

## APARTHEID IN BESSIE HEAD'S NOVEL *WHEN RAIN CLOUDS GATHER*

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### Abstract

*Bessie Head, South African writer, born in 1937. She was raised by a foster family in a poor section of the coloured community in the Cape Province. She was sent to an Anglican Mission School for coloured girls; where she learned from Principal about her white mother, who died in mental hospital. The novel, When Rain Clouds Gather (1969) deals with the themes like colonialism, apartheid, exile and racial discrimination etc. The system of apartheid and racial discrimination adversely affected every section of the non-white population in South Africa. It denied all the rights of the population which are attributed to them as a human being. It was based on the principle of inequality, and its object was to keep non-whites as servile appendages of whites forever. The novel is set in the fictional village Golema Mmidi, in a remote eastern section of Botswana. Golema Mmidi represents Serowe, the village in which Bessie Head settled after moving to Botswana in 1964. The characters in the novel are either exiled or come from another village or tribe. Makhaya's story is very optimistic. Being the victim of apartheid, Makhaya decides to migrate Botswana as his ultimate refuge to escape from colonial operation suppression. The characters in her novels suffer from the effects of apartheid system, the administrative system of the Chief's neglect to the local development, traditional methods of cattle grazing, and women's lack of access to information about agriculture. At the end, all the villagers come together as if they do not want any evil to impose on them, and now they all are present there to suppress the evil quickly and silently.*

**Key Words:** Apartheid, Exiled, Oppression, Optimism, Victim, Infertility, Suppression etc.

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South Africa was colonized by the English and the Dutch in the seventeenth century. The segregation policy of the South African government existed before the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948. But the main difference they made was segregation policy as a part of the law. The primary aim of the National Party was to keep racial segregation. And for this reason, new legislation classified the population into four groups: Black, White, Coloured and Indian. This segregation policy of South African government is later known as 'apartheid'. In *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Hornby defines apartheid as "the former political system in South Africa in which only white people had full political rights and other people, especially black people, were forced to live away from white people, go to separate school etc" (58). Leo Kuper explains the basis for apartheid as, "Apartheid, in theory, rests on difference, not on inferiority. It thus recognizes the liberal rejection of the dogma of racial inferiority" (31).

Various laws were made for the enforcement of apartheid. These laws touched every aspect of social life, including a prohibition of marriage between non-whites and whites and the permitting of 'whites only' job. Some important laws were: Population Registration Act (1950), Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), Promotion of Bantu Self Government Act (1959), according to this act different racial groups had to live in different areas. This act moved all the black South Africans outside of the town. Africans living in the homelands needed passports to enter South Africa, aliens in their own country. Apartheid was a social system which severely disadvantaged the majority of the population, simply because they did not share the skin colour of their rulers. This policy lasted in South Africa until 1992. The challenge to this system of apartheid began with the founding of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912. The ANC's struggle emerged as the leader of black resistance in South Africa. Nelson Mandela was the great leader of ANC who was sent to prison for his involvement in armed struggle in 1961. In 1950, The Population Registration Act required

that all South Africans be racially classified into categories. The classification of these categories based on appearance, social acceptance and descent.

The system of apartheid and racial discrimination adversely affected every section of the non-white population in South Africa. It denied all the population the rights which are attributed them as a human being. It was based on the principle of inequality, and its object was to keep non-whites as servile appendages of whites forever. It was a system in which the non-white population were denied an opportunity for self-expression in any field. It was a system designed to enable the whites to monopolize both political and economic power. Various laws were made to keep races apart. Under Apartheid system, the future of the child was determined by his birth on the basis of colour of the skin and the race to which he belonged. As Ghorpade Pradnya observes,

White imperialism and its corollary apartheid are still the chief menaces vitiating the social fabric of Africa and the blacks are as helpless as ever against the forces of destabilization deliberately unleashed by the white people in power. It is a pity that Africans are still forced to live within the narrow confines of their tribal enclaves (48).

All the social facilities to blacks were inferior than whites. The condition of black woman is miserable during apartheid. She had to suffer at first for being woman and second for being black. In order to free from the rules of apartheid system, the black population launched a violent struggle. Their struggle gave invitation to the shootings of Nationalists and freedom fighters and political assassinations. In this connection R.K. Anand comments "The state appeared to be at war with its own people" (145).

Botswana was not a developed country at the time of enforcement of apartheid laws in South Africa. It was one of the poorest countries in Africa. It was located in South Central Africa bounded by Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, with Kalahari Desert in the western part of the country. It is because of apartheid in South Africa that people started to run away from South Africa and sought shelter in the nearby locations. Botswana is a country where maximum number of people were exiled during the apartheid. The history and society of Botswana changed after the exile of people and takes a new shape. In spite of being a land

of infertility, becomes a new hope for the people who exiled from South Africa, and tries to seek escape from the repression of apartheid.

Ashcroft Bill states,

... all writing in South Africa is by definition of form of protest or a form of acquiescence which it depends on how it situates itself within the political realities of the daily struggle against apartheid... But, since all writing in South Africa has obvious and immediate political consequences, it must *explicitly* engage in resistance to the oppressive regime in order to avoid acquiescence (84).

Bessie Head, South African writer, born in 1937. She was raised by a foster family in a poor section of the coloured community in the Cape Province. She was sent to an Anglican Mission School for coloured girls; where she learned from Principal about her white mother, who died in mental hospital. She was informed by the Principal about the interracial sexual relation between her white mother and an African stable boy, which was illegal according to the Immorality Act of apartheid. This incident was very shocking to Bessie Head. She worked for several newspapers in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth. Her political involvement as a member of Pan Africanist Congress led to her brief arrest. She lived in Botswana, as a refugee from 1964 until she was granted Botswana citizenship in 1979. Her novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* deals with the themes like colonialism, apartheid, exile and racial discrimination etc.

Bessie Head, being born in South Africa is also a victim of apartheid. Her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969) examines her decision to live in exile rather than stay and fight with the apartheid system inside South Africa. Her deep observation and practical experiences about the traumatic conditions of people during apartheid leads her to voice against the inhuman cruelty of the policy, through the medium of a literary work. Her renowned novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969) offers a vivid analysis about the conditions of people during apartheid in South Africa and their new life in Botswana.

The novel is set in the fictional village, Golema Mmidi, in a remote eastern section of Botswana. Golema Mmidi represents Serowe, the village in which Bessie Head settled after

moving to Botswana in 1964. James Trevor remarks, “*When Rain Clouds Gather* is a simple narrative in which Makhaya escapes South Africa to find sanctuary in Botswana. Bessie Head explores the complex tensions within the protagonist and the process of adjustment to a new life” (81). The novel deals with the themes of colonialism, apartheid, exile, racial difference, gender discrimination, women empowerment and other social issues. The characters in the novel are either exiled or come from another village or tribe. The protagonist of the novel Makhaya Maseko is a South African refugee and he leaves South Africa because ‘...he could not marry and have children in the country where black men are called ‘boy’, ‘dog’ and ‘kaffir’. He dislikes the black men are called like this. The continent of Africa was vast without end and he simply felt like moving out of a part of it and that was mentally and spiritually dead through the constant perpetuation of false beliefs’ (11).

Botswana earlier known as Bechuandland, a British Protectorate, and an agriculture-based country. Here, the refugees like Makhaya were kept in specific villages to restrict their movements. They had to report the police station regularly and their exiled status always keep them poor. But, the story of Makhaya is optimistic in the sense that in spite of the interruptions from the politicians, he was well accepted by the villagers.

Makhaya’s story is very optimistic. Being a victim of apartheid, Makhaya decides to migrate to Botswana as his ultimate refuge to escape from colonial suppression. As Mane Tejaswini and Ghorpade Pradnya observe,

The migrants experience a sense of displacement or dislocation. They are uprooted from their native culture. Their sensibilities and reactions are governed by their inherent culture. In the process of migration there arises the conflict between the new and the old. Migrants expect acceptance in the new environment, and at the same time they still cling to the old world. They face varied situations, problems of rejection and acceptance (48).

The protagonist Makhaya, is a black South African journalist, who flees his country after serving a jail sentence. Makhaya spends two years in jail for his anti-government activities. Bessie Head’s novels and short stories repeatedly tell the story of a traumatic



experiences, her suffering of colonization and trauma of patriarchy, trauma of tribalism. The characters in her novels suffer from the effects of apartheid system, the administrative system of the Chief's neglect to the local development, traditional methods of cattle grazing, and women's lack of access to information about agriculture. Makhaya describes the life in South Africa as '...it's a lot of life that they rise up but there are man-made laws to keep them down there. After a time it begins to drive you crazy. You either drink too much, or you join underground sabotage movements which are riddled with spies. You keep a piece of paper in your pocket with a plan to blow something up, and you get thrown into jail for two years before you've blown anything up (30).

Makhaya seeks freedom from racial oppression and restraints of traditional or tribal society. He rejects oppressive social customs and sex defined roles. He expresses dissatisfaction with his own name:

'It's Zulu,' the young man said. I'm a Zulu.' And he laughed sarcastically at the thought of calling himself as a Zulu.

'But you speak Tswana fluently,' the old man persisted.

Quite drunk by now the young man said rather crazily,

'Yes, we Zulus are like that. Since the days of Shaka we've assumed that the whole world belongs to us; that's why we trouble to learn any man's language. But look here, old man, I'm no tribalist. My parents are- that's why this saddled me with this foolish name. why not call me Samuel or Johnson, because I'm no tribalist' (3).

He rejects the ancestral attitude to women. He believes in gender equality and after his father's death he puts his personal belief into practice. He is the eldest person in the family, and there is a custom that elder brother should be called 'Buti' and being an elder brother, he should be given respect. But, Makhaya makes changes in his home after the death of his father. He tells his sisters to call him by his name, as he wants to associate himself as friend, as equal to sisters. When his mother protests, he says, "Why should men be brought

up with a false sense of superiority over women? People can respect me if they wish, but only if I earn it" (10).

The village Golema Mmidi is ruled by the Chief Matenge. He is described as "... an overwhelming avariciousness and unpleasant personality- soon made him intensely disliked by the villagers who were, after all, a wayward lot of misfits" (18). Sekoto 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. On the other hand, both chiefs use the villagers as a mean to destroy each other. Matenge first applies his hatred on Dinorego. Dinorego refuses to sit on his advisory council. 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 symbolize the rigidities of tribalism and apartheid system. Both the Chiefs are selfish and self-centred. Their only intention is to keep their power and position.

Gilbert is a character who suffers a lot from tribal practices. He is a 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. He finds a peace in helping people, humility and in hard work. In England he could not feel free because of the hypocritical mentality of upper middle-class status from which he originates. Gilbert knows the centuries of habits, beliefs and superstitions are hard to change. He uses different ideas to help and change the condition of poor people. Chief Sekoto allows him to fence the land, but Matenge and villagers take it as an offence. Gilbert also denounces the 'cattle post tradition', in which men as well as young boys live in an isolated and lonely conditions. In spite of all the difficulties he encounters, Gilbert never gives up and his persistence that brings him all victories which finally lead him to the end of his journey.

In South African traditional society 'The women were the traditional tillers of the earth, not the men. The women were the backbone of agriculture while the man on the whole were cattle drovers' (31). Therefore, it is necessary for Gilbert to involve women with the help of 'someone with the necessary mental and emotional alienation from tribalism to help

him accomplish what he had in mind. Three years of uphill battling had already made clear to him his own limitations in putting his ideas across the people, and he had also learned that change, if 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 from on top' (26). Unlike Makhaya, Gilbert's background contains 'innocence and lack of understanding' (97).

In Botswana, away from the commotion of apartheid in South Africa, Makhaya 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 in 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). Makhaya's new freedom in Botswana allows him to work for the goodness of mankind. His marriage proposal to Paulina marks the concrete end of his journey. He rejects the life full of ailments and faults. He has run away from it. To Makhaya, 'Loving one woman brings him to the realisation that it was only people who could bring the real rewards of living that it was only people who give love and happiness' (171). When Makhaya meets Paulina, she is building a new life in Golema Mmidi. She is also looking for man who, will bring her love, stability and be a father of her child. She quickly accepts Makhaya's proposal and Golema Mmidi becomes for her the promised land where she can live in peace. At the end of the novel Gilbert manages to change from aspects of the traditional ways of life.

Chief Matenge's rigid attachment to the tradition finally leads him to destruction. After the death of Paulina's son at the cattle post, she is summoned by Matenge. He decides to humiliate Paulina for an unstated crime. He is jealous of Paulina's influence over women of the village. And he is also angry that the tobacco project has been initiated without his permission. There is a huge loss of the cattle of the villagers. They suffer the loss of their cattle due to drought and now looking for ways to preserve the rest of their herd. Instead of offering any help or words of comfort, Matenge accuses Paulina for the death of her own son. This creates anger in the mind of villagers and they all gather quietly in front of Matenge's house. But, Matenge never appears in front of the villagers. He closes the door and commits suicide. The people of the village have courage now to face the chief. No one called them but



they are running to the house of Matenge with the thoughts in their mind, "... but today they wanted to see his face when their cattle were dying why his cattle were safe...They wanted to see this man who had all the privileges, who had never known a day of starvation in this country of two years of good rain and seven years of drought. They wanted to know what his mood was like after these years of silence and mute disagreement" (184). People now have confidence and courage to ask questions to Matenge. Makhaya and Gilbert's efforts for the development of the village give them courage to face the chief. At the end, all the villagers come together as if they do not want any evil to impose on them, and now they all are present there to suppress the evil quickly and silently.

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