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Enduring Suppression and Seeking Self: A Study of Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*

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Abstract:

As a South African writer, Bessie Head has encountered the trauma of being coloured closed by and the same she has replicated in her present work of fiction. Whatsoever took place in South Africa during 1960's, the present novel renders the factual sight of that time. Issues of bias and inequities, persons in exile, racism, African history, and interpersonal relationships are discussed in Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* as it deals with a black South African, victimized by apartheid in his country of birth and then treated unequally as a refugee in Botswana. It reveals how all black people suffer, have no rights to vote, poorly educated and often imprisoned and beaten. The enslavement of people by chiefs is depicted and then how they muster up their strength to stand up for their rights.

Keywords: Trauma, Dictatorship, Oppression, Struggle, Identity, Belongingness.

Head has shaped African literature with her unique perspectives and realism delivered through compelling characterizations, settings, and imagery. Her writing examines universal concerns, especially understanding of people's internal struggles to define and accept themselves and their roles in their communities, as well as the treatment of individuals and groups. Although blacks are considered as animals but still this novel is an endeavour to create a kind of utopia where people of all races can find themselves a place of solace, optimism, and integration. As Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Mask* completely denies the oppression of ruling party just because of one's birth in a particular community. As he says,

I am a Negro, and tons of chains, storms of blows, rivers of expectoration flow down my shoulders. But I do not have the right to allow myself to bog down. I do not have the right to allow the slightest fragment to remain in my existence. I do not have the right to allow myself to be mired in what the past has determined. (Fanon 179)

Head's novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* concords with the familiar South African themes of racial hatred, corrupting power and authority together with the political and spiritual exile. These themes are very well dealt with despair and gloom, but hope lingers throughout the novel. Head puts the blame of racist action on the shoulders of whole humanity and vividly portrays social inequities, poverty, and depression of the black people

by recalling her own experience as a refugee from Apartheid South Africa. Commenting on the novel in an interview with *Paris daily Liberation*, Head says:

My first novel is important to me in a personal way. It is my only truly South African viewpoint. The central character in the novel, a black South African refugee, is almost insipid, a guileless, simple-hearted simpleton. But that is the true reflection of the black South African personality. We are an oppressed people who have been stripped bare of every human right, we do not know what it is like to have our ambitions aroused, nor do we really see liberation on an immediate horizon.

Makhaya, the leading role of *When Rain Clouds Gather* dislikes whites and wants them to leave Africa, but his complaints seem somewhat abstract and unrelated in the village. Makhaya escapes to Botswana. Throughout the 1960s, many black intellectuals, political activists, and white liberals either have gone underground with their activism or fled the country. Those arrested, often spend many years in jail, and suffer unspeakable torture. Makhaya, the protagonist, a fetching young man from South Africa, has just released from jail. Unable to put up with the harsh treatment of the black people in his home country he decides to flee, in the hope that he will find the peace of mind, he has always dreamed of, in the vast land that makes up the rest of Africa. That is how he ends up in the village of Golema Mmidi, in the heart of rural Botswana. Makhaya, in the novel, epitomizes Head's attempt to abandon the past and to embrace all that is new and free in Botswana. All the turmoil of Head's life encouraged her to start a new life in a foreign land. According to the critic Heywood, Makhaya's decision to flee is not based on any overt political motive, but rather on a strong desire to calm his jangled black sensibilities and to come to terms with his personal inner chaos.

Bessie Head takes us back in time to pre-independence Botswana. The author describes Golema Mmidi, at the time of Makhaya's entry, as a country where after two years of good rain and seven years of drought, the rain clouds still gathered in September; a country whose people have been living under oppressive chiefs. As the story progresses, it is very clear that despite the pressures of tradition, the opposition of the local chiefs to development and the harsh climate threaten to bring tragedy to the community, but strangely there remains hope for the future. Maria, (one of female characters) points out to Makhaya, when he wonders how the people can withstand all the anguish, the drought, the demise of cattle, he may see there are no rivers on the ground but people keep rivers inside them that is why all good things and all good people are called rain. Sometimes the rain clouds gather even though cloud gathers not in the sky. It is all in people's heart. Sometimes disaster comes with change, with the death of the cattle, people begin to think of taking up crop production adapting Gilbert's (white man) modern methods, and they begin to think of being free from the oppressing chiefs. Makhaya has no place in the biased and racist South African society. He decides to move to Golema Mmidi where he hopes to find physical and emotional freedom and to live a better and fulfilling life. Makhaya's revelation to old Dinorego is a testimony to this view: "I just want to step on free ground. I don't care about people. I don't

care anything, not even the white man. I want to feel what it is like to live in a free country and then maybe some of the evils in my life will correct themselves”(WRCG 5). According to the critic, "The sources of his turmoil are both political and social and disillusioned, he wishes to distance himself from both people and politics" (Uledi-Karnanga 29). His main problem with South Africa is that he detests the use of derogatory terms such as when referring to the Blacks. He cannot marry and have children in a country where blacks are called ‘boy’, ‘dog’ and ‘kaffir’. To him this marks the dehumanization and objectification of the Blacks. Albert Memmi says, the colonised is projected as lazy, one with no sense of economy, jealousy, fanatical, a weakling who requires protection. He is always considered in a negative light. He is depersonalized. The living conditions imposed upon the colonized do not grant them liberty. Makhaya, being a black has confronted these negative terms attached to him. He wants to get rid of this humiliation and wants to lead a free life. Aime Cesaire comments in this remark, “Colonization ... dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that the colonizer gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal” (DC 41).

The correct term for referring to black South Africans is a highly contentious and litigious topic, is plagued by the legacy of apartheid. Around 1960, the white governments officially referred to the black population as ‘natives’, administered by the Ministry of Native Affairs. Afterwards, until the late 1970s, the apartheid government began referring to them as ‘Bantu’, with the ministry becoming known as the Ministry of Bantu Affairs (or administration) until 1978, when the ministry has gained the less toxic and innocuous name of ‘plural relations’. The use of the words ‘natives’ or ‘Bantu’ to refer to black South Africans is considered pejorative, because of its close association with apartheid and racial discrimination. Using ‘African’ on its own to refer to black South Africans is generally rejected by the non-black minorities. Many white Afrikaners consider themselves to be Africans, as do many Coloureds and Indians. The word *kaffir* is an extremely derogatory and insulting racial slur for South African blacks (the local equivalent of ‘nigger’ in the United States). It stems from the Arabic word *kafir* (non-believer) and has been widely used by Europeans to describe all black peoples.

Makhaya’s vision of Golema Mmidi is that of a semi-paradise which parallels and sharply contrasts with his home country South Africa, wherein, life is harsh and inhospitable to the extent that he is unable to marry and make children. There is no hope because children symbolise hope and continuity. Rather, he is looked upon and is treated like a “kaffir” and reduced to a kind of outcast. Hence, Makhaya, with the hope to begin a new life, leaves South Africa to Golema Mmidi. As Fanon says, “But I as a man of color, to the extent that it becomes possible for me to exist absolutely, do not have the right to lock myself into a world of retroactive reparations” (180). Gilbert, who because of finding it difficult to pronounce his name properly settles for “Mack”. In their discussion, it emerges that Makhaya has worked for a newspaper in Johannesburg. It is only where blacks can see themselves on front page, can read about their neighbours, but people go violent on this. Black people can rise but there is manmade law to make them down. This drives Makhaya crazy and lead to too much drinking and as a member of underground sabotage movement that took him in the jail. South Africa is presented as a constricting and inhibiting world in which one cannot blossom. As Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin White Mask* argues that the colonialism drives the

colonized to madness by rejecting any individuality-claims of the native. This explains why Makhaya leaves South Africa.

Makhaya's inner life has been a battleground of strife and conflict. Being born in a custom – bound and conservative of tribes of African continent where people walk around in skins and beads, and those who moves to the cities move with their tradition. Black man himself is responsible for his condition. Things would not have been so wrong if black man has not accepted the oppression. They call white man 'Bass' and 'Master' even if they shoot him dead. Black man lives the living death of humiliation. His agony piled up on all sides in a torrential fury because death is not only thing that is wrong, there thousand others as well.

Makhaya had seen it in the slums of all the cities of South Africa where black men had to live and how a man walked out of his home to buy a packet of cigarettes and never returned and how his seemingly senseless murder gave a brief feeling of manhood to a man who had none. Thousands of men died this way to boost up the manhood of a manless man. But there were many other reasons why a man became a murderer, and at one stage Makhaya had acquired enough hatred to become mass murderer. He lived on this touch – and – go line with his sanity, finding nothing to stabilize him. Of course, there was the gorgeous, exotic, exuberant round of the black man's life – his prostitutes, his drink, his music, his warm happy laughter. Eventually he slipped into this gay, happy round of living, but not before he had a look at the type of woman, he was supposed to marry and have children with. Makhaya is afraid of any relationship because life in Apartheid South Africa has conditioned him not to trust anyone because betrayal is never far away. Therefore, at the beginning, Makhaya is afraid to become emotionally involved with others because he fears pain and betrayal. However, Makhaya has been looking for human bounteousness. It is what "Make life seem whole and sane to him" (WRCG 61) and to full appreciate it he must also implicate himself. At first, he is uncommunicative with people like George Appleby Millipede. As Fanon says, "I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: that of demand human behaviour from the other...I have no wish to be the victim of the fraud of a black world" (179). But Makhaya soon discovers the human generosity of the people of the community. He is at first obviated by it because "it meant that if you loved people you had to allow a complete invasion by them of your life, and he wasn't built to face invasions of any kind"(WRCG 77). Makhaya nevertheless wishes he could put an end to his painful isolation and return some of this generosity. But to do so, he needs "to undo the complexity of hatred and humiliation that had dominated his life for so long" (WRCG 77). Makhaya's alienation from his emotions is too strong to be resolved immediately. Moreover, he is unable to replace his hatred with goodness all at once and by himself. In this regard, he needs to be guided, and Mma-Millipede becomes his teacher throughout the novel. Makhaya has a natural inclination to attain psychic wholeness for, unlike Matenge, "he has the sun inside him all the time" (WRCG 70) and he "understands anything that appeals to his generosity because in the depths of him, he is a lover of his fellowmen" (WRCG 130). Mma-Millipede's stance towards him is that of a mother and her kindness "seemed like mountains of affection for the lonely Makhaya" (WRCG 77). But Makhaya is looking for answers about how to live glowing and

coherently and Mma-Millipede tries her best to help him. She has never encountered so much hatred and agony in a person.

Makhaya is amazed by his close relationship with Gilbert, a White person-something he never saw in South Africa. They live in peace and unity. His life is free of hatred and fear for another human being. There is equality, as a Black man he's nobody's slave. He has regained a sense of manhood and personal dignity. The community values cattle ownership, sometimes at the expense of education, this worries Makhaya. Agricultural changes, from a hand-to-mouth life style to a profit making farming method. Farming as an economic activity blossoms in the village. Commercial farming seems to be overtaking communal subsistence farming. Paulina's son Isaac's fatal illness and death brought Makhaya and Paulina together, although not married. Chief Matenge's reign has been vanished the place is too advanced for a dictator. Adverse climatic changes destroy life. Droughts kill people and their crops. Makhaya finds himself home away from home. He fully identifies with Batswana people. He desires to be a millionaire via feeding the Batswana people. He sees himself as having a responsibility of determining his destiny. He believes that Blacks can take control of their lives.

Matenge takes his own life, which shows the sign of being mentally weak and challenged. Matenge's committing suicide marks complete end of tyranny or one-party rule. All villagers, including Joas Tsepe, discount him. Gilbert's co-operatives have unified the villagers in farming and economic production. Paulina is a person in charge of women in the village. At Matenge's death, Makhaya makes out that another oppressor will come and that he would probably wish to kill him too. But Makhaya undergoes a transformation, for he not only attains his psychic wholeness, he also learns how to listen to his inner god. At the end of the novel, Makhaya finally trusts himself and he knows that his god "would so much entangle this stupid young man with marriage and babies and children that he would always have to think not twice but several hundred times, before he came to knocking anyone down" (WRCG 187). Makhaya is now at peace and to find happiness he needs a woman who will "easily become a part of his inner harmony and peace" (WRCG 33). His marriage proposal to Paulina marks the concrete end of his journey. He has rejected in his mind the world full of ailments and faults. He has run and run away from it, but now the time has come when he can run and hide no longer and would have to turn round and face all that he has run away from. Loving one woman has brought him to this realization that it is only people who can bring the real rewards of living, that it is only people who give love and happiness. Makhaya finds in Paulina "a passionate and impetuous woman with a warm heart" (WRCG 77). Her own life has not been easy but her strong temperament facilitates her recovery from suffering. When Makhaya meets her, she is building a new life in Golema-Mmidi. She is also looking for a man who will bring her love, stability and be a father to her child. She quickly accepts Makhaya's proposal. Golema Mmidi becomes for her the land where she can be at peace.

When Rain Clouds Gather is Bessie Head's first attempt at exploring the personal quest. In this novel, Bessie Head merely suggests her ideas of the anthropomorphic view of god and the precarious balance of good and evil in every individual. Makhaya's story is very optimistic. The happiness he finds at the end is to some extent naive and reminiscent of fairy tales. The quest for mental stability is essential but Makhaya is not prepared to escape from

the Batswana people that would be an escape from freedom and all associated responsibilities. "In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself" (Fanon 179). Makhaya has a home now the home is Botswana's Golema Mmidi village. According to the critic, "Golema Mimidi offers a means of personal and economic independence and interdependence, where the qualities that count are benign austerity, reverence for the lives of the ordinary people...and, above all, the ability to break out of the prison of selfhood without destroying individual privacy and integrity" (Heywood 177).

At the end of the novel Makhaya has brought himself into being. He now belongs and is in high spirits to be treated like a living being. Having a decorum, reconciliation, and self-determination he has luxury of time to park himself, lighten up, and take pleasure in life like all and sundry. Being branded himself with the village dwellers, his self-construct and image has transformed. He has a brain of distinctiveness and belongingness, has a constructive outlook towards life. From hostile South Africa village to a warm Botswana one, Makhaya finally belongs.

Abbreviation used:

When Rain Clouds Gather- WRCG

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