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**Journeys to I: The Quest for Identity in Bessie Head's A Question of Power, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's The Ship and Jack Kerouac's On the Road**

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## Introduction

As social theorists have argued, the quest for identity is inextricably bound to community and environment due to the cultural and social reference points the two offer for individuals to use in order to both interpret and interact with the world. An individual's identity is often compromised when these common bonds or reference points are absent due to discrimination, physical displacement, or a rapid industrialization of society. The main characters of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *The Ship* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* attempt to redefine their identities because they lack these bonds to their communities and environments, and are thus unsatisfied with the place they are assigned within their societies. Through their experiences on the physical and psychological journeys they begin, each character realizes both a new conception of God as an omnipresent being in everyone and everything and a new conception of the nature of good and evil which allows for the potential of both in all people regardless of race, sex or nationality. These realizations as well as each character's reflections upon the communities and environment they confront, cause them to redefine and, in some cases, reaffirm their previous conceptions of selves and relationships to others and the land.

The quest for identity through the formation of personal ties to community and the land is the subject of each of these three novels. Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* delves into the search for community ties and selfhood through the journey into madness of a South African woman of mixed heritage who is living in physical exile in Botswana. As a Palestinian author, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra addresses the Arab question of identity in *The Ship* by chronicling the revelations concerning personal relationships and

relationships to the land of two Arab men on a week long Mediterranean cruise. The American author Jack Kerouac confronts this question of identity in *On the Road* as the main character searches for belonging through a number of different cultural communities he encounters on his travels across America. Although the main characters of each novel do not share a common cultural background, their quests for a personal identity are each closely related to both their communities and the land.

The relationship between an individual's identity and his or her cultural community and environment has been explored by both sociologists and psychologists alike. Orrin Klapp insists that people are born into communities of which they have no control and their life experiences are determined by the emotional or psychological persona developed through their interactions in that community (5). Through this interaction with their communities, individuals create an identity which consists of a subjective conception of self rather than objective physical attributes such as eye or hair color and thus these concepts are arbitrary and malleable by personal opinion (Klapp 5). A child who has been told by his parents that he is musically talented will begin to view himself as such and the attribute become a part of his own conception of his identity even if objectively this claim is false or the child himself does not believe it to be completely true. An individual's personal conception of his or her own identity does not necessarily require approval or agreement from a community (Klapp 5). However, Klapp continues, the person's actual identity within a society "does require a certain conjecture or coincidence between what a person claims for himself and where others place him" (Klapp 5-6). If the child mentioned before performs before an audience who does not consider him to be talented, then the child will begin to question his perception of

himself as talented. The understanding of the very terms “personal identity” and “community” are interdependent, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, and life experiences are ultimately related to the communities from which each life establishes its identity (172-3). Thus, the identity a community forms for an individual becomes a part of that person’s identity, whether or not it conforms to the individual’s sense of his or her own self.

Communities help shape an individual’s identity by providing the rituals and language from which individuals analyze, internalize and interact with the life world. The economical and social relationships as well as discourses and practices of a community shape a person’s outlook on reality (Aers 3). Just as an individual must use the appropriate signifiers contained in language to communicate meaning to others, so too are personal actions used as a means of communication. V. N. Volosinov points out that these exterior signifiers of language and action become internalized as

each person’s inner world and thought has its stabilized *social audience* that comprises the environment in which reasons, motives, values and so on are fashioned... specific class and specific era are limits that the ideal of addressee cannot go beyond. In point of fact, *word is a two-sided act*. It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and *for whom* it is meant. As word, it is precisely *the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee*. Each and every word expresses the ‘one’ in relation to the ‘other.’ I give myself verbal shape from another’s point of view ultimately from the point of view of the community to which I belong. (qtd. in Aers 86)

Yet when the community to which one belongs lacks structure or its structure is prejudiced against the individual based upon race, sex or creed, then that individual is at a loss to satisfactorily define himself or others within the present social atmosphere.

An individual suffers an identity problem in this type of social atmosphere due to the lack of social, cultural or environmental reference points to which the individual may relate. Without feedback from the community, an individual cannot develop an adequate sense of meaning for himself. According to Orrin Klapp, there are three kinds of situations which commonly lead to this dilemma: a break-up of old traditions when faced with modernization and acculturation; an unsatisfactory identity imposed by prejudice and discrimination upon a minority group which cause the individual to feel outside of a society whose moral values the community refuses, and “mobile pluralism” or a great movement from one status, class, sub-culture, job or other association to another (15-7). In each situation the individual becomes alienated when left without any common cultural reference points to construct social or cultural bonds with others.

Natural environmental surroundings act as a solid reference point for an individual’s formation of an identity since everyone, despite race or sex, within a community must reside and work in the same surroundings. As Orrin Klapp argues, “place is a recognized territory of symbols that nurtures self identity—either ‘I belong’ or ‘this is foreign to me, I am an outsider’ and one achieves identity by differentiation” (28). A mobile life continually uproots the individual and presents new natural reference points as well as new cultural communities. Mobility causes an individual’s relationship with community as well as the land to become either unattached or strongly bound depending upon the emphasis one’s community places upon the physical land itself. A traveling salesman in the highly industrial society of America will place less emphasis upon his natural surroundings than a Palestinian in voluntary or involuntary exile from Israel who was once a farmer in a rural area. A culture based upon agriculture places

more emphasis upon the land and is thus more strongly bound to the land as a source of emotional as well as economic support than a highly industrial society which does not depend as heavily upon the land for its survival.

The main characters in the three works by Head, Jabra and Kerouac are each faced with these questions of identity. The focus of each author's work is a search for belonging, and thus an identity, through participation in a community group as well as an evaluation of personal ties to the land, particularly homelands. At least one of the above social causes which Klapp insists lead to identity problems is found in each novel. The main characters of the novels by Head and Jabra each face both the problem of discrimination in their homelands of South Africa and Israel as well as the problem of mobile pluralism as each leaves his or her homeland and interacts in new social and environmental settings. Kerouac's main character faces a rapid post-World War II modernization and industrialization of American society in which he is at a loss to find a satisfactory position or identity for himself. The symptoms which Klapp argues are common to individuals who lack a sense of community and identity are also found in each of these works in variable stages and degrees. Each of the main characters of the novels embarks upon a spiritual quest for community and identity to solve these problems.

In *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head explores the quest for identity of Elizabeth, a South African woman of mixed heritage, who has placed herself in voluntary exile from her homeland due to her unsatisfactory place in society caused by discrimination. Because Elizabeth's mother was white and father was black she is classified as "coloured" and is rejected socially by both the black and white people living in apartheid



South Africa of the 1970s. As a woman, Elizabeth's identity is also imposed upon by the roles ascribed to her by the patriarchal order. Thus, the hierarchical and patriarchal orders which surround her place Elizabeth in a state of emotional exile from others in South Africa. When this position is combined with her voluntary physical exile in Botswana, Elizabeth is finally driven to insanity. She has lost both the cultural and environmental reference points with which she has so strongly identified her personal conception of self. During her insanity, Elizabeth battles with inner demons which prey upon this lack of a secure personal identity. Although Elizabeth struggles within herself she must continue the daily activities of her life which include interactions with both the people of her new community and the land which she cultivates. Through her participation in community life, Elizabeth slowly becomes a part of the Botswana cultural community. From her experiences with both the mental delusions and physical realities which surround her, Elizabeth develops a new philosophy of life, God, and the nature of good and evil, as well as comes to several realizations concerning her own identity as it relates to others and the land. Elizabeth's revelations result in a new conception of her own identity which is strongly connected to her place both in her community and environment.

This search for a personal identity, specifically an authentic identity for an Arab male, is addressed by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra in *The Ship* by using a cultural mix of characters caught together on a Mediterranean cruise. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, the question of identity for Palestinians in exile, as a people without a homeland, and those remaining within Israel, as a national minority within a Jewish culture facing social discrimination, has been extremely problematic. Even among the

people who classify themselves as Arab or Palestinian there are a number of religious and tribal affiliations. There can be no community reference points for a people who do not share the same land, religion or customs. While on board the ship, however, the constructs of time and place and the social and political structures which they contain are suspended allowing the central characters Isam Salman and Wadi Assaf to explore their personal relationships to people and the land of the past, present and future without social or political barriers. Each character seemingly boards the ship with no prior connections to the other passengers, but as the days pass and a makeshift community is formed which excludes no one based upon race, sex or nationality, each passenger realizes that his or her presence on the ship is not mere coincidence. The suspended reality of the ship is infiltrated by the past as each character dwells upon memories relating to past friendships and homelands. The concept of a homeland is an integral part of each characters' experiences, and both Wadi and Isam realize through their physical and psychological journeys that their identities depend upon their relationships to other people and their homelands.

Similarly, Jack Kerouac's main character Sal Paradise embarks upon a physical and psychological journey in *On the Road* as he crosses the country many times in search of a place in a community and environment. In the beginning, Sal is dissatisfied with the mass consumption and highly industrial society of America in the 1940s and begins a physical and spiritual quest across the country in order to capture the American dream of personal freedom. He rejects his place in society, and follows the example set by his friend Dean Moriarty by beginning a life "on the road" in an attempt to escape both his society and the concepts of time and place which provide its framework. He turns to the

minority working class society in California and the black musicians of jazz bars in an effort for social interaction in a completely foreign social sphere, but it becomes evident that he can never become a real part of the minority culture he idealizes. The hobos on the road with whom Sal at first finds a temporary community also let him down as he sees their own disillusionment with their lives on the road and failure to find the satisfactory position in society which Sal himself seeks. Through his travels and experiences with others, Sal discovers that each person has the potential for both good and evil. However, he also comes to believe that this potential for evil will ultimately corrupt the entire person. The personal freedom promised by the American dream alludes Sal because he cannot be the person he yearns to be because he believes the potential for evil within himself will corrupt as it has all those with whom he has come in contact. In the end, Sal cannot find a community in which he feels at ease because he believes each in turn will become corrupted and fail him as the white middle-class society of America has failed him. Sal returns to his life on the East coast after finding nothing with the potential to be more satisfactory than his present identity in his current society and environment.

Each of these works demonstrates the importance of an individual's relationship with communities and natural environments in the development of a personal identity. The main characters of each novel are unsatisfied with the social roles assigned to them by their social and cultural surroundings in which they initially find themselves. They lack common bonds or reference points with the communities which surround them due to discrimination, physical exile or rapid modernization. Each character embarks upon a physical and emotional journey to escape his or her unsatisfactory place in society and

develop a new conception of personal identity. During their travels, they develop new conceptions of God and the nature of good and evil which cause a reassessment of both identity and community. These revelations along with their experiences with others and the land lead each character to reinterpret or, in Sal's case, reaffirm their place in society and personal identity as it is connected to both their communities and environments.

## Chapter 1

### **A Journey through Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power***

**"There is only one God and his name is Man."**

**--*A Question of Power***

The heroine of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* embarks on a spiritual quest for identity which carries her from a state of physical and spiritual alienation from both her physical and environmental communities to one of community with all people. As a South African woman of mixed heritage, Elizabeth lacks a personal identity both within the political caste system of 1970s South Africa as well as the patriarchal hierarchy in which she finds herself. Elizabeth is the daughter of a white mother and black father and so is labeled "coloured" by both black and white South Africans and is not accepted by either community. She moves to Botswana in voluntary exile with her young son to accept a teaching position in the small village of Motabeng. Elizabeth's physical exile from South Africa along with her alienation as a foreigner in a new community causes two mental breakdowns. She is thrust into a world of madness dominated by two male figures who attempt to destroy her both emotionally and physically. Elizabeth's experiences during her mental delusions as well as her actual activities and relationships within the physical community which surrounds her slowly bring new realizations on the nature of good and evil, God and her own identity as that identity relates to the community and land in which she now resides. As a person of mixed heritage and as a stateless person belonging neither to South Africa nor Botswana, Elizabeth ultimately strives to develop a philosophy of both life and community which incorporates all people.

Elizabeth's status as a "coloured" South African subjects her to the same prejudicial treatment received by the black race at the hands of the white upper class in South Africa. In the South African caste system black people are denied basic human rights and are essentially not people at all. Femi Ojo-Ade defines apartheid as "a basic debasement of humanity, a certain enslavement of the mind by a group surfeited by the aggrandizing elements of its own false superiority" (qtd. in Tucker 170). Elizabeth herself comments on the apartheid system when she defines being a black person in South Africa as:

living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you. They were just born that way, hating people, and a black man or woman was just born to be hated. There wasn't any kind of social evolution beyond that, there wasn't any lift to the heart, just this vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks... (Head, *A Question of Power* 19)

Elizabeth most closely identifies herself with the black citizens of South Africa because of the common political situation between people of mixed heritage and black people there. Thus, as a citizen of South Africa who is labeled "coloured," Elizabeth faces the same political obstacles as the black citizens and essentially becomes dehumanized by the social order of her own country.

Although Elizabeth identifies politically with the black race, she is not completely accepted culturally in their community because of her white heritage. Sexual relationships between white and black people in apartheid South Africa are outlawed so "the progeny of such encounters carry with them a life-long stigma of illegitimacy" (Abrahams 24). Thus, from the day she was born, Elizabeth could neither belong completely to the community of either race. Elizabeth's affluent white mother was

driven to a mental hospital because of the social conflict caused by her sexual relations with a black stable boy and the resulting pregnancy. Upon the death of her mother, an adoptive home is impossible to find for Elizabeth because of her mixed heritage as she is told by a teacher in grammar school: “First they received you from the mental hospital and sent you to a nursing home. A day later you were returned because you did not look white. They sent you to a Boer family. A week later you were returned. The women on the committee said: ‘What can we do with this child? Its mother is white’” (Head, *A Question of Power* 17). In affect, Elizabeth is caught between the different cultural and political worlds of the white and black race in South Africa as well as the worlds of the sane and insane.

Within the patriarchal South African social structure, Elizabeth is not allowed the opportunity for self examination necessary to achieve a full sense of her own identity. As a consequence, Kathryn Geurts argues, Elizabeth has never been taught that a woman has the right to “strive to become a whole person” (54). Elizabeth argues with the men of her visions saying that “‘journeys into the soul are not for women with children, not all that dark heaving turmoil. They are for men,...’” (Head, *A Question of Power* 50). She, unlike men, has responsibilities as a mother which will not allow her to undertake without guilt the complete psychological journey necessary through madness to new realizations (Geurts 54). Elizabeth’s delusions are continually interrupted by her obligations to her small son. During the day Elizabeth must see her son off to school and supervise him afterwards even though she may be tortured by night. Geurts points out that three-fourths of the novel elapses before Elizabeth is given over completely to her madness and collapses, ultimately relinquishing her responsibilities and duties as a

mother (54). The figures of Elizabeth's hallucinations prey upon her inability to fulfill her role and identity as a mother and other presupposed weaknesses as a woman which Elizabeth believes to be an inherent part of her sex and thus identity due to the continual reinforcement of these attributes by the patriarchal order.

As a voluntary exile from South Africa, Elizabeth attempts to make a home in the new community of the Botswana village Motabeng and thus achieve an identity through her interaction with others and the land. Her alienation from the Botswana community at the beginning of the novel, however, is very clear. In Motabeng, Elizabeth "lived such an absent-minded life and had such a blind spot in matters of public or social awareness that it took time to piece the fragments of information together, in some coherent form. Definitely, as far as Batswana (sic) society was concerned, she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be *in on their things*." (Head, *A Question of Power* 25-6). The social definition Elizabeth previously held for herself has no place in this new community, which, as Bessie Head later writes in "Social and Political Pressures that Shape Literature in Southern Africa," was unlike South Africa because it was "a land that was never conquered or dominated by foreign powers" which then established a social hierarchy based upon race (21). Instead, Head writes in the same article, Botswana provides Elizabeth with her first experiences of human ambition and greed not practiced exclusively by white people (21).<sup>1</sup> Left alone without the South African hierarchical social orders based upon both race and gender to which she had become accustomed, "it was barely three months after her arrival in the village of Motabeng when her life began

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<sup>1</sup> All following Head citations are from *A Question of Power*.



to pitch over from an even keel, and it remained from then onwards at a pitched-over angle” (Head 21). Elizabeth’s final physical alienation from her homeland and the social structure in which she had shaped her self identity is the final catalyst which initiates her complete descent into madness.

Elizabeth’s madness thrusts her into a vacuum of time and place; both of which she must destroy in order to reconstruct her identity within their frameworks. E. O. Apronti asserts that “time manifests itself as a malignant and implacable force, an agent of tyranny, the unconcerned and detached arbiter of the fate of man in racist South Africa” (qtd. in Tucker 171). Elizabeth’s final physical displacement has emphasized her position “as stranger, exile, bastard, and woman, she is the Other, the dispossessed. In order to reclaim herself, Elizabeth must disrupt the dichotomous nature of linear time—a time which sustains and supports the hegemony” (Tucker 170). Elizabeth has escaped the physical tyranny of South Africa and now attempts to escape the psychological tyranny of which she is the victim in more than one way. She can no longer accept the identity or destiny assigned to her by the hierarchical and patriarchal orders. She intends to reinvent herself and her fate, but must first confront the institutions which she intends to destroy. Throughout the novel, time and place for Elizabeth are destroyed as she jumps from mental hallucinogenic discourses to daily routines involving her community work and family life without regard to temporal or spatial congruency.

Two central characters dominate Elizabeth’s mental hallucinations and represent both the physical and spiritual tyrannical forces at work in history. Elizabeth creates the mental figures of Dan and Sello so that “forms of oppression, or power are de-politicized, identified as the desire for either spiritual or sexual domination over others” (Marquard

60). Margaret Tucker argues that both Dan and Sello represent a part of the power which produces history's cycle of domination (174). This cycle is not relegated solely to the South African political structure with which Elizabeth is most closely associated. Elizabeth explores the story of domination through the myths of different nationalities because "nearly every nation had that background of mythology—looming, monstrous personalities they called 'the Gods,' personalities who formed the base of their attitudes to royalty and class; personalities whose deeds were hideous and yet who assumed powerful positions, presumably because they were in possession of thunderbolts" (Head 40). Those with the power these men possessed inevitably claimed their powerful positions and instituted the forms of domination which had continued through time. The men of Elizabeth's delusions "know what is going to happen because they are the powers that make history" (Tucker 174). In his own way, each preys upon Elizabeth's insecurities as a woman born in South Africa without race and now without a homeland as well.

The first figure to dominate Elizabeth's psychological journey is Sello and the many forms he assumes in her hallucinations. Elizabeth names the figure in her hallucinations "Sello" because the figure physically resembles the actual man Sello in the Motabeng community who Elizabeth sees occasionally but with whom she has no connection. The figure of Sello appears to Elizabeth initially wearing "the soft, white, flowing robes of a monk" who remains ever present in the chair by her bed throughout her psychological journey (Head 22). This form of Sello "is the incarnation of a great teacher and the embodiment of a way of a way of life" (Johnson 202). Elizabeth identifies Sello as spiritual monk as the embodiment of the powers of the gods from

Egyptian, Indian and Christian cultures, thus illustrating the timeless force of his godlike power. At other times, Sello appears in a brown suit as a portrayal of the ordinary and everyday attributes of the spiritual force of Sello the monk. Elizabeth understands these two forms of Sello as representing “a particular individual exerting moral or intellectual force in a society at a particular time and a timeless spirit existing throughout human history” (Johnson 202). Sello assumes other forms to Elizabeth including “The Father,” “King of the Underworld,” “Old Father Time” and “Wonder There.” From Elizabeth’s mental experiences with all the forms Sello assumes along with their very titles, it becomes evident that Sello has the potential to be both God and Satan.

Elizabeth’s understanding of the many forms of Sello’s various incarnations which are inherently contradictory causes her to reevaluate her concept of God and the distinction between good and evil, and thus reevaluate these powers within her own self as well. The figure of “Sello as God remains ambivalent, passive, at times overwhelmed by the evil that strangely seems to be a function of himself” (Ravenscroft 184). As “Old Father Time” Sello perpetuates the “repetitions of power and oppression” and through his other forms becomes himself both the oppressor and oppressed (Tucker 176). Although Sello can be a spiritual teacher, he can also be overcome by his other roles and identities throughout history. Initially Elizabeth “falls into despair when Sello goes on to reveal his own inner conflict” and domination by the evil form of Medusa (Johnson 203). In the beginning, Elizabeth is incapable of resolving the multiple personalities embodied by the figure of Sello and thus becomes tormented by their conflicting meanings.

Sello presents the Medusa figure to Elizabeth early in the novel as the embodiment of the evil found in man and the patriarchal and hierarchical structures

which he has constructed. Medusa becomes “the reflection of the evil in man,” and Elizabeth must come to decipher that both she and Medusa “are images created to uphold man’s rule” as the victimized woman in the patriarchal structure (Tucker 176). The figure of Medusa is also identified with the South African apartheid system and contributes to Elizabeth’s demoralization as a “coloured” South African. Through the Medusa image and what she represents, Elizabeth comes to recognize “the similarity between racists and sexists” (Bazin, *Extrapolation* 77). Medusa is thus able to dehumanize Elizabeth on the basis of both her sex and race.

The form of Medusa is instrumental to undermining Elizabeth’s identity as a South African woman of mixed heritage. Joyce Johnson argues that “the main effects of the negative social attitudes which Medusa represents are to make Elizabeth feel excluded from the community of black Africans and to increase her insecurity as a member of the coloured minority” (204). Elizabeth herself recognizes that Medusa “was expressing the surface reality of African society” (Head 38). She is associated with the lower class black people of Africa and as such claims to be greater than Elizabeth because of her race (Head 37). Medusa confronts Elizabeth with the claim that “‘Africa is troubled waters, you know. I’m a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You’ll only drown here. You’re not linked up to the people. You don’t know any African languages,’” thus accenting Elizabeth’s disconnection from the black people by her language as well as her white ancestry (Head 44). Medusa’s concern for the poor emphasizes Elizabeth’s detachment from the poor of South Africa by reminding “Elizabeth that she is an educated middle-class coloured woman, and [Medusa’s] concern about traditional values is also a means of excluding Elizabeth from the African

community. She claims that Elizabeth is not a genuine African” (Johnson 204). In this way, Medusa attempts to destroy Elizabeth’s conception of herself by destroying her identification with the black African community.

Medusa’s attack on Elizabeth’s sense of self is not confined to her race as it extends to her identity as a woman as well. At one point, Medusa taunts Elizabeth with her vagina as she

sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation traveled out of her towards Elizabeth. It enveloped Elizabeth from head to toe like a slow, deep, sensuous bomb. It was like falling into deep, warm waters, lazily raising one hand and resting in a heaven of bliss. Then she looked at Elizabeth and smiled, a mocking superior smile: “You haven’t got anything near that, have you.” (Head 44)

Medusa’s attack “is not just a simple attack on her sexuality but an attack on her incapacity to give birth to a completely black African child, which, in turn, links her back to the inadequacy of her mother” (Ibrahim 126). Medusa thus preys upon Elizabeth’s sense of insecurity as a woman not capable of fulfilling her roles as a sexual being or as a mother. She could only produce offspring who would be classified as “coloured” providing “no escape from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality. There wasn’t any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. They were races, not people” (Head 45). In South Africa, all people are defined by their race and gender which decides their place in the social caste system. As a person of mixed heritage who lacks a sufficient concept of her own personal identity, Elizabeth identifies with a group of “coloured” homosexuals she once saw in a South African village who

openly paraded down the street dressed in women’s clothes. They tied turbans round their heads, wore lipstick, fluttered their eyes and hands and talked in high, falsetto voices. It was so widespread, so common to so many men in this town that they felt no shame at all. They and people in

general accepted it as a disease one had to live with. No one commented at these strange men dressed in women's clothes... An African man gave her the most reasonable explanation: "How can a man be a man when he is called boy? I can barely retain my own manhood." (Head 45)

Like these "coloured" men, Elizabeth is at a loss for a fulfilling definition of herself within the South African society due to the dehumanization caused by the apartheid system. Medusa, however, stresses Elizabeth's inferiority by asserting "'that's your people, not African people.'" (Head 45). Medusa is able to completely demoralize the humanity of Elizabeth by preying upon Elizabeth's insecurities as a woman of mixed heritage.

Elizabeth's sense of self is shattered by her initial experiences with Sello and Medusa, and she is left at the end of Part I of the novel struggling with the contradictions concerning God, the nature of good and evil and her own identity as a "coloured" South African woman. Sello as spiritual monk is the first figure to visit Elizabeth in her hallucinations after she arrives in Motabeng. After Sello's first appearance in this form, Elizabeth concludes that "she had no distinct personality, apart from Sello" (Head 32). However, when she sees the horror in the form of Medusa which can also be a part of Sello's nature, she claims that "maybe she had made too close an identification with Sello for her own comfort and safety" (Head 25). After the presentation of the evil forms such as Medusa which could also be a part of his nature, Sello "abruptly pulled away the prop of goodness" he had provided for Elizabeth as the spiritual monk and so Elizabeth "floundered badly in stormy and dangerous seas" (Head 29). Elizabeth has seen Sello's potential for good as the spiritual monk and his potential for evil through his identification with Medusa, and so Elizabeth has no other choice but to accuse "him of

being the originator of the caste system, alongside his other theories on the heavens” (Head 32). Thus, Sello comes to embody the possibility of good and evil found in each person and the choice each man and woman must make between the two powers within their souls.

By the end of Part I, Elizabeth is completely disillusioned with her previous definition of God, concept of good and evil and view of her own personal identity. She can no longer accept the philosophy of life to which she had previously prescribed because as an exile, woman and “coloured” South African, Elizabeth can have no place in that philosophy because she has not contributed or corroborated in its existence and is left out as a substantial member. Joyce Johnson points out that Elizabeth is forced to conclude that “she cannot rely on pre-existing moral rules but must find her own rules to meet the exigencies of her particular situation” (205). She turns away from her initial identification with the spiritual aspects of Sello and searches for a new guide on her psychological journey in order to create these moral rules for herself.

In Part II of the novel, the figure of Dan dominates Elizabeth’s psychological activities and attempts to destroy her sense of self. His concept of power is based upon violence, and he is not as overcome as Sello is by the agonizing soul-searching to resolve the conflict between the powers of good and evil in his own soul (Johnson 205). He is given completely over to physical tyranny and asserts that he has had “Dictatorship since 1910” (Head 115). Bessie Head is most likely referring to the Act of Union of South Africa of 1910 which deprived “coloured” South Africans of the right to vote (Johnson 206). Dan, like Sello, emphasizes the idea

that [Elizabeth] was not genuinely African; he had to give her the real African insight. People in her daily life were vividly reintroduced through imagery at night. In almost every way she had slighted somebody. In almost every way she had to be aware of Africans as a special holy entity and deep mystery he alone understood. (Head 159)

Just as Sello had embodied both the oppressor and oppressed throughout history, so does Dan embody the particular situation of the white oppressor in South Africa as Dictator and the oppressed as the black people of apartheid South Africa.

Dan is thus the embodiment of tyranny as both the tyrant and victim of the South African hierarchical system, and his introduction of the “seventy-one nice-time girls” establishes his role as a tyrant of the patriarchal order as well. Dan produces a procession of women Elizabeth refers to as the “seventy-one nice-time girls” who have been reduced to nothing more than physical parts to dehumanize Elizabeth as a woman. Dan epitomizes maleness to Elizabeth as he stands “in front of her, his pants down, as usual, flaying his powerful penis in the air and saying: ‘Look, I’m going to show you how I sleep with B... She has a womb I can’t forget. When I go with a woman I go for one hour. You can’t do that. You haven’t got a vagina” (Head 13). The women he presents to Elizabeth are named after dissected body parts; “Madame Loose-Bottom,” “The Womb,” “Miss Pelican-Beak,” and each falls “prostrate at Dan’s feet, never to rise again” (Head 163). By dominating these women, he forces Elizabeth “to see herself reflected in these women (woman as womb, woman as whore) and to see herself lacking something that they have (sexual power, possession of Dan)” (Tucker 177). Essentially, Elizabeth is doubly negated as a woman because “she is not even as good as the sexual objects with which Dan continually has sex” (Tucker 177). Dan demonstrates his complete domination of these women by reconstructing Miss Pelican-Beak because she



was too pushy for the new world. He began fixing her up. He broke her legs, he broke her jutting spindly elbows, he decorated her with tiny, pretty, pink roses for a new image of tender love. Out of her breasts, which were small, round and hard, he forced a black slime. Then he made her put on one of Elizabeth's bras. Her chest swelled up to Elizabeth's bust's size; she was supposed to have absorbed Elizabeth's harmless qualities by fitting her bra. Then he decided that the Pelican-Beak was too dangerous; she'd better quiet down totally. He'd re-design her pelvic area along the lines of Elizabeth's, which was extraordinarily passive and caused no trouble in the world. There, sure enough, at Elizabeth's side appeared a feminine pelvis with passive legs, nearly a replica of Elizabeth's. Poor Pelican-Beak had her own slashed off and was fitted out with the new pelvis. That job over, he dropped Pelican-Beak and turned to Miss Chopper. (Head 167-8)

Dan causes Miss Pelican-Beak to lose any sense of herself as an active force and is relegated to the passive position Elizabeth herself has accepted in society. Elizabeth connects the rape of these women explicitly to the rape of the oppressed black women in South Africa by viewing Dan as "one of those Afrikaner Boers in South Africa who had been caught contravening the Immortality Act with a black woman" (Head 198). Elizabeth's experiences with Dan reinforce the dehumanization of Elizabeth as a "coloured" South African and as a woman begun by Sello.

At the end of Elizabeth's first nervous breakdown caused by the two figures of Dan and Sello, she charges both the Sello of her hallucinations and the actual Sello who is a part of the community of Motabeng with child molestation by posting a notice in the town square. This accusation is the culmination of Elizabeth's realizations concerning the dualistic nature of good and evil. It is unimportant whether either the imagined Sello or the real Sello is guilty of the act because the act itself is "representative of his participation in a world where there must always be a victim. And, again, it points to the fact that ultimate good and ultimate evil both depend on complete control, the denial of

another's power" (Tucker 176). This realization causes Elizabeth's final mental collapse which leads to her very real confinement in a mental hospital. However, during her stay in the hospital Elizabeth begins the slow process of recuperation which leads to the formation of a new philosophy which does not allow for a hierarchy of good and evil with God above Satan found in traditional Christianity, but of a universal concept which allows for the capacity of good and evil in each individual.

Elizabeth's struggle with this new concept of good and evil is expressed through her interactions in the Motabeng community as well. Her experiences with Dan and Sello have demonstrated both the black and white man's capacity for evil, but each "wasn't asserting evil. He was saying he had the potential to be evil" (Head 116). However, the goodness Elizabeth experiences in the community of Motabeng demonstrates the capacity of "love and humility to lead the exiled consciousness from estrangement" to "an identification with mankind" (Marquard 60). Her participation in the daily activities of the village causes her to develop relationships with its inhabitants and leads her back to the world of sanity and community. Since the village is economically and emotionally dependent upon the land, Elizabeth's increasing involvement in the Motabeng community reunites her to the land as well.

Initially Elizabeth is alienated from the land as a physical embodiment of her mental alienation. Although, she admires the women who "gathered up their possessions in a big bundle of cloth, heaved it on top of their heads, slung a hoe over their shoulders and set out with long, firm, determined strides to their lands," she herself does not have a land to cultivate (Head 59). Elizabeth recognizes the importance of the land in the daily activities of the community and the

closeness to the soil was increased by living in a mud hut. It was like living with the trees and insects right indoors, because there was no sharp distinction between the circling mud walls of a hut and the earth outside. And the roof always smelt of mouldy grass, and all kinds of insects made their homes in the grass roof and calmly deposited their droppings on the bed, chair, table and floor. (Head 60)

Thus, while the land is an integral part in the survival of the physical community by its agricultural produce, it is also an integral part of the interpersonal relationships in the community.

It is through her garden and the local agricultural project, that Elizabeth establishes a place for herself in the Motabeng community. Her garden becomes a magical place where foreign vegetables are capable of growth in the foreign Botswana soil. She brings the Cape Gooseberry to her garden and “a complete stranger like the Cape Gooseberry settled down and became a part of the village life of Motabeng” (Head 153). Elizabeth spreads Cape Gooseberry propaganda explaining its health and economic benefits and the villagers begin to stop by her house and call “‘Cape Gooseberry,’ to show how well they had picked up the propaganda. They did it so often that eventually Elizabeth became known as ‘Cape Gooseberry’” (Head 153). Elizabeth’s garden also develops a relationship between Elizabeth and her coworker Kenosi who insists that Elizabeth “‘must never leave the garden,’ she said. ‘I cannot work without you. People are teasing me these days. They say: ‘Kenosi, where’s your teacher? You are not in school.’ People have never seen a garden like our garden. It came there in one day’” (Head 142). Nancy Bazin argues that Elizabeth’s relationship with Kenosi is more than a bridge to the community; it illustrates “the possibility of something quite different from the patriarchal relationships she has in her hallucinations” (*Extrapolation* 81). In effect,

Elizabeth's vegetable garden serves as a "therapeutic outlet, her actualization of woman's worth, her contribution to the brave new world of equitable human relationships" (Campbell 83). Elaine Campbell also points out that "Elizabeth's garden is as much a revolt against a tradition of subsistence agriculture as Elizabeth's mental recovery is a triumph over traditional social roles in her world" (83). Elizabeth has developed a place in the community and relationships with those who constitute that community which do not correspond to the positions to which she had become accustomed in her native country as a "coloured" South African woman.

In the Motabeng community, Elizabeth discovers the practicality of the theoretical concept concerning the duality of good and evil which she had initially uncovered during her mental discourses. Both during her insanity and recuperation, the potential for goodness is expressed by many of the people in the community, but the potential for abuse is also illustrated through Elizabeth's relationships with others in the Motabeng community. Elizabeth develops ties with Kenosi and the American Peace Corps volunteer Tom through the vegetable garden and agricultural project, but she also observes the abuse of power on a personal level rather than the political level found in South Africa with which she has previously so closely identified the concept of evil. The Danish woman Camilla dominates the agricultural project to which Elizabeth is assigned and treats the workers without respect in a similar fashion as the majority of white citizens treated black people in apartheid South Africa. In a conversation with a coworker at the project Elizabeth comments:

"I don't like her. She just goes around saying people are stupid."  
"We know, and we don't like it," Small-Boy said, angrily.  
"It's not only her, the others who work here say the same thing."

Small-Boy bent his head thoughtfully: “You haven’t met Gunner,” he said. “He’s the best man in the world. He loves people.” (Head 80)

Gunner is also from Denmark and Elizabeth realizes that “Danes—they were either very, very bad or so impossibly God-like that they out-stripped the rest of mankind in humanity” (Head 80). The potential for good and evil is found in both of the Danish people with whom Elizabeth interacts. Thus, the impossibility of classifying an entire group based upon the actions of an individual or group of individuals becomes clear from her interactions in the real community of Motabeng as well as in her mental activities. The community of which she is a part involves people from many backgrounds and with many dispositions, but “the kindness of the neighbour who cared for her son during her illness, the constant concern of Tom, the Peace Corps volunteer, and the generosity of the real Sello, who refuses to bring charges against her, cannot be ignored as testimony to the existence of goodness” in all its shapes and forms (Johnson 208). Elizabeth discovers that each of the people she meets must be respected as an individual without prejudices based upon race, sex or nationality.

Elizabeth readily accepts and is accepted by the community of Motabeng which is comprised of a number of people who are each of a different nationality, race and sex. Gunner, Tom and the fellow South African exile who offers his help to Elizabeth each escape to Botswana to escape an unhappiness found in their own countries. Each of these characters are able to “integrate into Botswana society and are accepted by the masses as participants in their struggle” (Abrahams 28). From her previous state of alienation as a “coloured” South African woman in physical exile from her homeland, Elizabeth cannot develop a philosophy of life which would exclude anyone because she

herself has experienced the torments caused by this exclusion. She desperately wishes to be “treated as a human being regardless of race, skin color, and sex; having been singled out all her life for ‘special,’ if inferior, treatment” (Ogungbesan 210). She does not wish to be extraordinary in any way, and when asked by a villager ““Would you like to be an important person?”” she quickly responds:

“Oh no, I’m quite all right as I am.” The word “important” could make her hair rise up. She wasn’t sure if it applied elsewhere, but she was essentially a product of the slums and hovels of South Africa. People there had an unwritten law. They hated any black person among them who was “important.” They would say, behind the person’s back: “Oh, he thinks he’s important,” with awful scorn. She had seen too many people despised for self-importance, and it was something drilled into her: be the same as others in heart; just be a person. (Head 26)

Therefore Elizabeth “forges an idea of universalism which deliberately disregards boundaries of sex, race, caste and creed” (Ibrahim 125). Elizabeth’s new perceptions on life must incorporate all people because she has identified the potential for both good and evil present in all groups or individuals and therefore cannot exclude anyone as she herself had been excluded.

Elizabeth’s new philosophy of life involves a community of all people with a God who is present in all and not placed above the daily activities of life. Only when God is above man could man “be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed” (Head 205). The power of the individual soul is strong, but it is a power that can overcome the person by its possibility for both good or evil. This evaluation causes Elizabeth to realize the possibility of breaking free from the cycle of domination in history presented by the forms of Sello and Dan by concentrating on the potential of goodness in herself. Elizabeth is now capable of directing the power of her soul by

choosing its capacity for good to direct her life and interactions in the community. As Nancy Bazin argues, the choice between the power of good and evil of the soul must be made by each man and woman and this choice determines the person's social attitudes and behaviors (*The Black Scholar* 40). Elizabeth now has the power to choose her own destiny and cultivate it as she has cultivated the Cape Gooseberry. Elizabeth no longer sees time as "empowered by some authoritative abstraction of history" as Sello and Dan represented, but rather the community with which one is involved is its motivating force (Tucker 181). Elizabeth's mental torments "are assimilated to the historical sufferings of mankind through a network of wide-ranging images, the seemingly random nature of which points to their inclusiveness" (Marquard 59). Elizabeth realizes that the problems of South Africa are a large expression of the individual corruption of the soul by the power it possesses. Sello vocalizes the solution to the South African problem by claiming hatred of "the racist whites for what oppression they have inflicted and continue to inflict on the black people of South Africa" is ridiculous because "as racists, they are not free, they simply imprison their souls in their own cobweb of hatred" (Head 194). Through her interactions in the community and the realization of goodness she finds there, Elizabeth "had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man. As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging" (Head 206). Elizabeth has found a place in the universal community of all people which does not exclude anyone based on race, sex or nationality; but incorporates the power of the soul to choose between good and evil as the foundation for community and belonging.

Elizabeth begins her journey into madness in both physical and emotional exile as an alienated person based upon her sex, race and nationality. She has never been allowed to develop an identity in the South African social structure as a “coloured” person and has also been denied self exploration as a woman by the patriarchal order. Her final physical alienation pushes her completely into the realm of insanity through which she must travel to reevaluate her identity. Through her madness and experiences as a member of the Botswana community, she returns to sanity with a new philosophy which incorporates an omnipresent God in each individual’s soul with the power of good and evil at his or her disposal. She becomes a part of the Motabeng village and forms a kinship with its inhabitants all of whom defy boundaries of race, sex and nationality. Her healing is complete as she becomes a true person within a community of all people. Elizabeth ultimately creates her own identity within this universal community based on her own terms and personal philosophy of life which is developed and cultivated by her relationships to others and the land.



## Chapter 2

### A Voyage Home: Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *The Ship*

**"Shall we complete the voyage?"**

**--*The Ship***

Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *The Ship* explores the relationships and revelations of several passengers which occur during a week-long Mediterranean cruise. The ship's environment suspends the constructs of time and place creating the illusion of a present without a past or future. This leaves each of the central Palestinian male characters free from social and political structures to explore his identity, his relationships with others, and his relationship with the land. However, the suspended reality of the ship is eventually destroyed by the invading presence of the past in the memories of each passenger and in the passengers' present actions. Although most of the passengers deny the connection at the beginning, each passenger's relationship to the land plays an important part in the character's past, present and future conceptions of identity and community with others. At the end of the voyage, both Wadi Assaf and Isam Salman achieve a new understanding of their own identity and new knowledge concerning the concepts of good and evil and their personal relationships to God, other people and the land.

In the novel's opening chapters, the frameworks of time and place are suspended for the passengers on the ship, allowing them the opportunity to explore their relationships to each other and the land without the social or political structures imposed by time and place. The novel defines time as the framework "that enfolds the history of man, the clamorous, raging history of man" which includes the characters' past problems

on both a personal and political level and Isam Salman insists that each passenger on the cruise is seeking to escape from such problems (Jabra 72). Isam seeks to escape the torture of seeing Luma, the woman he once intended to marry, married to another man and, as Wadi Assaf insists, from his homeland as well. The ship offers escape because it is “a whole world unto itself” and creates “a bodily sense of gliding simultaneously through time and space. Airplanes almost eliminate time and thus destroy in you that human feeling of growth, of mellowing and of change. They emphasize the fact that you are traveling on a commercial, not a mental, enterprise” (Jabra 38). The physical journey on the ship, however, is accompanied by a psychological journey as Isam insists during an internal monologue:

I was sure that the sea played a supportive role in such matters, just as it did in our relationships with women. The scenes are always the same except when we reach port. Eyes get used to the various decks on the ship and the blue of the waves and the sky; ears become attuned to the roar of the breakers and the monotonous throbbing of the ship’s engines. Hearing sharpens and words become unusually clear and powerful. One hears everything that is said, and reaction, whether of pleasure or otherwise, is immediate. (Jabra 92)

The distractions of time and place are suspended because “time is not on the characters’ side; it will not resolve their problems or assuage their fears. What counts is the moment out of time at which the past is liberated in the present in order to usher in the possibility of the future” (Haydar and Allen 7). As the characters’ physical bodies are carried to a future destination, Isam and Wadi embark upon a psychological journey to the future as well.

However, the ship is only capable of the temporary suspension of time and place, and not of their complete eradication. Each of the characters’ past lives are carried with

them on their physical and psychological journeys in both physical and emotional ways. The passengers are forced to realize the pervading presence of the past when Mahmud Rashid, a fellow passenger and Palestinian, claims during a dinner party on ship that a waiter on board is the man who imprisoned and tortured him many years ago and then violently attacks the waiter in an act of revenge. That same night the sea becomes stormy, reflecting the disruption of the suspended reality the ship had previously created for its passengers. Isam says to his fellow passengers that “the sea has begun to betray me” and concludes that “on board a ship, it should be written, as follows in letters of sun and wind: ‘Abandon all memories, all ye who enter here?’ For voyagers, the sea is a tremendous eraser that can wipe out the most stubborn types of ink, even images etched into the soul like wounds. But unfortunately the sea is not the river of oblivion, however much the travelers might wish it were” (Jabra 124-5). Wadi had tried to convince the others of the continual presence of the past early in the voyage by arguing:

“What you knew two days ago, and what you know today are not the same thing. Life runs, speeds on, racing people. Everyday it changes you, erodes you, gnaws at your sides, enlarges the numb areas in your heart. Every day, it adds to you blows you up, and hammers into your heart the nails of pain and joy. You’re forever changing. Your childhood accompanies you, but it’s no longer a part of you. It’s there, far away, with those waves on the horizon, on that island you behold in the sea of your dreams.” (Jabra 19)

This argument is now validated on board the ship as memories of the past which the passengers had believed were behind them continually pervade the thoughts of each passenger throughout their time on board.

For each passenger, the memories of the past are closely associated with land which is a concrete image which symbolizes the emotional needs of each individual.

Since Isam and Luma are from the same tribe, they had previously been prevented from marrying in college, and so for “Isam the land is an imagined enemy which drives a wedge between him and Luma and compels him to escape. His decision to sever his relationship from the land is a voluntary one” (Haydar and Allen 8). Unlike Isam, however, Wadi “has been driven from his land, and, as a result, has lost an integral part of his identity” (8). Although both Isam and Wadi’s initial detachment with the land is based upon different circumstances, each realizes, in turn, the importance of a physical homeland in cultivating a personal identity and community with others.

For Wadi, the land is always with him as part of his past, but it is also the driving force of his future, and thus becomes a very part of his personal identity. The longest narrative sequence related to past events concerns the land as Wadi’s remembers his experiences in Jerusalem and the loss of his childhood friend Fayiz during the 1948 war between the Arabs and Jews. For Wadi, “Palestine is the microcosm of the Arabs’ defeat, of their failure to determine their destiny in their own lands” and it comes to mean his very “soul to be reclaimed” (Haydar and Allen 5). Isam also realizes the spiritual significance of the land to Wadi’s sense of himself:

It is easy for anyone who had spent his younger days in Jerusalem to identify God with the land or, as Wadi would say, ‘To unite Christ with the rocks.’ But Wadi united himself also with Christ and the rocks, and he saw the need to preserve this trinity as one whenever it seemed to fall apart. Wadi Assaf would only be himself, he said, when he returned to God and the land. So when the Jews had conquered Palestine, they had also conquered him and his God. He was, therefore, like Jerusalem, torn apart, and he had to reintegrate the self; to reclaim the whole trinity. (Jabra 92)

Isam realizes that for Wadi the land, God and his own identity are one. Clearly, Wadi's future is dependent upon the reclaiming of his full self, which includes his homeland, and thus the reclaiming of his power to determine his own identity and destiny.

Not only is Wadi's identity and future defined in terms of his homeland, Wadi's past and future relationships to others are expressed in terms of the land as well. Wadi's memories of Fayiz are irrevocably bound to the rocks and water of his homeland which were also the source of its creation. Wadi remembers the summer that he and Fayiz discovered a spring near a cave, and Fayiz yelled "'So here is the root of it all... this is the very womb' he was bending over as far as he could to touch the secret of the city's birth with his own two hands. 'Water and rock!'" (Jabra 55). After Fayiz has been fatally wounded by Jewish soldiers in May of 1948, Wadi "sat him down on a rock with his legs apart... He was smeared all over with the blood that I knew must be on my face, hands, and shirt. Rocks. Terror. . . . Two crazy people in a desert of death. When I took him off my back to take a rest, I swore that I would come back, somehow, as an invader, as a thief, as a killer; I would come back, even as a casualty. That I swore on a rock" (Jabra 64). In fact, Wadi was swearing on his very soul which included both his past, present and future person, all of whom are bound to the land. Similarly, Wadi's future relationship with his present girlfriend Maha, whom he intends to marry, is tied to the land. Wadi says to himself:

I wanted Maha to be one of the rocks of Jerusalem, a rock on which I could build my city.... However, the memory of Fayiz was still fresh as ever in my mind, as though he had never been killed. The land we both loved as we wandered back and forth, day and night, through the streets of Jerusalem and the surrounding villages still represented everything we both loved and everything I still love. In all of this, past and present were closely intertwined, each one of them alive and pointing to the other. And

after I had been away for so many years, Maha was gradually taking her place in this involved mesh of everything I hold dear. (Jabra 188)

The land is the connection between Wadi and the friendships of his past and the relationships of his future.

While on board ship, Wadi and Isam begin to realize the importance of their connections to others, as well as the land, to their own personal identities. When Wadi and Isam board the ship it is seemingly with no previous attachment to any other passenger, but during the course of the cruise both men realize they are bound together in a community by ties which transcend the boundaries of the ship itself. While on board ship Isam appreciates the community among the passengers and exclaims at one point, “How quickly people become friends on a ship! They imagine that the friendship will last a lifetime. They laugh easily, they love easily, confess to each other easily, then forget everything just as easily” (Jabra 29). Wadi makes the same realization about the people on board when he maintains that the best thing about the cruise “is that you may get to know—or else would never get to know at all—two or three people whom you would never otherwise have dreamed of meeting” (Jabra 40). As the story unfolds, however, it becomes evident that Isam and Wadi directly or indirectly have a preexisting relationship with each other and the other passengers on board. Wadi had once believed his friendships with those on board were coincidence, but he realizes “we were all on board the ship to a specific moment in time when an Iraqi architect named Isam Salman had decided that he wanted to spend several days at sea far away from his own country on his way to a distant exile” (Jabra 191). All the passengers were physically brought together on board ship through Isam and once on board they form emotional attachments

to each other through him as well. On board ship, a group of friends quickly forms with Isam at its center as the connecting force. They were all “brothers on this ship, whether we’re sober or drunk” and excluded no one who was willing to share themselves with the group (Jabra 101). However, as the passengers prepare to leave the ship and return to society, the ship can no longer serve as the tie that binds them together and the land must resume its integral place in their lives.

Although Wadi had always acknowledged the role of land in the construction of his identity and in his relationships to others, Isam only comes to this realization at the end of the cruise through the help of Wadi. Isam slowly begins to understand he has been searching for the freedom to create himself and determine his own destiny by physically removing himself from Baghdad and Luma, and thus the social institutions which had limited the free expression of himself by preventing his marriage to Luma. However, Wadi argues with Isam:

You won’t find it anywhere else. It’s not in that misty, illusory, enticing “there” in Europe or anywhere else. There’s the lapse into inanity; there’s the real defeat. Do you realize, Luma, that Isam claimed he was running away from you? What I say is that he was running away from his city and his land. He’ll never find his freedom anywhere else. Are you listening, Isam? It’s in the alleys of your country, in its orchards, its deserts. Your freedom requires that you refuse to run away, face up to things, accept whatever pains you; that you know that pain, that anger, and the whole slow, agonizing progress. Your freedom involves your being an architect in your own country. (Jabra 198)

Isam and Luma plan to return to Baghdad together, and Wadi and Maha plan to return together to Jerusalem in order to begin new lives together despite the social and political factors which had previously denied them the opportunity to do so. Thus, throughout the novel “the quest for land is the motivating force,” while “all the characters of *The Ship*

are heroes in that each contributes one or more pieces to a complex mosaic, at the center of which is the land with all the agony, yearning and promise which it brings with it” (Haydar and Allen 9). A reunion with their homeland allows both Wadi and Isam the freedom to create a personal identity through a relationship both with their respective partners and their homeland.

Although the resolutions and revelations Wadi and Isam achieve may seem to be exclusive to their unique personal situations in the political and social worlds in which they interact, they are in fact universal realizations concerning the nature of all people. Concerning the political situation of his homeland, Wadi asserts that “every time the struggle assumes a form that conflicts with man’s basic right to be a human being whose dignity must remain untouched, the struggle ceases to be a political one. It’s something else. The political designation is a shameful cover-up which can only lead to yet more agony and a more shameful cover-up” (Jabra 123). The political situation in which they are involved cause Wadi and Isam to theorize about the dual nature of man concluding that “everyone of us is Christ and Judas at the same time. Everyone of us is betrayed, crucified, and given gall to drink, and he does the same to everyone else” (Jabra 100). In *The Ship*, Jabra “appeals to a universal ethos which treats the angst of man wherever he may be” which is caused by man’s conflict between good and evil in both himself, politics and society in general (Haydar and Allen 9). Each person has the potential for both good and evil as another Palestinian on board, Yusuf, illustrates in a poem he recites for his fellow passengers:

Which one of us is the sun, which one the moon?  
Which the spider and which the fly?  
You be the spider and I the fly,



Or you be the fly and I the spider;  
 I devour you and you me  
 As do the rocks and the sea.  
 I'll be the rocks, you be the sea—  
 Or I am the sea  
 Roaring wildly around you everyday  
 While you give and withhold,  
 Contain the waves and set them free.  
 And if I am the rocks,  
 I'll softly embrace your violence  
 As it charges and retreats.  
 Is it a battle of love or hate?  
 He who knows the difference, let him say!  
 Let him describe the mutual devouring of spider and fly,  
 Of rock and sea, out of love and out of hate,  
 Ever-renewed, like night and day;  
 Which one of us is the sun, which one the moon?  
 Which the spider and which the fly? (Jabra 101-2)

The poem effectively illustrates the conflicting concepts of good and evil which Wadi and Fayiz had pondered while teenagers in Jerusalem before the war when they attempted to answer the question “Is it in fact true that good exists only through the existence of its opposite, evil?” (Jabra 50). Although *The Ship* does not answer this question, it does confront the problem of accurately identifying good and evil and the problem of resigning the issue solely to the social or political sphere. As Wadi insists, “Power and its contradictions, money, possessions, marriage, children—they’re all constantly tearing us apart” at both the personal, social and political levels (Jabra 71). The power to produce both good and evil can be found in every person and a personal choice must be made by each.

While on board ship and participating in its makeshift community, each character makes startling revelations concerning their identities, relations with each other and relations with their own countries. While the environment of the ship creates the illusion

of a reality free from the confines of time and place, inevitably the two invade the memories of each character since the past is omnipresent in the person they are and the future guides their present decisions. The land also plays a large role in the identities of the characters as their past relationships and selves are bound to the land and their future lives promise to be so as well. Although the political and social situations in which both Isam and Wadi find themselves are contrary to the destinies each desires for himself, both men will accept the power to choose their own identities and stop attempting to escape by resigning themselves to live freely with the women they love in their homelands.

### Chapter 3

#### A Quest for the American Dream: Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*

**“You boys going to get somewhere, or just going?”**

**--*On the Road***

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* chronicles a man's search for identity as he struggles with his own disillusionment with the American dream and seeks a community and place to which he can belong. The main character, Sal Paradise, creates a spiritual quest for himself as a means to escape his dissatisfaction with the highly materialistic society of 1940s America. He follows the example set by his new friend Dean Moriarty and sets out on the road in search of spiritual revitalization through the experience of unlimited freedom promised by the American dream. His time on the road is divided between the communities of his college friends in Denver and San Francisco as well as the new acquaintances he develops with the traveling hobos on the road, the Mexican working class of California and the black jazz musicians across America. Along the road, Sal comes to new realizations concerning his relationships to others, himself and God. In the end, his experiences reaffirm his life on the East coast and the identity he has there so he ultimately turns his back on the road and the possibility of a different identity for himself through participation in other communities.

At the beginning of the novel, Sal Paradise is disillusioned with his identity as established by cultural standards in 1940s America. He has just received a divorce from his first wife and does not know how to define himself without this relationship. Sal's spiritual disillusionment with the identity he is forced to accept by society is reflected in his physical state at the very beginning when Sal states, “I had just gotten over a serious

illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead" (Kerouac 3).

According to Michael D'Orso, Sal's disillusionment is caused by a dissatisfaction with the overtly industrial Cold War America of the late 1940s and his place within that society as a middle-class white male (24). In his state of disillusionment, Sal is susceptible to the alluring promise of freedom from the identity with which he is trapped in this society offered by the exploits of a new acquaintance, Dean Moriarty.

Sal hits the road with Dean in an attempt to escape his life on the East coast, capture the American dream of freedom, and thus discover a new spiritual direction for his life. William Holmes points out that Sal's real journey is inward, and if Dean and Sal "seemed to trespass most boundaries, legal and moral, it was only in the hope of finding a belief on the other side" (qtd. in Charters xxx). Sal and Dean, "through the spiritualization of their own lives" and reconstruction of their own spiritual identities are attempting to "respiritualize America" by proving the American dream to be alive and well (Nicosia 345-6). For Sal, the road offers "a beguiling promise of escape and renewal" on his quest for a satisfactory personal identity by affirming the American dream of individualism and success (Birkerts 75). Sal begins his journey disillusioned and unsure of his own identity, but hopes to find reassurance in the American promise by experiencing the essence of the American people and land while on the road and thus creating a new and individual definition of self.

The narrative structure of the book underscores Sal's basic identity problem. Although Sal travels across the country many times, he always returns to New York and the life he left there. Sal Paradise is thus split between two lives: his life on the road and

his life at his aunt's home in New York City. Warren French argues that the novel itself "is intensely focused on only the half of [Sal's] life that he lives on the road" and "only the most fleeting references are made to the life he lives off the road" (37). Of course, the reader hardly notices the omission because it is Sal's life on the road which is the most interesting and exciting to the reader (French 37). This is the part of his life in which Sal develops the new knowledge which will affect the direction of his entire life. Each section of the novel chronicles a separate cross country trip and each trip begins with Sal's depression and yearning for escape from his life in New York City. While on the road, Sal's journey becomes increasingly more frenzied finally resulting in a retreat back East, his road life leaving him as depressed and dejected as his life in New York had. At the end of Part I and Sal's first cross country trip, Sal is "sick and tired of life" and begins the journey home (Kerouac 106). This duality in Sal's life is important because it is always to his comfortable life at home, being cared for by his aunt, that Sal retreats when the road life becomes too difficult.

The different and conflicting qualities of each life causes Sal's split identity between his life on the road and at home. His own view of his uncertain identity is expressed in a brief moment of pure lucidity on the first morning of his road life:

I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was—I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds, I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon. (Kerouac 17)

Throughout the novel Sal continues to see himself and others he encounters on the road as “ghosts” indicating their lack of a true existence in the world which surrounds them.

It is through his friendships with others that Sal attempts to reach a new knowledge concerning his own identity. The hobos Sal meets on the road provide him the greatest feeling he has with any community of belonging to one group of individuals. During his first trip, and on his way to Denver and the community of college friends who await him there, Sal catches “the greatest ride in my life” which was “a truck, with a flatboard at the back, with about six or seven boys sprawled out on it, and the drivers, two young blond farmers from Minnesota, were picking up every single soul they found on that road” (Kerouac 24). While traveling across the Midwest, this group of hitchhikers and hobos become a part of a community which extends across America as Sal discovers while talking to Gene:

“Do you happen to have met a fellow called Big Slim Hazard somewhere?”

And he said, “You mean the tall fellow with he big laugh?”

“Well, that sounds like him. He came from Ruston, Louisiana.”

“That’s right. Louisiana Slim he’s sometimes called Yes-sir, I shore have met Big Slim.”

“And he used to work in the East Texas oil fields?”

“East Texas is right. And now he’s punching cows.”

And that was exactly right; and still I couldn’t believe Gene could have really known Slim, whom I’d been looking for, more or less, for years....”

“Well, damn me, I’m amazed you know him. This is a big country. Yet I knew you must have known him.”

“Yessir, I know Big Slim pretty well. Always generous with his money when he’s got some. Mean, tough fellow, too; I seen him flatten a policeman in the yards at Cheyenne, one punch.” That sounded like Big Slim; he was always practicing that one punch in the air; he looked like Jack Dempsey, but a young Jack Dempsey who drank.

“Damn!” I yelled into the wind, and I had another shot, and by now I was feeling pretty good. (Kerouac 29)

During this ride, Sal becomes a part of the traveling hobo community which extends across the racial and geographical boundaries of America.

Yet Sal goes on to meet other hobos on the road who do not conform to this wonderful sense of community feeling because they like himself are lost. On Sal's trek back East after his first journey on his own, he meets the Ghost of the Susquehanna, a hobo who is as disillusioned by his life on the road as Sal is with his life on the East coast. The Ghost of the Susquehanna "serves a pivotal symbolic role in the novel, complimenting the gang's ghostlike existence" (Goldstein 61). The old hobo acts as a prophet who commands Sal to follow him to a bridge; across which Sal may find the spiritual goal of his journey (Goldstein 61). However, unlike the old hobo, Sal does not completely belong to the road as he himself observes: "the old hobo walked right in the road in the teeth of advancing traffic and almost got hit several times. I plodded along in the ditch" (Kerouac 104). Ultimately, Sal and the hobo "never found that bridge" (Kerouac 104). Like the bridge he seeks to show Sal but never finds, "the old hobo connects to the mad dreams of these American youth; their spiritual malaise and craziness" (Goldstein 61). Sal eventually makes his own path by hitching a ride with a man who "told me I was on the wrong road. I suddenly saw the little hobo standing under a sad streetlamp with his thumb stuck out—poor forlorn man, poor lost sometimeboy, now broken ghost of the penniless wilds" (Kerouac 104). His experience with the old hobo who has been too long on the road causes Sal to be "filled with a poignant awareness of [the hobos'] loneliness, their isolation, both spiritual and physical" (Feied 65). It is the same type of isolation Sal himself has felt on the East coast, and

eventually he will learn that this isolation and the isolation of the road are of the same kind.

Sal's friendship with Dean Moriarty is the most significant single relationship Sal forms while on the road, and through this friendship Sal comes to realize many things concerning his own identity and conceptions of good and evil. This friendship is an attempt by Sal to create a meaningful relationship with another individual. He is instantly attracted to Dean:

Because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time. (Kerouac 8)

But eventually Sal, Dean, and their friendship will burn out. French notes that Sal's friendship with Dean begins "after the breakup of a marriage and depicts the finally unsuccessful effort to establish an intimate bond" (36). Sal never completely understands his relationship with Dean because he perceives Dean at different points throughout the novel as both Satan and God. This is the first illustration of Sal's slow realization of the potential for both good and evil within each person and communities in general. Dean's ultimate betrayal of Sal will play an important part in Sal's new conception of God and realizations concerning good and evil. In the beginning, however, Sal and Dean hit the road together in an attempt to escape their dissatisfaction with American life and together they seek an elusive spiritual goal which includes a new self definition within a satisfactory community and relationship with the land.



Sal and Dean attempt to escape time and place on the road and the social and political attitudes incorporated in them by uniting time and place in the single idea of “It.” Both Sal and Dean are trying to cope with the relentless confines of time with its social and political institutions. D’Orso points out that with Dean’s “urgent speech patterns” and need for fast driving and a tight schedule are all attempts to include as much as possible of experiences and places in a given amount of time (261). Together they attempt “to reduce time and space to smaller and smaller increments until they disappear altogether as measurements of activity” and the moment takes over (Dardess 203). Dean provides his own definition of “It” for Sal:

“Here’s a guy and everybody’s there, right? Up to him to put down what’s on everybody’s mind. He starts the first chorus, then lines up his ideas, people, yeah, yeah, but get it, and then he rises to his fate and has to blow equal to it. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he *gets it*—everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops. He’s feeling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his bellybottom strain, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing.” (Kerouac 206)

Everyone’s thoughts—the past, the future—everything is included in “It” as Dean explains. In the same way, Sal and Dean continually strive for “kicks” in a need to eliminate the past and future and live solely for the experience of the moment (D’Orso 262). During most of their cross country trips, Sal and Dean go to many jazz bars across the country. The improvisational jazz music they find there is a musical expression of this same need to create a moment which is completely self-contained. Dean admires the saxophonist Slim, noting that ““Slim knows time,”” because his music is able to transcend it (Kerouac 176). Unfortunately, Sal’s dream of the Shrouded Traveler who “was pursuing all of us across the desert of life and was bound to catch us before we

reached heaven” foreshadows the inevitable force of time, with all of the political and social structures it contains, as well as death which will eventually catch up with him (Kerouac 124). Throughout the novel, Sal pays close attention to the cycles of time indicating his inability to truly escape the structures it contains. He is always aware of the passing of seasons and the novel itself “completes one cycle in the life of the narrator, since at the opening he has just lost one wife, and at the close he has finally found another” (Nicosia 348). Both time and space catch up with Sal in the end and with them are the social and political institutions, such as marriage, which they contain.

Although Sal does not completely understand that a place in a community is the elusive goal of his spiritual quest, he does recognize that his quest has an immediate and palpable goal of cultivating a lasting relationship with another individual. Specifically, he is searching for a woman to marry so that he may create an identity for himself as “husband” with all of the characteristic attributed to that identity by American society. Near the end of Part I, while Sal prepares to leave San Francisco because he is dejected once more by his life on the road, he cries “Oh where is the girl I love? I thought, and looked everywhere, as I had looked everywhere in the little world below” (Kerouac 79). He admits this to Dean and a few others: “‘I want to marry a girl,’ I told them, ‘so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old. This can’t go on all the time—all this franticness and jumping around. We’ve got to go someplace, find something’” (Kerouac 116). Even Dean agrees with him, admitting to Sal later “‘We know life, Sal, we’re growing older, each of us, little by little, and are coming to know things. What you tell me about your life I understand well, I’ve always dug your feelings, and now in fact you’re ready to hook up with a real great girl if you can only find her and cultivate her

and make her mind your soul as I have tried so hard with these damned women of mine” (Kerouac 186). Sal never rejects the idea of marriage, an institution of the society with which he is at odds, indicating once more his inability to truly escape the social structures of middle-class white America. He yearns for marriage because it is a permanent bind to another individual and thus a confirmation of his own identity within the confines of a relationship established by social institutions.

The most meaningful relationship Sal has with a woman during the course of his adventures is with the Mexican woman Terry whom he meets in California. For fifteen days, Terry and Sal “were together for better or for worse” (Kerouac 85). Perhaps more important than his relationship with Terry is that, for the duration of those fifteen days, Sal attempts to become a part of the minority way of life which he idealizes because it is outside the white American society he is attempting to escape. He recognizes a connection with the Mexican community of California and knows that the “Okies” of the area “thought I was Mexican, of course; and in a way I am” (Kerouac 97). Sal attempts to define himself and establish his place in the Mexican community both through the perceptions of him by the “Okies” as well as through his own yearning to be a part of the Mexican community. One vivid example of Sal’s attempt to enter this community comes when Sal joins the black and Mexican workers in the cotton fields. Although Sal enjoys the field work which brings him closer to both the land and his fellow workers, his lack of skill as a cotton picker indicates his failure to connect with this community:

We bent down and began picking cotton. It was beautiful. Across the field were the tents, and beyond them the sere brown cottonfields that stretched out of sight to the brown arroyo foothills and then the snow-capped Sierras in the blue morning air. This was so much better than washing dishes on South Main Street. But I knew nothing about picking

cotton. I spent too much time disengaging the white ball from its crackly bed; the others did it in one flick. Moreover, my fingertips began to bleed; I needed gloves, or more experience. . . . My back began to ache. But it was beautiful kneeling and hiding in the earth. If I felt like resting I did, with my face on the pillow of brown moist earth. Birds sang an accompaniment. I thought I had found my life's work. Johnny and Terry came waving at me across the field in the hot lullal noon and pitched in with me. Be damned if little Johnny wasn't faster than I was—and of course Terry was twice as fast. They worked ahead of me and left me piles of clean cotton to add to my bag—Terry workmanlike piles, Johnny little childly piles. I stuck them in with sorrow. (Kerouac 96)

By working in the cotton field, Sal becomes closer to the Mexican community and especially with the land, but he also realizes in a drastic way that he does not completely belong to that community.

The indications that Sal cannot become a lasting part of the Mexican community he finds in California are found in his experiences in the cotton field, while hitchhiking, and in Mexico itself. After only a few days work in the cotton fields he “could feel the pull of my own life calling me back” (Kerouac 98). Although he and Terry make plans for her to meet him in New York, “we both knew she wouldn't make it” (Kerouac 101). She is not a part of the world to which he is returning. Together they could not even get a ride hitchhiking, symbolizing the rejection of their union by the society of America. Sal thinks to himself that he “hated every one of [the boys in the passing cars]. Who did they think they were, yaahing at somebody on the road just because they were little high-school punks and their parents carved the roast beef on Sunday afternoons? Who did they think they were, making fun of a girl reduced to poor circumstances with a man who wanted to belove? We were minding our own business. And we didn't get a blessed ride” (Kerouac 88). Yet Sal himself does not stand by Terry in the end and returns to his old East coast life with the money his aunt has wired him from New York. When Sal and

Dean travel to Mexico later in the novel, Sal makes a final distinction between himself and the Mexican community when Dean comments on the sweat of the children lining the road: “‘It’s not the kind of sweat we have, it’s oily and it’s always there because it’s always hot the year round and she knows nothing of non-sweat, she was born with sweat and dies with sweat’” (Kerouac 298). The political and social pressures this minority group confronts in everyday life are always present in their community just as the sweat is always present on the faces of the children. Terry and the others of the Mexican community with whom he lives and works as well as the Mexican children he observes in Mexico do not have the security of a safety net to which they may retreat. Sal and Dean have the choice to participate in the minority communities they encounter, but the people of those communities, however, do not. Sal can retreat at any time to the middle-class comforts of his aunt’s house and has the option, which he utilizes more than once, of wiring her for money. In the end, Sal succumbs to the social and political pressures of America and realizes that the interracial relationship he has with Terry and her community cannot last as he cannot ever become a lasting part of the community to which she belongs.

One reason, Sal strives to become a part of this Mexican community is due to the strong bonds he senses between the individuals of such minority communities. During his second stay in Denver, Sal sees these strong connections in the black community there. In Part III of the novel, Sal decides to move permanently to Denver after having experienced a great time there, in Part I, while visiting his college friends. However, once Sal arrives in Denver alone, he is not content because Denver the place has lost its meaning since the group of friends with which he had identified the city are no longer

present. Initially, Sal envisioned himself becoming a part of “Middle America, a patriarch,” but he discovers “nobody was there—no Babe Rawlins, Ray Rawlins, Tim Gray, Betty Gray, Roland Major, Dean Moriarty, Carlo Marx, Ed Dunke., Roy Johnson, Tommy Snark, nobody” (Kerouac 179). Wandering through the streets he repeats to himself, “it was the Denver Night; all I did was die. Down in Denver, down in Denver, All I did was die” (Kerouac 181). His wish to be a part of the minority community he sees in Denver only brings a stronger need to cultivate relationships of his own. Along the streets, “a gang of colored women came by, and one of the young ones detached herself from motherlike elders and came to me fast—‘Hello Joe!’—and suddenly saw it wasn’t Joe, and ran back, blushing” (Kerouac 180). So strong is Sal’s desire to create strong relationships with others that he wishes to adapt his identity in order to become a part of this community:

I wished I were Joe. I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad, strolling in this violet dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America. The raggedy neighborhoods reminded me of Dean and Marylou, who knew these streets so well from childhood. How I wished I could find them. (Kerouac 180)

Although Sal idealizes the minority way of life because of the strong community ties between the individuals, he knows he cannot become a true part of their community from his experiences with Terry in California. Instead, he wishes to find the friends who most closely fit into his white middle-class sense of community and thus confirm his already existing identity as a white middle-class American male. Sal sets off once more to find Dean in San Francisco, and along the way he sees “God in the sky in the form of huge gold sunburning clouds above the desert that seemed to point a finger at me and say,

‘Pass here and go on, you’re on the road to heaven’” (Kerouac 182). Thus, it is clear that as Sal travels closer to the community to which he belongs, Sal is also attempting to travel closer to a union of himself, others, and the land.

Sal’s final realization of his identity is related to his conception of God and His relation to people and the land. Both Sal and Dean identify the concept of God with the same minority class they idealize and of which they have attempted to become a part. After realizing his incapability of becoming a true part of the Mexican life he had embraced in California with Terry, Sal states “I looked up at the dark sky and prayed to God for a better break in life and a better chance to do something for the little people I loved. Nobody was paying any attention to me up there. I should have known better. It was Terry who brought my soul back” (Kerouac 96-7). A little girl in Mexico reminds Sal of the Virgin Mary because her eyes were “like the eyes of the Virgin Mother when she was a child. We saw in them the tender and forgiving gaze of Jesus” (Kerouac 298). The Jazz musicians Sal and Dean discover on the road become the very embodiment of God. After a particularly moving jazz session Dean shouts excitedly ““There he is! That’s him! Old God! Old God Shearing! Yes! Yes! Yes!”” and “when he was gone Dean pointed to the empty piano seat. ‘God’s empty chair’” (Kerouac 128). Sal’s conception of God does not place Him above people and ordinary things, He is present in people themselves like Terry, the Mexican child and the black musician. However, Sal’s identification of the minority community with the very concept of God will later result in his final disillusionment as he is not able to justify the dual nature of good and evil that his developing concept of God incorporates.

Sal sees God not only in the minority communities which he idealizes, but also in everybody and everything which exists. Although they cannot explain it, their life on the road has proved the existence of God to Sal and Dean. Dean explicitly states that ““we both understand that I couldn’t have time to explain why I know and you know God exists”” (Kerouac 120). God is connected to everything, Dean explains later, “all things tied together all over like rain connecting everybody the world over by chain touch”” (Kerouac 138). Sal comes to this same realization by observing the slowly passing country side: “As the river poured down from mid-America by starlight I knew, I knew like mad that everything I had ever known and would ever know was One” (Kerouac 147). The realization of this connection which is begun by the road is once again connected to the physical road when Sal tells Dean later, “The thing that bound us all together in this world was invisible, and to prove it pointed to long lines of telephone poles that curved off out of sight over the bend of a hundred miles of salt” (Kerouac 210). Yet Sal’s new concept of an invisible, omnipresent God is not complete, and he later comes to realize the dual nature of this God as well.

Sal’s disconnection with his physical environment is an expression of his disconnection from others and the God which is a part of them. Sal strives for a relationship with the land throughout his journey on the road because this relationship is an integral part of his own identity. Sal attempts to connect not only with the Mexican community as illustrated before, but also with the land through his work in the cotton fields. The best illustration of Sal’s perception of his own alienation from the land and thus a part of himself is seen on his trip to Mexico with Dean and Stan. At the end of a



frantic night; Sal, Dean and Stan sleep in the open air with each settling into a different position:

Dean took a blanket and laid it out on the soft, hot sand in the road and flopped out. Stan was stretched on the front seat of the Ford with both doors open for a draft, but there wasn't even the faintest puff of a wind. I, in the back seat, suffered in a pool of sweat. I got out of the car and stood swaying in the blackness.... I jumped up on the steel roof of the car and stretched out flat on my back... I realized the jungle takes you over and you become it. Lying on the top of the car with my face to the black sky was like lying in a closed trunk on a summer night. For the first time in my life the weather was not something that touched me, that caressed me, froze or sweated me, but became me. The atmosphere and I became the same. (Kerouac 294)

Unlike Dean who places himself in the road and in direct contact with the land, Sal sleeps on top of the car, secure in his relationship with the land as long as the steel of the car supports him from behind. Sal's experiences the land from a secure point supported by the industrial world of which he is a part.

Sal's final physical and spiritual breakdown occurs after confronting an industrially-based Mexican community in Mexico which conflicts with Sal's conception of the agriculturally-based Mexican communities of California with whom he had once attempted to identify. In the beginning of the novel, Sal identifies all Mexican people with the Mexican community which he found while working in the cotton fields of California. At the end of the novel, Sal once again experiences the same strong community between people and the land while traveling through the Mexican countryside. However, Sal finds in the community of the Mexican countryside the desire to become a part of the same industrial civilization he seeks to escape. Before driving into Mexico City near the end of the novel, Sal observes the Mexican children who line the road and steadily watch the car:

All had their hands outstretched. They had come down from the back mountains and higher places to hold forth their hands for something they thought civilization could offer, and they never dreamed the sadness and the poor broken delusion of it. They didn't know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and roads and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way. Our broken Ford, old thirties upgoing America Ford, rattled through them and vanished in dust. (Kerouac 299)

These children yearn for the industrial society represented by the Ford automobile which Sal desperately attempts to escape. In Mexico City, Sal finally comes face to face with a Mexican community living completely in an industrial society. From the countryside of Mexico, Sal, Dean and Stan drove past “long, ragged adobe slums stretched out on the plain; we saw lonely figures in the dimming alleys. Soon night would come. Then the city roared in and suddenly we were passing crowded cafes and theaters and many lights” (Kerouac 300). The minority community Sal had idealized has failed him as he sees that they like the white American society of which he is a part can be lured away from rural communities bound together as people both physically and emotionally by the land which supports them both economically and spiritually.

It's Sal's disillusionment with the Mexican community and Dean's final desertion which ultimately causes Sal to create new theories concerning the potential for good and evil found in both communities and individuals. His spiritual disillusionment is reflected in his physical breakdown. Immediately after arriving in Mexico City, Sal “got fever and became delirious and unconscious. Dysentery” (Kerouac 302). Dean does not stay with Sal and deserts him after receiving a Mexican divorce from Camilla. Sal looks at him from his bed and “didn't know who he was any more” (Kerouac 302). As he heals, Sal realizes “what a rat” Dean could be, but then Sal says to himself: “I had to understand

the impossible complexity of his life, how he had to leave me there, sick, to get on with his wives and woes. ‘Okay, old Dean, I’ll say nothing’” (Kerouac 303). Sal sees that Dean has given in to the evil potential within himself. Dean has been torn between his potential to be either God or the Devil just as the Mexican community has been torn between rural and urban life. Sal cannot allow the two to exist simultaneously because “by choosing one side or the other, by declaring once and for all that Dean is a ‘rat’ and nothing else or by declaring that he is ‘God’ and nothing else, Sal could rest on the security of an unambiguous position” (Dardess 206). This unambiguous position, however, will result in Sal’s ultimate disillusionment and resolution to return to his life on the East coast and an end to his life on the road.

Sal’s life on the road has led him to new realizations concerning his own identity through his relationships with others and to the land as well as to new conceptions of an omnipresent God which includes all individuals. Sal understands and accepts the concept of a universal community of all people because everyone is connected because God is found in each person. In turn, Sal has identified with Dean, the hobos he has met on the road and the minority communities with whom he has come in contact. Although “he had found people like himself,” he sees how easily corruptible they can become by their very capacity for evil (Kerouac 280). Sal has seen the potential for good and evil in individuals and larger communities, but he cannot accept that the potential for evil does not necessitate the existence of evil itself. In Sal’s eyes, Dean and the Mexican community have been corrupted by their very capacity for evil. For Sal, there cannot be the existence of both good and evil at the same time in an individual or community. Ultimately, he sees that he too must be corrupted, and so he resigns himself to his present

life and identity in New York with no hopes of belonging to a different community in which he can develop a more satisfactory sense of his own identity. There can be no freedom promised by the American dream since the capacity for both good and evil will ultimately corrupt leaving no place for a personal decision between the two.

Sal eventually returns to New York City from his journey and commits himself to the role American society has assigned him as a middle-class white male and remains as disillusioned with the American dream and its promise of freedom as he had begun. In New York City, Sal finds “the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes that I had always searched for and for so long” (Kerouac 306). Yet when Sal calls out his name to her from the street below her window, thus expressing the identity that name signifies, he “heard [his] name resound in the sad and empty street” (Kerouac 306). He has become nothing more than a “sad paradise” as the promise of freedom to create his own identity has escaped him (Charters xxii). He commits, although reluctantly, to this new woman and the institution of marriage just as he commits himself to the “materialistic world of bad taste and conspicuous consumption epitomized by the final Cadillac ride” (French 42). Sal deserts Dean in New York City as Sal and his friends leave to go to a Duke Ellington concert at the Metropolitan Opera: “the Cadillac was parked and ready to go. Dean stood outside the windows with his bag, ready to go to Penn Station and on across the land” (Kerouac 308). Sal is “unable to communicate with Dean” because “Sal has been on the road, but never of the road;” he is now “left behind glass, the captive of his ‘white ambitions’” (French 42). These ambitions, however, are no worse than the “senseless nightmare road. All of it inside endless and beginningless emptiness. Pitiful forms of ignorance” (Kerouac 254). In Mexico, Sal has been to the “end of the road”

from which there is “no place to go, but back” (Kerouac 301, 66). The “con-man” in Dean could not tempt Sal back to the road this time because Sal has gained the only knowledge from it that he ever will: The road can provide a vision of freedom, but in the end there is no way to reach that vision. The bridge the old hobo was searching for could not be found because it was not there.

During his time on the road, Sal briefly enjoys participation in the communities of the traveling hobos and minority classes of America, and develops a significant, but brief, friendship with Dean Moriarty. His experiences with these communities and involvement with the land, however, lead him to an ultimate spiritual downfall. The knowledge he gains concerning the nature of good and evil do not allow for the freedom of an individual identity promised by the American dream and he returns to his original disillusionment within the confines of the industrial American society. The unity of all which Sal comes to understand is a unity of corruption because Sal views the capacity for both good and evil in each individual soul as the ultimate corruption of that same soul including his own. Sal cannot escape the identity assigned to him by the industrial American culture because the communities and individuals with whom he has developed relationships have each failed his idealistic needs. Ultimately, he returns to the lifestyle and identity accepted by American society by marrying and foregoing a life on the road.

## Conclusion

The main characters in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *The Ship* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* attempt to overcome an unsatisfactory political or social environment by embarking upon a quest for spiritual renewal. The characters search for a place to belong in both a physical environment and a community of people. During their journeys, they make startling realizations concerning the nature of good and evil and God which directly relate to their new understandings of their own personal identities and relationships to others and the land. In the end, the characters are able to apply this new knowledge to their own lives by either returning to their previous positions in society or developing a new sense of self based upon a new philosophy of life and understanding of personal identity related to community and environment.

A dissatisfaction with the political and social world in which they live causes the initial identity problems of the main characters. Elizabeth voluntarily leaves her native South Africa, but cannot escape the identity its hierarchical caste system and patriarchal order has placed upon her. Isam Salman buys a cruise ticket to escape the social structures which keep him from marrying Luma while Wadi Assaf spends his entire life in political exile instead of living in his occupied homeland controlled by the Jewish authorities. Sal Paradise rejects the contemporary values and structures of 1940s America by hitting the road and attempting to join a number of different cultural communities including the hobos who travel America without social restrictions and the minority classes whom he idealizes. The identities the characters are forced to accept within their initial societies are not acceptable so they begin quests through interactions

with others and new environments in hopes of returning with a new insight to direct their lives.

Since the characters search for both a physical and emotional place in their communities and physical environments, they each embark upon a physical journey which is paralleled by the more important psychological journey. In order to begin these quests, each character, in his or her own way, attempts to suspend the social and political institutions which hinder them by suspending the frameworks of time and space in which they act. Elizabeth's physical journey carries her into a voluntary exile from her homeland resulting in a mental breakdown which then initiates her psychological journey which effectively eradicates time allowing her the opportunity to realize the connection between community, personal identity and the land. Similarly, during their week-long Mediterranean cruise in the suspended reality created by the confines of the ship, both Isam and Wadi discover how important a homeland and relationships to other people are to their own identities and vow to include both in their plans for the future. Sal's travels take him across the vast physical expanses of America and Mexico with Dean in an attempt to experience "It," the moment without past or future. Unlike the journeys of Elizabeth, Isam and Wadi, however, Sal is never fully satisfied with the identity he assumes through his participation with others and the land and he returns at the end of his voyage to the same disillusionment with which he began. However, Elizabeth, Isam and Wadi are able to find a new direction for their lives at the end of their spiritual quests with the new knowledge concerning identity through a connection with others and the land.

Regardless of race, nationality or gender, the characters in these novels make the same significant discoveries concerning God which directly relate to the formation of their identities in their communities and environments. Each character comes to view God as an omnipresent being in all people and all environments. Thus, a universal community consisting of all people is possible due to the fact that God exists in every person. An individual's identity is inherently bound to others through this common bond as well as to the land since it too is a part of this omnipresent being and is the foundation upon which communities rest. Just as Elizabeth becomes a part of the community of Motabeng and forms a bond through her garden with others and the land, so do Isam and Wadi share a community with all of the people on board ship and plan to share their futures with the women they love in their homelands. Sal also finds this brief connection with others and the land on the road, but in the end it does not last for him due to his realizations concerning the nature of good and evil.

Each of the main characters discover that the capacity for good as well as evil is found in each individual person and not groups based upon race, sex, creed or nationality. In turn, each realizes that good is not only found in the victims and evil in the oppressors of the political and social constructs with which they had previously identified the terms; both are found in every individual and their every day interactions with people. Each person is capable of being God or Satan, Christ or Judas; but a choice is made by each person between the two and this choice directly effects the identity of the individual. Although Sal comes to these same conclusions concerning good and evil, he is unable to accept the freedom to choose good over evil. Through his experiences on the road, he has seen every individual and groups of individuals he has encountered become



overcome by the power for evil. For him, the two cannot coexist; evil will always dominate the good. Sal cannot find a community in which he may construct a satisfactory definition of himself because all communities will ultimately become corrupted as the industrial American society of which he is a part already has. His time on the road serves as an affirmation of his original disillusionment and he returns to his initial identity in the American social community with which he is most familiar. Isam, Wadi and Elizabeth, however, discover the benefits of community and the importance of land to their identities and attempt to grow from their new realizations. In all cases, however, the characters return with new knowledge concerning identity from their spiritual quests.

*A Question of Power*, *The Ship* and *On the Road* chronicle the quests of individual characters for a personal identity which is based upon the characters' relationships to the communities in which they find themselves and the land. Wadi Assaf's monologue in *The Ship* concerning the Bedouin's experiences is symbolic of the spiritual quests ventured by Elizabeth, Isam, Wadi and Sal:

what matters is that they venture into the unknown in order to return with something knowable, communicable. In the meantime, they will have defied the scorching sun, lived with the stars, overcome thirst, subsisted on a handful of dates, and worn out their buttocks on camel saddles that are not made for them. No doubt some of them are running away from something or other. Certainly they are escaping from societies where they don't feel at home, or women whom they are afraid to marry, or some kind of comfort that has bored its way into their hearts like woodworms in a piece of wood. But this kind of escape is toward something yet harder, something more intractable—and more worthwhile.... In the end, the explorer writes his book and publishes it. We read it in his foreign language to learn something new about ourselves, to learn where some of us are. (Jabra 74)

Bessie Head, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Jack Kerouac have revealed much concerning the relationship among God, individuals, community and land by revealing much about their interconnections. Each of these authors and their main characters are from different cultural backgrounds yet reach similar conclusions at the end of their journeys, thus illustrating the universality of these revelations for all people on their individual quests to form personal identities. The quests undertaken by Elizabeth, Isam and Wadi lead to a new direction in their lives and hence a new course of self definition based upon their new conceptions of good and evil, God and identity through a relationship with others and the land. Sal is unable to reconcile the new knowledge he has uncovered concerning the dual nature of good and evil, and returns to the unsatisfactory identity created for him by 1940s America while yearning for another identity and community which he knows are not possible because each will eventually become corrupted and as unsatisfactory as the one in which he presently finds himself. Ultimately, the journeys of Elizabeth, Isam, Wadi and Sal lead to new knowledge which leaves Elizabeth, Isam and Wadi with new personal identities based upon community relations and a connection to the land and Sal with nothing more than his initial identity and disillusionment.

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