

BESSIE HEAD

A Question of
Power





Penguin

BESSIE HEAD

A Question of Power



PENGUIN BOOKS

Contents

Message From Chinua Achebe

Part One: Sello

Part Two: Dan

Message From Chinua Achebe:

Africa is a huge continent with a diversity of cultures and languages. Africa is not simple – often people want to simplify it, generalise it, stereotype its people, but Africa is very complex. The world is just starting to get to know Africa. The last five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and now the time has come for Africans to tell their own stories.

The Penguin African Writers Series will bring a new energy to the publication of African literature. Penguin Books (South Africa) is committed to publishing both established and new voices from all over the African continent to ensure African stories reach a wider global audience.

This is really what I personally want to see – writers from all over Africa contributing to a definition of themselves, writing ourselves and our stories into history. One of the greatest things literature does is allow us to imagine; to identify with situations and people who live in completely different circumstances, in countries all over the world. Through this series, the creative exploration of those issues and experiences that are unique to the African consciousness will be given a platform, not only throughout Africa, but also to the world beyond its shores.

Storytelling is a creative component of human experience and in order to share our experiences with the world, we as Africans need to recognise the importance of our own stories. By starting the series on the solid foundations laid by the renowned Heinemann African Writers Series, I am honoured to join Penguin in inviting young and upcoming writers to accept the challenge passed down by celebrated African authors of earlier decades and to continue to explore, confront and question the realities of life in

Africa through their work; challenging Africa's people to lift her to her rightful place among the nations of the world.

Chinua Achebe

For
Randolph Vigne and Christine Hawes
Ken and Myrna Mackenzie
And for Bosele Sianana,
With love

*Only man can fall from God
Only man.
That awful and sickening endless, sinking
sinking through the slow, corruptive
levels of disintegrative knowledge ...
the awful katabolism into the abyss!*

D H LAWRENCE: From a poem: 'God'

PART ONE

Sello

It seemed almost incidental that he was African. So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment. And yet, as an African, he seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements: 'I am just anyone.' It was as though his soul was a jigsaw; one more piece being put into place. How often was a learner dependent on his society for his soul-evolution? But then how often was a society at fault and conclusions were drawn, at the end of each life in opposition to social trends. It wasn't as though his society were not evil too, but nowhere else could he have acquired the kind of humility that made him feel, within, totally unimportant, totally free from his own personal poisons – pride and arrogance and egoism of the soul. It had always been like this, for him – a hunger after the things of the soul, in which other preoccupations were submerged; they were intuitions mostly of what is right, but the confirmation was so strong this time that a quiet and permanent joy filled his heart. A man might laugh at intense suffering only if the evil that tortured him became irrelevant and if obsessive love, which was also one of his evils, became irrelevant too. Had it? Again, he could only apply intuition. Everything felt right with him. A barrier of solitude and bleak, arid barrenness of soul had broken down. He loved each particle of the earth around him, the everyday event of sunrise, the people and the animals

of the village of Motabeng; perhaps his love included the whole universe. He said to himself that evening: 'I might have died before I found this freedom of heart.' That was another perfect statement, to him – love was freedom of heart.

The man's name was Sello. A woman in the village of Motabeng paralleled his inner development. Most of what applied to Sello applied to her, because they were twin souls with closely linked destinies and the same capacity to submerge other preoccupations in a pursuit after the things of the soul. It was an insane pursuit this time. It did not bear comparing with the lofty statements of mankind's great teachers. Hidden in all their realizations were indistinct statements about evil. They never personified it, in vivid detail, within themselves. What they did say, vaguely, was that it was advisable to overcome one's passions as the source of all evil. It was harder to disclose the subtle balances of powers between people – how easy it was for people with soft shuffling, loosely knit personalities to be preyed upon by dominant, powerful persons. The woman had first possessed the arrogance of innocence, and had grown over a period of four years to despise the man Sello. He had freely disclosed some unpleasant and horrific details about his inner life, which damned him as a monumental sinner in her eyes. But once her relationship with the man, Dan Molomo, could be looked at with clear, hard eyes, she had again turned to Sello and held out her hands and said: 'Thank you! Oh God, thank you for the lever out of hell!' He had said something in reply like: 'You see, you are just the same.' It seemed as though, now, she spent hours and hours undoing the links that bound her to Dan, whereas at one time it had been a fierce, forever relationship with wonderful music and fantastic thrills and sensations. If Dan hadn't been such a hard spitter (he spat with glorious contempt at things he dominated) she might have permanently made excuses for the other side of his song. As it was, she said: 'I might have died under the illusion that I loved him.'

The woman's name was Elizabeth. Unlike Sello and Elizabeth, the man Dan did not hold conversations with death. Only he did not look so pretty these days, and he was an extremely pretty man. It was arguable whom he