

## Treatment of Apartheid in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*

Jitya Ranjan Saikia

Deptt. of English Dr. B.K.B. College, Puranigudam, Nagaon, Assam

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**ABSTRACT:** Apartheid commonly refers to the segregation of the blacks from the whites. The introduction of apartheid in South Africa is a significant factor for the mal-adjustment of people in South Africa and the neighbouring countries. It is because of apartheid policies that people started to run away from South Africa and sought refuge in the nearby locations. Botswana is such a country where maximum numbers of people were exiled during apartheid. Botswana was not a developed country during the time of apartheid; rather it was one of the poorest countries in Africa with a very low per capita income. It was located in South Central Africa bounded by Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, with Kalahari Desert occupying the western part of the country. Actually, it was an agriculture based country. Since it was a British Protectorate, so the amount of colonial domination was less in contrast to the other African colonies. The people exiled here, attained a happy and suitable life style free from the apartheid troubles. Bessie Head, being a writer originated from South Africa was also a victim of apartheid. Her practical experiences in life and her deep observations about the traumatic conditions of people during apartheid led her to voice against the inhuman cruelty of the policy through the medium of her literary works. Her famous novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) offers a vivid analysis about the conditions of people during apartheid in South Africa and their new life in the terrain of Botswana. Head found better scope in Botswana for justifying her practical views on apartheid and so she selected this country to be her destination in the novel. The history and society of Botswana changed after the exile of people and took a new shape. Botswana, in spite of being a land of low fertility, became a heaven for people seeking to escape the repression under apartheid. The pre-independent identity of Bechuanaland changed after its independence in 1966 which is a process of historical recreation for the people of the nation.

**KEY WORDS:** Racism, Apartheid, Colonialism, Exile, Violence.

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### I. INTRODUCTION:

Apartheid changed the socio-cultural identity of the blacks in South Africa and the neighbouring countries. Under this policy, they had suffered a lot and had lost all their belongings and finally were exiled to the nearby places. Bessie Head, being a victim of this policy reveals her inner experiences through her famous novel *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The novel deals with the themes of colonialism, apartheid, exile, racial difference, gender inequality, women empowerment and other social issues. All these are centred on the structure of the plot. The political circumstances as presented in the novel are quite significant. The characters in the novel are either exiled from another country or they simply came from other village or community. Their most difficult tasks are their own adaptation and their acceptance inside the community. Head practically experiences the social evils going on in the society and she practically examines the facts with realistic fervour. She writes the plot of the novel taking an account of her past experiences. The protagonist Makhaya, is presented as a South African refugee. Head uses her husband's struggle against the system, his determination to escape it, his exciting flight across the border into Bechuanaland to introduce the character of Makhaya. (Eilersen 96) Makhaya's escape from South Africa to Botswana is the beginning of a quest for psychic wholeness. He does not find happiness and peace in a country which forces him every day to fill his heart with hate in order to survive. He leaves South Africa because he refuses to marry and have children in a country where black men are called 'boy', 'dog' and 'kaffir' (16). Makhaya also "simply feels like moving out of a part of Africa that lies mentally and spiritually dead through the constant perpetuation of false beliefs". (16). He leaves his country in the hope of finding a better place in which he would be free and where he would find at last "the road of peace of mind" (20). However, he is deluded by the illusion that everything is going to solve itself out from complexities, because he is living in a free country. But additional disintegration and more shattering of his soul occur before he attains psychic wholeness.

### **Impact of Apartheid upon South Africans:**

This research paper focuses on the impact of apartheid upon the South African people like Makhaya who, because of this inhuman practice searches for peace and happiness for a better life. The concepts of refugeeism and tribalism threaten his quest, on the kindness of some villagers, and the struggle for food. The paper also takes into consideration his already existing alienation, resulting from a hateful traumatic past. When Makhaya arrived for the first time in Botswana, he became stateless. He could not return to South Africa and he had no proper identity in Botswana. Then he became a refugee and started living with this difficult situation. Botswana which was earlier known as Bechuanaland, a British Protectorate was an agriculture-based country. Here, the refugees like Makhaya were kept in specific villages to restrict their movements. They had to report regularly to the police station and their exile status kept them always poor. But Makhaya's story is optimistic in the sense that in spite of the interruptions from the politicians, he was well accepted by the villagers while most of the time refugees were not always given proper places with the local population (Eilersen 88). It is nevertheless time that has recreated the setting of the story in the village of Golema Mmidi that plays an important part in the process of exploration.

In the story of the novel, Makhaya's search for psychic wholeness is not an easy quest because he has to abandon the absolutes he learned in South Africa and change his brutal attitude for a softer one. In addition to this hard task, he must also adapt to a very different kind of life. He must get used to the transition between a free country and one in which apartheid exists to the core of the urban and the traditional societies. He arrives in Botswana with modern ideas and prejudices about the country and thinks, like Gilbert, that he can change people overnight. His main reproach of Botswana is its tribal system, and his obstinacy in seeing all disadvantages that prevent him from seeing how this type of political organization can help him attain inner peace. Therefore, at the beginning of the novel, apartheid in the form of tribalism alienates him and threatens his psychic wholeness. At the beginning of the novel, Makhaya's adopted position on the matter is clear. Later in the novel this list is revealed to the readers. The first criticism as evident in Makhaya's views concerns the position held by women of the tribe like this, "The ancestors made many more and one of the bitterest making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life. To this day, women still suffered (sic) from all the calamities that befit an inferior form of human life" (Head 92). Makhaya rejects the ancestral attitude to woman. He believes in gender equality and at his father's death he puts his personal belief into practice. "He made many changes in the home, foremost of which was that his sisters should address him by his first name and associate with him as friends" (15). Also, he is unashamed to do what is called 'woman's work'; he, for example, lights the fire and makes tea. At first Makhaya feels alienated because, as he says to Gilbert, he is trying "to run into 'a wife and children' but he cannot imagine that in a tribal community like Golema Mmidi, there exists a woman, who married and who will still have a life of her own" (32). To attach psychic wholeness, Makhaya will have to stop focusing solely on the negative aspects of his social environment. His second criticism about tribalism is the all-powerful position held by tribal chiefs. The village of Golema Mmidi is ruled by the chief Matenge, an avaricious and unpopular leader. His power is nevertheless limited because he must defer to his elder brother, paramount chief Sekoto. Sekoto is described as a "very charming man with three great loves: fast cars, good food and pretty girls" (49). He is a good man in so far as he does not abuse his power, which is one reason for his popularity among the villagers. However, a paramount chief is a parasite for the people, and because Sekoto is a chief, "he live (s) off the slave labour of the poor. His lands (are) ploughed free of charge by the poor. He (is) washed, bathed, and fed on the poor (sic), in return for which he handed out (sic) old clothes and maize rations" (24). He and Matenge hate each other, and the war that exists between the two brothers prevents the villagers from suffering too much from Matenge's evils. But on the other hand both chiefs use the villagers as a means to destroy each other, thus alienating specific individuals. In the first place, Matenge applied his hatred on Dinorego, "who had refused to sit on his advisory council" (45). Then he turned his hatred on Gilbert Balfour, who soon becomes the scapegoat of the two brothers. Sekoto is much afraid of Gilbert's ideas to uplift the poor; therefore he sends him to Golema Mmidi with the hope that Matenge will destroy him. On the other hand, Sekoto will also be satisfied if it is Gilbert who destroys Matenge. Sekoto and Matenge epitomize well the rigidities of tribalism. Both chiefs are selfish and self-centered and their only concern is to keep their powerful and privileged position, thus threatening the well-being and psychic wholeness in some of their subjects. Gilbert is the character who suffers most from tribal practices. He is the foreigner who believes in progress and development in a traditional village where people are quite pleased with their way of life and are particularly suspicious of everything new. Gilbert, like Makhaya, is also looking for his own peace of mind, and his quest brought him to Botswana, where he believes he can find psychological equilibrium. Gilbert has an optimistic view of life and wants to work hard for the welfare of humanity. He was dissatisfied with life in England, and, in order to find his inner peace, he had to leave. Gilbert finds his psychic stability in hard work, humility and helping people. In England he could not feel free because of the hypocritical mentality of the upper middle class status, from which he originates. His quest, like Makhaya's, is not an easy one. Sekoto and Matenge keep

turning Makhaya's projects down and because he is a foreigner, the community is suspicious of him. His experiences in Golema Mmidi have been a mixture of distractions and victories. When Gilbert arrives for the first time in Golema Mmidi, he has two challenges. One is, getting the villagers on his side so that they can put into practice his ideas of development and overcoming Matenge's opposition to his projects. Matenge is the symbol of anti-progress. He is afraid to lose his powerful position and its advantages. Therefore, he must by all means keep the people poor and uneducated. But everything is not that simple to Gilbert, who knows that centuries of habits, beliefs and superstitions are hard to change. Three years of battling had already made clear to him his own limitations in putting his ideas across to people, and he had also learned that change, though it was to take place at all, would in some way have to follow the natural course of people's lives rather than impose itself in a sudden and dramatic way. He did not have the kind of personality that could handle people, because everything in him was submerged to the work he was doing. He lacked sympathy, patience and understanding. Gilbert met his first difficulty when he misunderstands the complexity of the land tenure system. Chief Sekoto allowed him to fence the land, but Matenge and the villagers took it as an offence. Gilbert also denounced the 'cattle-post tradition', in which men as well as young boys live in isolated and lonely conditions, when agriculture could have provided them better living conditions. In spite of all the difficulties he encounters, Gilbert never gives up and his tenacity that brings him small victories which finally lead him to the end of his journey. Gilbert lives in Golema Mmidi three years before he begins to appreciate the results of his experimental farming. He has a hard time trying to adjust himself and his ideas to the people, but he turns some traditional habits to his advantage. He understands that the agricultural revolution "would depend in the long run on the women of the country" (43). Women are the backbone of agriculture and are on the land every day of the year, while men "shuttle to and fro with the cattle" (43). Therefore, it is necessary for Gilbert to involve women with the help of "someone with the necessary mental and emotional alienation from tribalism like Makhaya" (30). Gilbert's quest starts and ends in Golema Mmidi, and the name of the village is the proof of his agricultural success.

By the end of the novel, by showing concrete results to the returning husbands, Gilbert manages to change some aspects of the traditional ways of life. Gilbert's work in the village is not finished but the hardest part has been accomplished. His inner peace is no more threatened by the fear of a failure. He finds psychic wholeness not only in the success of his work, but also in his personal love life. He finds psychic wholeness more easily than Makhaya because he is untroubled by inner torment. Gilbert is a very down-to-earth person and his only aim in life is to be useful to his fellow men (81). Therefore, he spontaneously helps people in need without asking any questions or without wondering whether the person is trustworthy. Unlike Makhaya's, Gilbert's background contains "innocence and a lack of understanding evil" (97). To find his peace of mind, Makhaya must leave aside his feelings of hatred and regain his innocence and his natural goodness. In Botswana, away from the tumult of apartheid in South Africa, he can hear and listen to the inner voice of his heart which "keeps telling you that your way is right for you, that the process of rising up from darkness is an intensely personal and private one, and that if you can find a society that leaves the individual to develop freely you ought to choose that society as your home" (80). In Golema Mmidi, Makhaya finds such a community and no longer needs to put all his energy into fighting for his individuality. Consequently, this new freedom allows him to open himself to the people around him and to begin to work for the good of mankind. Makhaya is now at peace and to find happiness he needs women who will "easily become a part of his inner harmony and peace" (33). His marriage proposal to Paulina marks the concrete end of his journey. He had rejected in his mind and then a world full of ailments and faults. He had run away from it, but now the time had come when he could run and hide no longer and would have to turn round and face everything that he had run away from. Loving one woman had brought him to this realization that it was only people who could bring the real rewards of living, that it was only people who give love and happiness. (163) Makhaya finds in Paulina "a passionate and impetuous woman with a warm heart" (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 and Golema Mmidi also becomes for her the Promised Land where she can live in peace. When *Rain Clouds Gather* is Head's first attempt at explore the personal quest of the protagonist in the middle of apartheid complexities that have ruled people for a long time. In this novel, Head merely suggests her ideas and views of god and the precarious balance of good and evil in every individual without going further in her reflection. She extends her exploration of these ideas in other works published after this novel. Makhaya's story is very optimistic. The happiness he finds at the end is to some extent naive and reminiscent of fairy tales. Head opines that the quest for mental stability is essential but not found so easily. The apartheid rules are handled with proper reflection to the presentation of the issues and Head has become strong in dealing with them in structuring the novel at its best.

## II. CONCLUSION:

Colonialism destroyed the identity of the blacks in South Africa and the nearby countries with the application of different inhuman practices. Apartheid and Tribalism are two significant and complex inhuman practices which regulated the blacks and suppressed their desires for long. These cruel practices had shattered the common life of the blacks in the southern part of Africa. Originating in South Africa, apartheid had ruled out the identity of the blacks and they were racially differentiated from the whites in participating the public affairs. In my paper of Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*, I have found out the issues like colonialism, apartheid, exile, violence etc. as relevant to the structure of the novel and have gathered proper evidences in their justification. The re-creation of history in South Africa and Botswana is also explored under the impact of these issues.

Bessie Head had considered apartheid as a complex policy of the British under which they framed their individual plans and ruled people accordingly. The identity of the blacks was shattered and they started to hate the whites in all spheres of life. I have analysed the cruelty of apartheid upon the blacks and how history of these people was re-created in terms of their establishment of a new identity. Botswana was presented as the ultimate homeland for the people during apartheid. The notion of exile and tribalism are broadly discussed with a view to understand the actual position of the blacks not inside South Africa, but around Botswana too. The novel offers a clear idea about how history creates its own place in literature. The novel centres on the unification of characters that have diverse identities under the apartheid rule. South Africa, the hub of apartheid cruelties has problematised its native blacks who come under racial segregation. People of South Africa started to migrate towards the nearby countries becoming unbearable to the apartheid rules. The present novel explores the protagonist Makhaya's life in South Africa and later in Botswana. Being the victim of apartheid, Makhaya chooses Botswana as his ultimate refuge to escape from colonial suppression. There he finds a humane welcome by the natives and gradually changes his life with the activities inflicted upon him by the society. Bessie Head tries to focus on the changing nature of history in the construction of a nation's identity. In the social and historical construction of Botswana, the existence of racism marks the increase in the world's awareness of the representation of varying identities and cultural values of the nation. It is revealed that Botswana is a nation which is given a new identity by the juxtaposition of different cultural and ethnic diversities that come to the nation in different periods of history. The practice of apartheid in South Africa is the basic ground for the flow of citizens to the neighbouring countries who have brought with them different cultural ideas. Botswana is such a land where the unification of different people has changed its cultural and historical entities. The narrative of the novel speaks about the autobiographical mode of the novelist which is different from the traditional writings of Rousseau and other life writers. Here, Head uses a third person narrative structure to provide real life information about her individual life in South Africa and Botswana. Lurking on these ideas, this research seeks to explore Stephen Greenblatt's idea of new historicism, Homi Bhaba's notion of nation and identity, Edward Said's postcoloniality and so on. In logical terms, it can be concluded that the title of the research paper is properly justified with reference to the context of the text.

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