

**THE UNCANNY AND PATHOLOGICAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF APARTHEID'S  
INCARCERATION IN BESSIE HEAD'S *WHEN RAIN CLOUDS GATHER*.**

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**ABSTRACT**

*As a South African author, Bessie Head has chosen to write in the tradition of social realism. Drawing her artistic inspiration from the social circumstances surrounding her own life, she addresses the central issue which prevails in South Africa—the question of power and oppression. The thrust of this essay is to demonstrate that power and its mismanagement is a fundamental concept in Head's works. Using the sociological orientation of Raymond Williams, the paper will examine the use or abuse of power at the level of social relationships applicable to the apartheid South African context. Keywords: Uncanny, Pathological, Apartheid, Incarceration*

**INTRODUCTION**

In his essay, "Literature and Society", Raymond Williams establishes the nature of the relationship between these two separate categories, defining their correlation in terms of "mental structures" which "simultaneously organise the empirical consciousness of a particular social group and the imaginative world created by the writer" (21). In this respect, literature represents the consciousness of a people and evolves out of the group's cultural and historical heritage and experience. The writer's role, then, is to transcribe the consciousness of his social group in writing. Williams refers to the creative act as a "specific literary phenomenon". He elaborates:

(it is) the dramatisation of a process, the making of a fiction, in which the constituting elements, of real social life and beliefs, were simultaneously actualised and in an important way differently experienced, the difference residing in the imaginative act ... (25) .

The act of creative writing is, thus, a two-fold process. Firstly, by using his imaginative faculty, the writer encapsulates in fiction the various elements which constitute real social life. Secondly, while he faithfully records the ordinary facts of history, social development, and culture, the writer, through his artistic imagination, is also communicating these commonplace human experiences in a way that renders them strange and unfamiliar, agreeing with the eighteenth century English writer's view of poetry thus literature as "as what oft' was thought, but ne'er so well express'd" (Ils 298). Cecil Abrahams shares the theoretical understanding that a writer's vision is unavoidably shaped by the various social forces impinging upon his consciousness:

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum: it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. Literature, in both its interpretative and prophetic segments, grows out of the confrontation that the artist experiences in relation to the experiences of his society (13).

The literary experience is, thus, not an isolated one. What shape a writer's world view are not only his private beliefs, values or experiences, but also his personal encounters with the society he lives in. Moreover, since every society is distinct in its historical, political, and cultural background, variations in themes and stylistic approaches are likely to occur in its literary expression. Charles Larson acknowledges the in severable link between artistic endeavour and social consciousness in the African context:

if we think of fiction as growing out of the collective experience of the society in which the author lives - out of the reservoir of ideas and experiences of the total consciousness of the society itself - then the African writer has, indeed been the historian of his continent's increasingly widened outlook on life, moving from a virtually closed-off societal view of the village and the clan to an ever-widening world view (280).

As a South African writer, Bessie Head has herself articulated the direct and corresponding relationship between socio-political conditions and literary creation. In her essay, "Social and Political Pressures that Shape Literature in Southern Africa ", Head talks about the violence and savagery that characterise Southern Africa's history - "police states, detentions, sudden and violent mass protests and death, exploitation and degrading political systems" (20). How these circumstances have shaped her writing is significant. She says:

I only feel sure that the main function of a writer is to make life magical and to communicate a sense of wonder. I do admit that I found the South African situation so evil that it was impossible for me to deal with, in creative terms (22).

Depending on the theoretical basis for critical analysis, critics differ in their assessment of Head's achievements as a novelist. This is reflected in the varying viewpoints put forward by the literary critics, each of which operates from a slightly different critical perspective. The studies by Lewis Nkosi in his *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature* and Cecil Abrahams' titled "The Tyranny of Place: The Context of Bessie Head's Fiction" are insightful by way of what they offer in social criticism: both critics discuss at length on the significance of the protest elements in Head's novels. However, Nkosi's analysis seems to suffer an over-emphasis on the dearth of revolutionary potential of Head's work. On the other hand, Abrahams' more temperate and even approach takes us beyond the protest elements to the metaphysical aspects of Head's novels, relating the author's plight as a political exile to her artistic imagination and vision. While Nkosi and Abrahams regard *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru*, and *A Question of Power* to be of varying degrees of success, Arthur Ravenscroft in the "Novels of Bessie Head" brings the differing strands of the three novels together by emphasising their homogeneity - " ... each novel strikes out anew and also reshoulders the same burden" ( 174-86). While he does not neglect the political aspects of Head's work, Ravenscroft shows great sympathy and understanding for Head's role as a socially responsible artist. Marquard, Jean (48-61) merging the biographical with the historical approach, probes into the author's past as a background to understanding the themes of exile and commitment. Marquard interprets Head's portrayal of the outsider experience as "becoming African", a process which encompasses both spiritual renewal and social commitment. Taking a closer look at the South Africa of the apartheid era, chaos and the search for freedom both disputed the soul of the nation. There is always this insistence that Ezekiel Mphahlele puts it, "every writer is committed to something beyond his art, to a statement of value not purely aesthetic, to a criticism of life" (187).

Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* is explicit in its exploration of the nature of freedom under conditions of extreme social and personal pressure. The study, on *When Rain Clouds Gather*, deals with the search for roots from different perspectives, and as it affects characters of different social backgrounds, all victims of political, tribal, sexual or even religious power. The book reminds the reader, in the words of Ola Virginia, "of the drought—stricken world of Ngugu wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* where characters with different visions and problems bond together in search of political justice and spiritual regeneration" (61).

*When Rain Clouds Gather* is a story about a political refugee from South Africa, Makhaya Maseko, who enters Botswana illegally and settles in the rural town of Golema Mmidi. The town is inhabited almost exclusively by women for most of the year, as the men take their cattle to graze for extended periods away from the town. The villagers are aided in agricultural development by an Englishman, Gilbert Balfour, whose attempts to modernise agriculture and get the people to abandon subsistence farming are frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the local government, by the prejudices of the Batswana people and by the chief of the town, Matenge. Matenge bears a grudge against Gilbert for destroying his cattle speculation business through the establishment of co-operative for the cattle farmers. Makhaya finds a father figure in the village in the name of Dinorego, who is the father of Gilbert's love interest and eventual bride, Maria. Makhaya, shares with the very religious Mma-Millipede, a deep resentment of all the years of living under apartheid. Mma-Millipede tries unsuccessfully to drain Makhaya of his bitterness by preaching the gospel to him from her Tswana Bible. The novel takes its title from the strange phenomenon of rain clouds that regularly gather in Golema Mmidi although no rain falls, and the town suffers a drought for most of the year.

Makhaya's escape from South Africa to Botswana is the beginning of a quest for freedom. He cannot 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 is mentally and spiritually dead through the constant perpetuation of false beliefs” (16). Makhaya leaves his country with the hope of finding a better world in which he would be free and where he would find at last “the road of peace of mind” (20). However, Makhaya is deluded by the illusion that everything is going to sort itself out because he is in a free country. But additional disintegration and more “shattering” of his soul occur before he attains freedom. This paper will focus on Makaya’s and Gilbert’s search for inner peace and especially on the pathological concepts of refugeeism, prejudices and tribalism which threaten their quests. It will also take into consideration Makhaya’s and Gilbert’s already existing incarceration, resulting from hateful traumatic past and ideological leanings.

When Makaya arrives for the first time in Botswana, he becomes stateless. He cannot return to South Africa and he has no status in Botswana. He then becomes a refugee and must live with this difficult situation. In Bechuanaland, refugees were kept in specific villages to keep them together and to restrict their movements. They had to report regularly to the police station and their refugee dole kept them poor. But Makhaya’s story is optimistic in the sense according to Gillan Eilersen that, “in spite of the politicians, he is well accepted by the villagers while most of the time refugees are not always popular with the local population” (88). It is nevertheless true that the setting of the story in the village of Golema Mmidi plays an important role. The local population is quite different from the typical, rural one: “It was not a village in the usual meaning of being composed of large tribal or family groupings: Golema Mmidi consisted of individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life” (22). Makhaya’s integration is facilitated by an uncommon population of exiled individuals. Gilbert Balfour and Georges Appleby-Smith are British (23), while Dinorego, Mma-Millipede and Pauline Sebeso are from the northern part of Botswana (68, 75). The population is friendly and Makhaya is well accepted. Gilbert, the white agricultural expert, gives him a job the first day of his arrival. And more, George Appleby-Smith a British colonial police officer, not only grants him political asylum but also “sticks his neck out” for him so that he immigrates in Botswana. Makhaya’s adaptation could have therefore been easy was it not for two important factors: his own inner alienation and the tribalism he encounters.

Makhaya is in search of peace of mind. However, he does not trust himself and other people enough to make this search easy. He begins his quest with a negative attitude and believes that he will never find what he is looking for in Botswana and still less in the small village of Golema Mmidi. His first intention is to pass through Botswana: “I also ought to be passing through because I’m a refugee” (30). Makhaya does not know how to listen ‘to the voices in his heart’ which are guiding him to his inner peace. “But whatever it was, he simply and silently decided that all this dryness and bleakness amounted to home and that somehow he had come to the end of a journey” (17).

Makhaya soon forgets this promise and it will take all the tenderness and humanity of some villagers to remind him of it. Makhaya’s negative attitude is the result of a long and traumatic existence in South Africa. Apartheid destroyed Makhaya’s existence and caused deep psychological scars: “his nerves weren’t so good, too easily jangled by the irritations of living ... the inner part of him was a jumble of chaotic discord” (7). Makhaya’s life has been one of humiliation, hatred and revenge, while deep into his heart he is kind and gentle. He calls himself the Black Dog:

A Frankenstein monster only animated by the white man for his own needs ... He hates the white man in a strange way. It was not anything subtle or sly or mean, but a powerful accumulation of years and years and centuries and centuries of silence (133).

Makhaya concentrates his thoughts and energy on that hatred, turning it into plans of destruction. South Africa made him a potential murderer. Not so long ago, he had been sent to jail for “walking about with little pieces of paper describing how he was going to blow everything up” (19). On his arrival in Botswana, Makhaya still has that ‘wild element’ in him and wishes to kill Matenge: “He has seen and faced death too often to be afraid of it, and taking another man’s life meant little to him” (66).

This life of fear and hatred shaped a part of Makhaya’s personality and he learned to distrust people: he had a trick “of slightly averting his face as though no man was his brother or worthy of trust”(7). In South Africa it allowed him to survive, but in Botswana, it makes him arrogant and difficult to please and approach. When he meets Gilbert for the first time, he cannot conceive at first that a white person could be good and even less that he could be his friend. Makhaya also speaks impertinently to George Appleby-Smith who is only trying to help him and he cannot believe that the latter will really ‘stick his neck out his neck’ for him’ (61). Makhaya also prefers to avoid the villagers and when Paulina sends him her greetings through her little girl, he replies rudely and sends back a cruel message (78).

Another error Makhaya makes because of his South African conditioning is his

association of exile with freedom. He thinks that merely stepping into Botswana will change everything and that he will be totally free. Worse, he arrives with an individualistic and egotistical definition of freedom: “I don’t care about people. I don’t care about 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” (10).

The sources of his turmoil are both political and social; disillusioned, he wishes according to Uledi-Kamanga “to distance himself from both people and politics” (29). It explains why in the “worst tribal country in the world” (10), where the community takes precedence over the individual, Makhaya feels alienated. It is only later that he will partially recognize in the words of Abrahams that “the past cannot be escaped, that the tyranny of the place South Africa will haunt him and turn his Botswana exile into ‘an illusion of freedom’” (137).

Makhaya’s search for ease from his imprisonment is not an easy quest because he has to abandon the absolutes he learned in South Africa and change his ‘wild’ and 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 and between an urban and a rural society. Makhaya arrives in Botswana with

modern ideas and prejudices about the country and thinks, like Gilbert, that he can change people overnight. Makhaya’s main reproach of Botswana is its tribal system, and his obstinacy in seeing only disadvantages prevents him from seeing how this type of political organization can help him attain inner peace. Therefore, at the beginning of the novel, tribalism alienates him and threatens his psychic freedom.

*When Rain Clouds Gather* depicts a tribal structure that alienates all but its leader.

At the beginning of the novel, Makhaya’s adopted position on the matter is clear: “... he laughed sarcastically at the thought of calling himself a Zulu ... But look here, old man. I’m no tribalist ... I have a list of grievances against the tribe” (9). Later in the novel this list is revealed to us. The first criticism concerns the position held by women of the tribe: “The ancestors made many errors and one of the most bitter making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenial sense, as being an inferior form of human life. To this day, women still suffered from all the calamities that befall 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 equals and 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, when married who will ‘still have a life of her own’ (32). To attain freedom, Makhaya will have to stop focusing solely on the negative aspects of his social environment.

Makhaya’s second criticism about tribalism is the all-powerful position held by tribal chiefs. The village of Golema Mmidi is ruled by 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 insofar 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 lives 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, in return for which he handed out old clothes and maize rations” (24).

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 evil. 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 transferred his hate 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-centred and their only concern is to keep their powerful and privileged position, thus threatening the well-being and freedom of 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 good of humanity. He was dissatisfied with life in England, and, in order to find his inner peace, he had to leave: "I'm running away from England. You know what England's like? It's full of nice, orderly queues, and everybody lines up in these queues for a place and position in the world. I let all that go hang and hopped out" (32). Gilbert finds his 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, from which he comes (102). His quest, like Makhaya's, is not an easy one. Sekoto and Matenge keep turning his projects down and because he is a foreigner the community is suspicious of him. His experiences in Golema Mmidi have been a mixture of frustrations and victories.

To find his peace of mind, Makhaya must leave aside his feelings of hate and regain his innocence and his natural goodness: Dinorego "felt in Makhaya's attitude and utterances a horror of life, and it was as though he was trying to flee this horror and replace it with innocence, trust, and respect" (97). Makhaya needs time and the right environment to be able to feel and express love, and, being in Golema Mmidi is exactly what he needs. Gilbert's farming cooperative also makes Makhaya realize, for example, how ironic it is to use dynamite to kill people while it could be used to save hundreds of them. In Golema Mmidi, he uses dynamite to make dams that will bring water to the village while "not so very long ago, he had come out of jail for wanting to use this very dynamite against the enemies of human dignity" (137).

In Golema Mmidi, violence and hatred become unnecessary because it is believed that evil destroys itself. Dinorego explains to Makhaya: "in this country there is a great tolerance of evil. It is because of death that we tolerate evil. All meet death in the end, and because of death we make allowance for evil though we do not like it" (WRCG 27). Matenge's sudden death is another lesson not only for Makhaya's understanding of his own alienation from the more humane parts of his nature, but also one more step towards its healing. Angry at Matenge, he seriously wishes to kill him. Again, the irony comes with Makhaya's cutting down Matenge's body from the rafter after his suicide:

the God with no shoes, with his queer, inverted reasoning, had brought Makhaya, a real and potential murderer, face to face with the body of Matenge just hanging there and hanging there. 'Don't you see?' he said softly. 'Murder is small-minded business' (186).

This final event is another lesson for Makhaya and it modifies his radical thinking. Makhaya has just witnessed the importance of the community, which is one positive aspect of tribalism. What causes Matenge's death is the pacifist attitude of the whole community. All the villagers find themselves at the village centre and "they were at last of the same mind" (WRCG 176) and "Matenge had to barricade himself up, not because the villagers were about to rise up and tear him to shreds, but because he was an evil pervert and knew it" (177).

At first, Makhaya sees only the disadvantages of tribalism, and for him the community is synonymous with the oppression of the individual. Because Makhaya is looking for freedom the last thing he wants in Botswana is to be oppressed. In Golema Mmidi he learns that to belong to a community is a need every individual feels and that belonging does not enslave people when it is based on respect for one another. In fact, it is the essential link missing in Makhaya's life. For a lonely refugee, a stateless person like Makhaya, it is at last the feeling of belonging and the end of the journey- what Makhaya's heart calls at the beginning: "home" (17).

A cardinal trait of Golema Mmidi's community is its sharing, both material and spiritual. To belong to the community Makhaya must accept to open himself to the people and sacrifice some of his freedom in order to gain happiness and peace of mind. When he left South Africa, Makhaya's main objective was to find freedom at all cost, but now, "it wasn't a new freedom that he silently worked towards but a putting together of the scattered fragments of his life into a coherent and disciplined whole" (122). To achieve this, he is ready to try and involve himself, physically at first with agriculture, then emotionally with some of the community's residents. Makhaya is afraid of any relationship because life in South Africa had conditioned him not to trust anyone because betrayal was never far away. Therefore, at the beginning, he is afraid to become emotionally involved with others because he fears pain and betrayal. However, it is human generosity that he is looking for; it is what "makes life seem sane to him" (61); and to fully appreciate it he must also implicate himself. At first he is reticent with people like George Appleby-Smith who are kind to him or people who wish to know him better, like Paulina or Mma-Millipede. But Makhaya soon discovers the human generosity of the people of the community, and he is at first repelled 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" (71). 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" (71).

In Botswana, away from the tumult of 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 humankind. Makhaya is now ready to turn towards people for his salvation. He realizes that:

people are the central part of the universe of Africa, and the world stood still because of this ... He feels, too, that all the tensions, jealousies, frustrations, and endless petty bickering which make up the sum total of all human relationships were in reality unnecessary (135).

In fact this belief is necessary to his own survival, and in order to keep it alive he "combines the good in Gilbert with the good in his own society" (135). Makhaya discovers the importance of dependable friendships and the vital need to believe in people. He chooses his place in the society and wants to stay among the poor ordinary people (171). He now sees in poverty and tribalism a way of life that suits him and makes him feel peaceful: "the poverty and tribalism of Africa were a blessing if people could develop sharing everything with each other" (156). In Golema Mmidi, people are already working to create such a world and this revolution also belongs "to young people like Gilbert and Makhaya" (180). Makhaya finally understands Mma-Millipede's words about brotherhood. In a community where people are respectful of one another: "... you looked on the other man as your brother, you could not bear that he should want for anything or live in darkness" (180).

In him we observe Bessie Head's belief that man contains his own divinity and therefore people should treat one another as gods. Makhaya expresses this idea for the first time to Paulina: "...sometimes I think I am God" (143); and he believes that everyone has a god inside and that people's lives depend on their capacity to listen to the voices of their own god. In Makhaya's case, his god made him take "a long and perilous journey along a road where everyone threw things at you. Then he said you were small-minded if you wanted to throw things back"(186). Makhaya undergoes a transformation, for he not only attains his peace, he also learns how to listen to his inner god

The final union of this impetuous woman with the reserved Makhaya marks the end of the refugee's morbid speculations on the oppressors and the oppressed and his journey towards self discovery, peace and happiness. He finally grows out of the hate which was gradually consuming his being. In Ravenscroft's word:

Against a political background of self-indulgent, self-owing traditional chiefs and self seeking, new politicians more interested in power than people, the village of Golema Mmidi is offered as a difficult alternative: not so much a rural utopia for Africa of the future to aim at, as a means of personal and economic independence and interdependence, where the qualities that count are benign austerity, reverence for the lives of ordinary people (whether university-educated experts or illiterates villagers) and above all, the ability to break out of the prison of selfhood without destroying individual privacy and integrity (177).

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