

The Politics in Identity: An Analysis of Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*

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Abstract

This paper examines and analyses the politics of identity in Bessie Head's novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*. This paper seeks to explore the question of identity as presented in this novel. It also analyses the thematic concerns connected with power identity and the vision of the author. It reveals Head's identity impacts in the commitments of choosing the characters like herself, suffer of identity crisis. These characters travel between points of discrimination to exclusion. Head uses her South African experiences to create an imaginary identity for herself through her characters in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The paper discovers that her vision of identity realization is achieved through her characters. The themes of love and brotherhood are typically achieved through the varying relationship. The women characters also yearn for equality in their marital relationships, these are determined women with minds of their own individuality. The paper concludes that Head uses these themes to interpret her views concerning identity creation and realisation.

Bessie Head, a South African writer protests against the oppressions and dehumanising experiences meted against the people of South Africa, shows a quest for survival and suggests a suitable identity for themselves through her writings. Head is a coloured, born in an asylum's hospital in South Africa, to a white woman who was considered mad. Her father was black a black men. Head was taken from her mother at birth and raised in a foster home until the age of thirteen. She attended missionary school and eventually became a teacher. Abandoning teaching after only a few years, she began to write for the *Golden City Post*.

As the political crisis deepened in South Africa in the 1960s, Bessie went to exile in rural Botswana where she remained in refugee status for fifteen years before gaining citizenship. It is in Botswana that her literary career began to blossom. Bessie Head's novels are nevertheless fiction and all her main characters have their own quest and their own means of attaining individual liberty. The aim of this present analysis is mainly to concentrate on the

characters of the novels and their quest for identity. Many of Bessie Head's protagonists have the position of outsider inside their societies. These characters are either exiles from another country, by force or by choice, or they simply come from another village or community. Their most difficult tasks are their identity adaptation and their recognition by the community. Bessie Head herself experienced the situation well. In 1964, she voluntarily exiled herself to Serowe, Botswana, where she accepted a teaching post. She left South Africa on an exit permit (which allowed a citizen to leave but not to return). For thirteen years she was a refugee. She was granted Botswana citizenship in 1979. From this experience came her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, whose protagonist, Makhaya, is a South African refugee.

Makhaya Maseko, a South African political activist and former prisoner, who flees to Botswana to escape from imposition of exile. At the South African-Botswana border, Makhaya befriends an old man, Dinorego, from the village of Golema Mmidi on the Botswana side. It is from Dinorego, that Makhaya learns of a British white agriculturalist named Gilbert Balfour who is attempting to introduce co-operative farming methods to Golema Mmidi. Eventually, Makhaya joins Balfour in his noble enterprise but as fate would have it, their efforts are opposed by a tribalistic and exploitative reactionary sub-chief called Matenge and his semi-literate Pan-Africanist henchman, Joas Tsepe. Already notable at this stage of the novel are its explicit concepts of tribal and racial identities and power, as evident in its characters' backgrounds, roles and functions. Matenge and Tsepe's opposition is eventually defeated when Gilbert, Makhaya and the fiercely assertive Paulina Sebeso combine with the other villagers against Matenge, driving him to suicide. Tentatively, co-operative farming is established and both Gilbert and Makhaya commit themselves to both the land and its people by marrying Maria and Paulina respectively.

The issue of power and identity in this novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, is uncovered when one realizes that Makhaya's exile has been caused by the injustices of the South African political system, with its basis in the construction of racial and tribal identities. The novel, thus becomes a proof of a discriminated Black South African's purpose to find refuge in a foreign land whose people would, possibly, not judge or oppress him on the basis of the colour of his skin. Mackenzie comments, "Makhaya Maseko's quest is to find inner peace of mind by a constructive engagement with the social world and in the world of Golema Mmidi, these desires are offered fulfilment" (*When Rain Clouds Gather* 22). But in Golema Mmiditoo, Makhaya is uplifted from the oppressed state while comparing with his previous downtrodden condition.

Head's novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* is the revelation of her intense loneliness and mental anguish she experienced throughout the larger part of her life, over issues of her identity as a refugee and a prohibited immigrant. Her experience is brought out through Gilbert Balfour, a white man who had himself come to Golema Mmidi in search of a personal identity. So, through Makhaya and Gilbert, Head brings out the issue of identity from different perspectives as both black and white search for stable and possibly authorized identities and roots they can claim as their own.

In the novel, the sign of rain clouds represents the people from every parts of the world gathered together for the goodness of GolemaMmidi. People like MakhayaMaseko, Paulina Sobeso, Gilbert Balfour have left their places and came to GolemaMmidi in search of an identity and settled where they lived with their desired dreams.

MakhayaMaseko leaves South Africa, a land where he has lived under sufferings caused by subjugation and the harsh realities of the racial policies of the postcolonial government. He wants to "... step on free ground" (4), and by living in a free nation where the people live with the ultimate liberation. Head clarifies Makhaya's reasons for leaving South Africa as not being civilized enough to support his pursuit for personal rebirth and reawakening. In South Africa, "...he could not marry and have children ... black men were called 'boy' and 'dog' and 'kaffir' (11).

However, it is a search for an individuality that is not just from the cultural chains but internal or divine. So, it is a communal effort to achieve it but couldn't possible only with the effort of an individual. Makhaya is much aware of his racial identity as he considered "...a Black dog for the amusement of white people" (128). Thus, when Dinorego asked Makhaya's origins, cynically he replies, "It's Zulu ... I am a Zulu. And he laughed sarcastically at the thought of calling himself a Zulu" (9).

In contrast, the villagers of GolemaMmidi cannot understand Gilbert's radical western agricultural practice of paddocking, as to them, the fence would only lead to changes in their traditional patterns of agriculture. They are anxious to retain their tribal practices as well as identity. Eventually, Makhaya's seeming 'pride' in his traditional identity returns when he finally seems to realize that in GolemaMmidi it is custom which takes care of people and supports family structures. Cultural identity, thus, becomes perceived as an integral part of the individual. This is especially evident with the onset of maturity and exposure to the values of community. This is seen when Makhaya, towards the end of the novel, realizes that "the poverty and tribalism of Africa [are] a blessing if people [can] develop, sharing everything with each other"(156).

The author has shared the view that language is central to understanding identity. Makhaya's confidence in Setswana enables him to pass for a Motswana, while Gilbert on the other hand, being unable to learn Setswana, remains virtually an outsider. Language becomes a basic tool of one's identity, as it creates and encourages identity. Thus, language results in an identity stability and consistency: "...the Tswana language [like] the bush, [belongs] to all Batswana people" (160). This image of linguistics however suggests bitterness in view of Head's own language dilemma in Botswana.

Similarly, Gilbert has left behind a life of pleasure in England but when he too feels excluded by the villagers, takes refuge in his memories and thinks back of England where, in his depression, he feels he belongs. He grows increasingly alienated and silent with each failure to understand Batswana culture and be understood by the Batswana people. Makhaya on the other hand, the fact that he speaks Setswana fluently, makes his 'outsider' status less obvious and thus less painful. Mackenzie comments, "Head's contention is that socially ascribed identities are false, misleading and degrading to the true inner person" (27). This is further compounded by the fact that he also happens to be black whilst Gilbert is white. What

these two then show is that on the basis of colour and language, one can either be taken in by a community or be rejected as different. Makhaya's arrival from South Africa, as well as his name, identify him as a stranger.

Gilbert, Makhaya and Paulina being strangers to Golema Mmidi, consciously involve themselves in agricultural work as, "they cannot exist unless they can live in the village in such a way that the changes that they bring about are necessary ... in determining who they are" (281). They therefore fight to turn the wasteland into a sanctuary of prosperity. Their obsession with the agricultural development of the village thus takes on the added dimension of incorporating them into the village and bestowing on them its identity. As Smith comments, "it would seem to suggest that Africanness is not a natural state of existence, [but that] it must be performed" (70). The characters of Bessie Head must dreadfully find new identities for themselves in the village through performance which might go unrecognized. It still becomes essential that they identify with their adopted land and, through service they prove their identity among the tribal villagers.

Works Cited

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