalitarian space that defies the hierarchical structures she has known. The collective endeavors, the nurturing of the garden, and the shared responsibilities mirror Lévinas' concept of ethical transcendence as an outcome of shared labor, mutual recognition, and a profound sense of responsibility for the well-being of the Other.

Lévinas' "fecundity" as a result of ethical encounters resonates with the portrayal of the garden as a site of growth and interconnectedness. Elizabeth's participation in the garden group exemplifies how ethical engagement yields productive and transformative outcomes. Her interactions with others become a catalyst for personal and communal growth, echoing Lévinas' assertion that transcendence occurs through mutual openness and shared responsibility. The garden's representation as an egalitarian space exemplifies the ideal Lévinasian ethical community. Lévinas' assertion that ethics is intrinsically tied to community-building resonates throughout the novel. The garden group becomes a microcosm of Lévinasian ethical ideals—a space where individuals collaborate, support each other, and recognize their shared humanity. This community-building is not confined to geographical or social boundaries; rather, it embodies the interconnectedness of all humanity.

The gardening project in the book is described as multicultural and inclusive, celebrating humility and ordinariness. It is seen as a counteraction to racial elitism represented by exploitative figures like Dan and Medusa. The garden and its impossible location (on the edge of the desert) can be an example of the encounter between Self, Other, and Other's Other. This can make the garden into a locus of progressive fertility and dynamism and of becoming than being. It can also be the site where ordinariness, fraternity and *performance* can lead to sensibility and "affectivity," a place where action, labor and emotion can win over reason, pure thought, and self-interest. As Bergo explains,

Lévinas [...] reframes labor, less as mastery and humanization of nature, and more as the creation of a store of goods with which an other can be welcomed. Thanks to his joy in living and his creation of a home, the

human being is able to give and to receive the other into his space. (Bergo, 2015, p. 9).

Accordingly, it seems that the main objective for this community is to cooperate and work for each other because even though hospitalized, Elizabeth was still a member of the group and it was the responsibility of other Others to compensate for her absence.

Conclusion

The exploration of philosophical perspectives, particularly in the comparative analysis of Kantian, Hegelian, and Lévinasian frameworks, reveals fundamental differences in their approaches to subjectivity, the Other, and ethical responsibility. While Kantian philosophy tends to objectify the Other in the pursuit of abstract knowledge, Hegelian dialectics internalize the Other through historical synthesis. Lévinas, in stark contrast, introduces the concept of "traumatic astonishment," emphasizing the transformative and ethical nature of direct encounters with the Other. His philosophy rejects metaphysical divisions and calls for an acknowledgment of responsibility toward the incomprehensible and unique Other.

Transitioning to the realm of literature, Bessie Head's novel, *A Question of Power*, provides a narrative illustration of these philosophical concepts through the character of Elizabeth. Her dual journey, both in the external world of Motabeng / Botswana and in the internal world of her nightmares, exemplifies the complexities of identity, trauma, and the quest for belonging. Elizabeth's struggle with her own demons, represented by soul personalities like Sello and Medusa, mirrors the broader philosophical discourse on the Self and the Other. As Elizabeth grapples with her mental health, the novel becomes a poignant exploration of the impact of societal constructs, apartheid, and personal trauma on an individual's psyche. Her eventual decision to build a garden in Motabeng becomes a symbolic act of (re / de)constructing her shattered identity, embracing the ordinary and finding belonging in her immediate community.

Thus, the application of the theories (ideas) of Kant, Hegel, and Lévinas to the narrative of *A Question of Power* demonstrates profound intersections between theory and lived experience. The novel becomes a canvas where the abstract notions of hierarchical intersubjective philosophy manifest in the intricate tapestry of human emotions, societal structures, and the pursuit of identity. Elizabeth's journey becomes a testament to the transformative power of encountering the Other, resonating with Lévinas' call for an ethical embrace of otherness through humility and responsibility.

In the multifaceted journey of Elizabeth, the narrative unfolds as a testament to Lévinasian ethics and the transformative power of genuine encounters with the Other. The ethical struggle, according to Lévinas, is not an abstract ideal but a lived experience that transcends self-sufficiency and resists the generalization of individuals. Elizabeth's initial struggle lies in her failure to recognize the unbridgeable distance between herself and the Other, leading to a reliance on

generalizations and stereotypes. Lévinasian transcendence, as a relational and human affair, demands a direct encounter with the Other to break historical status quos and redirect them toward ethical magnitudes.

Elizabeth's journey through Lévinasian transcendence commences with openness to goodness and is engaged in the first act of dialogue. Her exile from the segregated State of South Africa prompts an examination of her agonizing past, challenging allegorical treatments of the Other and emphasizing the importance of everyday existence. The novel captures Elizabeth's evolving understanding as she navigates through trauma, the nightmare, and the societal construct. The residues of segregation and apartheid in her dreams symbolize the trauma, while her interactions in Motabeng reveal signs of life and goodness among ordinary people. The garden, in its egalitarian and inclusive nature, becomes a symbol of Lévinasian transcendence in everyday life, embracing differences and particularity. Besides, Elizabeth's shift from a teacher to a learner mirrors Lévinasian intersubjectivity, emphasizing learning and the wisdom of love. The rejection of conceptualization and the emphasis on immediate, tactile encounters find resonance in her engagement with the garden, dismantling artificial barriers imposed by abstract constructs. Her journey from hatred towards brotherhood and Illeity reflects Lévinas' call to embrace the wisdom of love and justice through direct encounters. Elizabeth's sojourn to Botswana becomes a crucible for her transformative journey, echoing Lévinasian philosophy through intricate explorations of human encounters. Lévinas' "traumatic astonishment" finds expression in Elizabeth's self-discovery, where encounters with the Other elicit vulnerability and humility. Her confrontations with "soul personalities" and her immersion in the garden group reflect this transformative process. Trauma, far from obstructing ethical growth, becomes a catalyst for reevaluation and connection. Through the "face of the other," Elizabeth confronts her limitations, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic perspective. Thus, the presence of third parties in Botswana maintains a balance between individuals, serving as reminders that everyone deserves respect and sympathy. Elizabeth's entanglement in apartheid-era binaries dissolves as she becomes aware of third parties—physical, geographical, and racial.

The garden project represents a dismantling of oppressive binaries, reflecting Lévinas' assertion that ethics is tied to community-building. The garden group becomes a microcosm of Lévinasian ethical ideals—a space where individuals collaborate, supporting each other in their shared humanity. This community-building embodies the interconnectedness of all humanity, transcending geographical and social boundaries.

In conclusion, *A Question of Power* intricately weaves Lévinasian philosophical concepts into Elizabeth's narrative, offering a profound exploration of identity, trauma, and the transformative power of ethical encounters. The novel becomes a powerful canvas where philosophy and literature converge, creating a rich tapestry of lived experiences that resonate with the call for ethical responsibility and the embrace of otherness. The garden emerges as a symbol of hope, where the seeds of genuine connection are sown and nurtured in the fertile soil of shared humanity.

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Notes

¹ The idea of “metaphysical divisions” was introduced by Emanuel Kant. In his work *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781, Kant argued that there are fundamental divisions or categories that structure our understanding of reality. These divisions include space and time, as well as concepts such as substance, and possibility.

² The term “initiant” in a quest refers to the person who is initiating or beginning the quest. This term was first used by Joseph Campbell (2012) in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In this book, Campbell explores the concept of the hero's journey and the various stages that a hero goes through in their quest. The initiant is the hero who sets out on their journey and faces various challenges and trials along the way.

³ The term was first used by French philosopher and literary critic Roland Barthes in his book *S/Z*, published in 1970. In this book, Barthes (1990) analyzes a short story by Honoré de Balzac using a symptomatic reading approach, revealing the underlying cultural and psychological implications of the text. This method has since been influential in literary theory and cultural studies.

⁴ The term was discussed in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. It refers to the moment when one is confronted with the radical alterity and infinite responsibility that comes with encountering another person.

⁵ This is in line with Kantian “schematism.” In his philosophy, schematism is the process by which categories are applied to sensory intuition to form meaningful representations.

⁶ Colonizers’ tendency to call male adult Africans is itself a blatant example of such hierarchical and condescending attitude.

⁷ The labels nationalists and colonizers usually give women robbing them of their actual and factual identities and selves. The concept of “yellow woman” is often associated with the writings of Leslie Marmon Silko (1996), a Native American writer of Laguna Pueblo and Mexican-American heritage. In her book *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*, Silko explores the complexities of identity and cultural heritage, using the figure of “yellow woman” as a symbol for blending of Native American and Euro-American cultures.

⁸ Althusser’s idea about ISAs—interestingly school is among these ideological State apparatus—and RSAs can be relevant.

⁹ Levinasian ethics draws parallel between Levinas and Buber's ideas on encounter. Both philosophers emphasize the importance of direct face-to-face encounters in transcending the Self. Buber's concept of I-Thou (Man and Man) is mentioned as a replacement for I-It relationships, highlighting the significance of openness to the otherness of others. This openness allows for recognition of God's address or summons coming through others: “Betweenness, according to Buber, is the site of openness to the otherness of the other and to the signs of God’s address or summons coming through the other” (Ludwig, 2009, p. 228).

Author's Biography



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