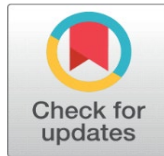
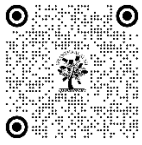


THE TRAUMA OF BLACK WOMEN IN BESSIE HEAD'S SELECT NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Before Nelson Mandela came to power in South Africa, the country's literature was basically a protest against the dehumanizing treatment of Black people by the White minority who controlled the country under the apartheid doctrine. This somehow led to a pervasive environment and socio-political instability. As a result, some authors set out to propose an ideal society for humanity while deciphering this social mystery. Bessie Head is one of them. This essay aims to analyse Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru* in order to show how her personal experiences and the dystopian South African society have influenced her desire for the ideal society.

Keywords: Trauma, Resistance, Subjugation, Apartheid

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this research paper is to investigate the idea of Utopia in two of Bessie Head's Novels. This demands a quick description of the dystopian South African society during the days of apartheid for a better comprehension. The South African society during Head's days was fundamentally undemocratic because the non-Whites who comprised up more than half of the population were ruled, oppressed and treated like second-class citizens. This set up was not comfortable for human survival. It is out of this dismal background that Head strives to construct a perfect society in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969) and *Maru* (1971). New historicism stresses that any significant literature needs to be done with an eye on history. Ross Murfin adds that "New historicists, like formalists and their critics, acknowledge the importance of the literary text, but they also analyze the text with an eye to history" (239).

The apartheid regime in South Africa came into existence in 1912 but was officially announced and adopted as a government policy in 1948. Jack Watson argues that Dr Malan used apartheid as his campaign slogan to canvas for votes in the 1948 elections which he won. Apartheid became genuine with the enactment of multiple acts/laws which prescribed segregations in various spheres. This was done with the purpose of obstructing the emergence of the black majority. Due to the socio-economic and political deficiencies of this program on the blacks, they started revolting against the policy. Most writers just departed the nation either on voluntary or imposed exile considering that most of their writings were under rigorous censorship.

In his article "Interrogating silence: New possibilities faced by South African literature..." Andre Brink points out that: The experience of apartheid has revealed that many sorts of levels of silence exist... Behind these loomed wider, greyer spaces, huge provinces of historical consciousness hushed by the power structure and invalidated by the prevailing discourse in order to make them inaccessible to other voices. This included the distortions of the right to the land, abuses in the name of Christianity, the extent of miscegenation between staunch Afrikaners and their slaves or servants, then enslavement of indigenous peoples in the interior strategies to ensure and perpetuate the marginalization of women in both black and white societies. (15)

Under this tense and tough situation, it became practically impossible for writers to compose. Those who had the bravery to write were solely out to foster internal resistance. Most of the texts that were written however were mainly aimed to attack the apartheid system. This explains why most of the authors were being chased. Derek Attridge and Rose Mary in their Introduction to writing South Africa, wrote:

South Africa has passed through a time that has for obvious reasons created a vast body of what one would call judgmental writings, both critical and creative texts that presuppose an ethical sufficiency to exist in the denunciation of apartheid and its perpetrators. For this reason, the current South African crisis forms a useful arena for the investigation of the uses and limitations of: as well as alternatives to judgmental writing. (7)

With this very sordid background, most of the South African writers decided to go on exile while some committed themselves in desperation.

Dorothy Driver notes that writers in exile were disconnected from writers at home, and none of them could simply claim a literary history. One notices there that South Africa was not certainly conducive to the flowering of creative literature and we understand that great literature generally work via the vision of a conventional outlook.

Unlike most South African writers who went on voluntary or forced exile, Head's predicament was much more horrible because she knew neither her mother nor her father. She has made this quite obvious in an interview with Lee Nichols: I was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, on the Sixth of July, nineteen thirty-seven? I did not have any parents. In fact, here is a form of tragedy related to my birth. My mother was a white woman of a very upper-class background. Her family was quite affluent and she obtained me out of wedlock from a Blackman. This succeeded in getting my mother labelled mad and by the time I was born, she had been admitted to the Pietermaritzburg mental hospital where I was born. (49)

Head was then raised up by foster parents. She was considered a curse because of her unique birth and ancestry. This carries with it a question mark. Her mother was therefore judged mentally sick after her delivery and hence was transferred to the psychiatric institution where she died shortly. This is verified by the remarks of a white missionary in *A Woman Alone*: "Your mother was insane. If you are not careful you'll grow insane exactly like your mother. Your mother was a woman. They had to lock her up as she was carrying a child by a stable lad who was a native". (4) Consequently, Head was rejected by her maternal relative. She was much preferred dead than being alive. As she grew older, she felt rejected and lonely in the world. After qualifying as a teacher and teaching for a few years at a Primary School for Colored Children in Clair wood –Durban, she resigned from her employment in 1958. She departed to work as a journalist for 'Gold City Post; a Drum Publication. This was a weekly newspaper dedicated to black leadership. During this time, she underwent untold suffering. But an unsuccessful marriage left her with a son with whom she was living in a two-roomed house without water and power. She defines her condition thus: "There must be many people like in South Africa whose birth and beginning are filled with calamity and disaster, the sort of person who is the skeleton in the cupboard or the dark and fearful secret person swept under carpet".(3)

Life for her was quite infilling. With the treason trial of 1961, Head lost many of her dear friends, accordingly, the sense of loneliness, violation, misery and horror pushed her to exile. Her involvement in the prosecution of a friend and in the activities of a banned political organization (PAC) inspired in her the impulse to leave South Africa for good.

Although, she was denied citizenship by Botswana in 1977, she spotted an advertisement on magazine for teachers in Botswana, she applied and as luck would have it, she secured a teaching post in Serowe in Bechuana land protectorate (1999:14). So covered by an exit permit, she took permanent exile in Botswana. In any case, she lost her job because of her sexual harassment by the Principal of her school. As a result, the school committee regarded her mentally sick and demanded that she should undergo a mental check-up. She nonetheless, stayed in Botswana under the guise of a refuge. So, neither South Africa nor Botswana gave a sense of accommodation for Head. After losing her work, she resorted to writing while attempting to leave Botswana. However, it should be remembered that her writing experience truly began in Botswana.

This part of my study discusses numerous attempts by Head to set in place a perfect society through desire fulfilment. She achieves this at the socio-cultural, economic and political levels. This falls within what is typically referred to as Utopian literature. "Utopia" here might be described as an ideal or perfect country or state, or any utopian system of political or social perfection. In literature, it refers to a thorough depiction of a nation or commonwealth ordered according to a system which the author suggests as a superior way of life than any known to exist, a system that could be introduced if the present one could be cancelled and people could start over. The word itself was coined by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 treatise of the same name. The roots of the word come from the Greek *ou* (not) and *topos* (place), therefore meaning "no place" or "nowhere". This is the type of civilization that Head tries to construct through fiction. She wants to construct a society in which everyone has a place. Everyone is accepted, happy, feels free as Edward Ako (1999) puts it: "Bessie Head depicts or imagines an ideal society, a kind of utopia, a land in which there is magic and wonder, a land of innocence, respect and trust, in short, a gathering of rain clouds." (148)

We observe that Head is out to present to the world a society in which there is good human relationship, a kind of world in which people feel for each other, work with each other, a society in which sex, race and skin color are not used as the standard for human competence or judgement, but a society in which prejudice is absent and everyone has respect for social norms and values. Above all, a society in which everyone feels at home and for the human race. Edward Ako (1999) affirms thus:

When people break away from their constrictions, when they abandon their prejudice and are eager to try something new, when what matters is the depth of one's spirit and not the color of the skin or sex when united, the people unite... their losses become their riches. (151)

Golema Mmidi, as represented in Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a kind of utopian community purified of prejudice and free of catastrophes. Social standards and values are widely respected and thus individuals flee from other hostile set-ups to seek consolation and a home in Golema Mmidi. We read, "Golema Mmidi consisted of people, individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life". (22) This is a civilization in which brotherliness, peace and love have a place.

This view falls in line with Obiajulu Ogwude's in her article, "Protest and Commitment in Bessie Head's Utopia": "Utopia is a good and idealized place, endowed with providing the greatest amount of freedom and happiness in parts of Botswana, Southern Africa and then as an ideal place that is nowhere" (71). Although Makhaya is neither physically behind bars or under house arrest, he finds South Africa limiting and passionately feels that he can flourish only in a free society: "If you can find society that leaves the individual to develop freely you ought to choose that society as your home". (80)

From the afore-going sentence, we can interpret that Golema Mmidi is a society which is not inhibiting. Human beings are free to aspire to whatever level feasible and to behave freely and go about life with every sense of belonging. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, human connections and interactions are directed towards a utopian set-up. Characters are in pursuit of happiness and the proper place. Makhaya has no place in the biased and racist South African society. He decides to move to Golema Mmidi where he hopes to obtain physical and psychological independence and to live a happier and fulfilling life. Makhaya's confession to elderly Dinorego is a witness to this view: "I just wanted to step on free ground. I don't care about anything not even the white man. I want to feel what is like to live in a free country and then may be some of the evils in my life may right themselves".(10)

Makhaya's picture of Golema Mmidi is that of a demi-paradise which mirrors and severely contrasts with his native country South Africa, wherein, life is hard and unpleasant to the extent that he is unable to marry and make children. Rather, he is looked upon and treated as a "kaffir" and reduced to a kind of outcast. Hence, he had to leave South Africa to Golema Mmidi. In this approach, there is no hope because children signify hope and continuation.

According to Makhaya, it is disadvantageous and important to relocate "out of a part of Africa that was mentally and spiritually dead through the constant perpetuation of false belief." (16) South Africa is described as a limiting and stifling world in which one cannot blossom. This explains why Makhaya leaves. From his experiences, we observe that suffering rather shapes an individual to achievement.

Human relationship in Golema Mmidi is free from apathy. Consequently, one person's problem is everybody's concern. Dinorego is a man full of kindness. He is not just fatherly, but attractive and responsible too. Socially, he is a kind of welfare officer with the purity of the soul. That is why he treats Gilbert and Makhaya as his own "sons". This he confesses in an exchange with Makhaya "I have no word to describe Gilbert, son... just as I accept you as my own son so do I take Gilbert as my own son".(27)

Dinorego's entire family likes Makhaya who is not their sort. They feel for him, and look at him as one of them. They demonstrate a lot of hospitality towards him. When Dinorego meets Makhaya for the first time, he instantly introduces him to his family. Food and drink is also supplied him.²⁸ The friendliness and brotherliness that is aimed towards Makhaya the stranger demonstrates that Head manipulates her characters to show that people can live together without class segregation between black and white which is her objective.

In the same narrative, Gilbert a White likes Makhaya passionately. He expresses the willingness to invite him for supper. Gilbert Believes that humanity no matter its history and origin is one. He is determined to ameliorate the agronomic situation of Golema Mmidi for the wellbeing of all. Thanks to his agronomic understanding, he is able to transmit agronomic know-how to the residents of Golema Mmidi for free. Gilbert is certain that a single man is incapable of bringing about a positive agricultural revolution. People must cooperate cooperatively to convert the landscape. His ambition is that all the cattle of Golema Mmidi shall graze on collaboratively owned feeding grounds (39). To accomplish this objective, he implements in close partnership with Makhaya and the women. About Gilbert we are told: "He was first and first and foremost a practical down to earth kind of man intently on being of useful service to his fellowmen" (81). Gilbert changes Golema Mmidi into a tragic free land. He works with the women to transform misfortune to prosperity. Here, he has disrupted the patriarchal structure that women are subordinate. This is Head's conscious attempt to build an ideal world separate from the norms of society. Through contemporary agriculture practices, the people of Golema Mmidi change a barren terrain to an evergreen one. They are able to produce enough food to eat and sell such that, the surplus and kitchen waste are transformed to cattle fodder. In this way, everyone is happy and healthy. As a matter of fact, marriage infidelity becomes a discourse of the past. Moreover, marriage abandonment induced by the mad search for grazing land by the men who use to abandon their families became unneeded. About this, we are told: Towards the conclusion of the long dry season they too left their watering grounds along the river bottoms, and walked with their cattle into the bush where the grass grew in tangled chaos under the trees and watered their cattle in the drinking holes of the wild buck. (161)

From this excerpt, we are led to understand that the men increasingly often abandoned their homes and went in search of grass to feed their cattle. Feeding the cattle well resulted in strong sales and thus they could buy all their necessities. About this, the narrator says: "The idea was to get capital in hand which would open up the way for purchasing fertilizers, seeds and the equipment necessary to increase food production in Golema Mmidi." (99).

Through cooperatives, Gilbert is able to halt subsistent agriculture, which was of little use to the people. He destroys the land tenure system that stratified the community into the rich and the poor and maintained the impoverished in a permanently poor position. Head's dramatized ideal world can be observed via Gilbert's concept of society, which is that everyone and everybody should work cooperatively together and reap the rewards collectively as we are made to apprehend in the ensuing assertion:

He wanted Golema Mmidi to be cooperative in everything as that was the only method of defeating the land tenure system in the tribal reserves and the only way of beating subsistent agriculture which was aimed towards making the poor more poor until eternity. (156)

In Golema Mmidi, personal sadness becomes community anguish. The death of Paulina's kid, for instance, is the concern of the entire town as everyone is heartbroken. This is a clue to new historicism which claims that literature is a product of society as man does not live in a vacuum. In African traditions, death and life are celebrated communally. On her part, Paulina is a really selfless woman. She works hard to enhance the society. She is really energetic. She communicates Gilbert's thoughts to the other women. This serves to open up the path for the agricultural revolution in Golema Mmidi. She is so indispensable to the rural community. Consequently, when Chief Matenge, an impediment to progress seeks to victimize her, the whole village community converges on him and he ends his own very life. This, further guarantees growth and happiness in the society.

Mma Millipede on her part, is the "people's mother". She is interested in the welfare of the entire community. Although she is aged, she is prepared to labor for others. She makes every move to see into it that Makhaya feels at home, and feeds well. She probes into his health state thus: "do you eat well... please inform me so that I can accompany you to the hospital as you are now far away from your home and relatives" (71). Thus, through her character, Head portrays ideal motherhood. This may be seen as Head's attempt at fraternization. A mother is a sign of life and motherliness and should be spread even if one is not a biological mother. She is able to plan the wedding of Maria and Makhaya as if they are her own children. In a utopian arrangement, distrust towards each other is nonexistent. People must trust one another: hence Dinorego (Maria's father) turns over to Mma Millipede the complete responsibility of his daughter's marriage.

The notion of utopia can equally be positioned in Head's *Maru* (1971) at the socio-cultural, economic and political levels. Socio-culturally, although the Leseding civilization is governed by the Botswanas who oppress and dominate the Masarwas (bushmen), Head utilizes her major character Maru to emplace an ideal set-up. Culturally, the Masarwa have traditionally been seen by the Botswana as people from the "bush tribe" who do not know anything. About this, a pupil is incited to disparage Margaret Cadmore Junior from the Marsawa tribe thus, "Since when did a bushy go to school? We take him to the jungle where he eats' mealie pap, pap" (17). As so, they are subdued and silenced. Head seeks to overcome this dilemma through her main character.

Maru is Witty because he has to set in place an ideal human civilization wherever there is respect for societal norms and values, by hesitating to be crowned paramount chief while figuring out a solution to equate the Masarwa and Botswana tribes. The inference here is that if Maru accepts to be crowned chief, he will have to see into it that the culture of the society (race prejudice) is preserved intact as we are given to understand:

If Maru takes over as supreme Chief, he would be expected as the custodian of cultural values to maintain the status quo; at least in terms of the way his people see themselves vis-à-vis the other. Maru's difficulty thus, is how to detach oneself from the unfortunate condition of events, how to retain his purity in the corrupted environment. (153) In order not to continue with bias, Maru discreetly calls on the king makers to give him chance to reflect over it. One is humiliated to consider that Maru does not desire the chieftaincy which every other individual will ordinarily desire. About it, he defines his position in the flowing lines:

"I never intended assuming the chieftaincy I was only born in it to see its horrors and its efforts on society. Everything I had done, had been an experience, experiment I just move on to further experiments" (70) Maru is motivated to bridge the divide between the tribes. He relates Moleka to his sister Dikeledi and by so doing he becomes closer to the Masarwa girl Margaret Gadmore. By getting married to a person of the "bush tribe" Maru connotes that, humanity is one. Head skillfully spans the gap between, the Mararwa. Thus, if a prince can get married to a female from the "bush tribe", it signifies he has deviated from the norm. Maru exploits the wedding of Dikeledi and Moleka to elope with Margaret Cadmore to a realm of fulfilment.

Head also leverages politics in Maru to put in place a perfect set-up. She equally does this through her main character Maru. Maru has insight. He banishes Seth, Pete and Morafi from society. These are all epitomes and promoters of bias. They aid Moleka to make life intolerable for Margaret. Maru is aware that if these people who are emblems of evil are eliminated from society, everything will go well. He consequently banishes them. In this approach, he purges society of racial segregation and sets in place human equality as Craig Mackenzie (1999) writes about Maru: "He envisions a world apart from petty human hatred and petty human social codes and values where the human soul roamed free in all its splendor and glory (46)".

Maru's relationship with Margaret Cadmore Junior is a groundbreaking act. When the Masarwa people in Leseding understand that Maru, a royal figure is married to one of theirs, they assume that their marginalization and inferiority has gone and hence hope for brighter days ahead. About this, Head in an interview with Lee Nichols (1981) underscores: When inhabitants of the Masarwa tribe learnt about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the narrow, dark airless room in which their souls had been confined for a long time. The wind of freedom which was blowing throughout the planet for all people, turned and flowed into the chamber. (53)

These Masarwas are thus, determined to challenge full force and to remove anyone will seek to look on or ostracized them. A new civilization is consequently in the creation since the chief-Maru is married to a Masarwa. It might be claimed that Bessie Head uses her imaginative invention to resolve challenges that were met in her culture. This is validated as Dorothy Driver (1993) underlines:

Using writing as some type of temple to go to some means of spiritual survival, Head constructed a home for a self out of what she saw as Botswana's potential to be a "cohesive whole". Her ideal community where the past is recalled in the present with the impression of a continuing and secure future, and not recognized and hence separated in terms of class and race. (166) We deduce that Head's narrative is a type of redemption. Her culture is devoid of any human conflict. Even if there is any, she eliminates the individual who seeks to block human progress. Thus, she is in absolute quest of a utopian society.

In this paper, we have seen that Head's work reflects a civilization that is in absolute desire for peace and harmony. She has done this by mustering people from varied cultural backgrounds and having them work together, by eradicating from society those who propagate prejudice and to compel her characters to turn down power if they had to obtain it by treading on others. It is imperative to emphasize that even though Head has projected a society in which human relationship is good and people feel for each other, work with each other in a society in which sex, race and skin color

are not used as the standard for human competence or judgement, all these remain a figment of the imagination. No such society can exist. It remains an idealistic endeavor. And so, we want to consider that art remains a tool of teaching for individuals to learn. We should nevertheless emphasize that dystopias inevitably close by presenting unpleasant, terrible, or otherwise terrifying outcomes for humanity. We can only continue to dream but they can be no perfect society. However, people may best exploit their environment and better conquer their issues; achieve their demands if they work in conjunction with one other. Instead of giving up in life, one should attempt to exploit his environment for his welfare. Hard work and human partnership as realized are a cure to human issues and a springboard for development.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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None

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