

Cross Cultural Identity and Hybridity in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clods Gather and Maru*

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Abstract

Bessie Head is one of the rare female novelists who give extraordinary contemporary voice. Her novels are deals about a small country in South Africa. Being bi-racial women, she overcomes many issues in existing South Africa. Bessie Head's novels portrayed the intricate relationships that exist between the constructive identity, discrimination, and violence. As a victim of racial discrimination in South Africa, Head was ideally placed to present a postcolonial critique of that society. Her novels present a expose of this racism. As women struggling to survive alone in a tribal culture, she experienced the hardships of patriarchal hierarchy. The protagonist in her novels both male and female struggle to survive the hardships of their lives. But novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* has been taken in a different perspective which discussed the features of Hybridity, syncretism, as a constitutive element in her novel.

Keywords: hybrid, multi culturalism, post colonialism, marginalization

Bessie Head, the south African-born novelist and short story writer, is one of the best-known women writers to emerge from South Africa in recent times. She has made her contribution to the literature of her country. Her life and works depicts the tragic conditions of South African life. She brings her life experience in her works in South Africa, focusing on the themes of racism and refugeeism. Head also published a number of short stories entitled *The Collector of Treasures* (1977) she has published a book called *Serowe: Village of the Rainwind*. Her last novel, *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984), is a historical novel which was describing about the setting of 19th-century Botswana. Head's work focused on the everyday life of ordinary people and their role in larger African political struggles during the Apartheid regime. Though she was brought up by Christians she was later influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism. Most of her novels have been written while she was exile in Botswana whereas her last work *The Cardinals* and her autobiography *A Woman Alone* published posthumously.

When Rain Clouds Gather depicts the story of Makhaya Maeseko, who is a political refugee from South Africa, who escapes to Botswana after serving a prison term for sabotage. He is taken to the village

Golema Mimidi by Dinorego, a village elder. In the village, Makhaya meets people who like him are seeking to make new and better lives for themselves in the harsh, drought-stricken land. He meets a British expatriate, Gilbert Balfour, an agriculturist who is trying to develop the skills of natives of Golema Mimidi. Gilbert sees in Makhaya an ally for helping the villagers to achieve greater self-sufficiency and recruits him to show the women to grow tobacco as a crop. Dinorego, his daughter Maria, Mma-millipede and the young widow, Paulina Sebesco, all share Gilbert's hopes for a better future and readily accept Makhaya into the community.

Makhaya and Gilbert wish to revive the poverty-stricken village of Golema Mimidi by introducing modern techniques face heavy opposition from an area chief, Matenge, who wants to preserve the old system. Ultimately, Paulina's son dies of tuberculosis due to distant cattle outpost during a drought. Her suffering is aggravated by Matenge's attempts to punish her, holding her responsible for her child's death. The villagers finally join hands challenging Matenge and his tyranny over them for the first time.

This novel focused on class, racial and gender issues within African society called doubly colonized. Head brings

into focus on culturally complex situations, depicted through two major relationships-between Makhaya and Paulina and between Gilbert and Maria. The very fact that Paulina is from northern Botswana while Gilbert and Maria belong to different races and cultures fosters tension and biases in their association. The cross-cultural identity of those relationships has wide changes to bring into the fore the problems of oppression and marginalization on the idea of race as well as gender. The novel has also introduced us to the characters like Matenge, the village chief, his brothers Sekoto, who is a paramount chief, and his friend, JoasTsepe. Through these characters Head emphasize the political environment in Botswana, the role of chiefs and the black tribalism ingrained in the African culture.

When Rain Clouds Gather follows a strict chronological with little digressions used to relate only to certain events that occur prior to the narrative time frame. The narrative quite realistically portrays the day-to-day occurrences in the lives of the simple village folks. This is clubbed with the naturalistic descriptions of the African terrain and the agricultural techniques employed by the villagers.

Maria and Gilbert are two different individuals belonging to two different cultures and races. Maria is a "... Busy, preoccupied, self-absorbed woman", who shows a rare self-confidence alien to her community. Gilbert and Maria have a good friendship and even a sort of camaraderie which may exist between the members of the same sex. Gilbert, being a broad-minded Englishman, suggests the idea of forming an alliance with a strong woman. The fact that Maria has "a life of her own" makes her even more attractive to him. He accepts her as she is a woman who has a mind of her own. He tells Makhaya,

She makes all these little rules and you can't budge her from them. Maria, however, turns down Gilbert's proposal of marriage knowing that a man of his intellect could not be happy with an uneducated woman like her. But much later when Gilbert is decided to marry Maria after a wait of eight years, it is an assertive man who goes to Dinorego's house to ask him for his daughter's hand in marriage (154)

The marriage between the two, however, changes their premarital equation and leads to the adoption of conventional roles. When Maria rejects Gilbert's proposal of living with him in his mother country, his reaction is too aggressive which causes Maria to beat a hasty retreat.

Head's delineation of the female characters is very important in the context of empowerment of women in African society traditionally plagued with gender inequality and bias. Paulina Sebesco has a tough persona. She plays a challenging role in the development of the cooperative in the village and also ensures the cooperation and support of the other women. "This pioneering energy is complemented by the fact that as a refugee she shares with other newcomers the image of rebelliousness against the status quo...her rebellion has specific sexual implications that touch upon her identity as a woman." (25) Paulina too is a newcomer to the village who has fled there to escape the tragedies of life. She is down and beaten but not defeated. She represents the new, forward-looking, liberal women.

Makhaya's relationship with Paulina, which is based on mutual respect and equality, becomes symbolic of the regeneration and advancement of a village. Thus it implies a freedom from any form of exploitation and recognition of individual strength. This can be seen in the manner in which the villagers rally against Matenge to fight for Paulina. As the novel ends, Makhaya is finally ready to propose to Paulina.

Bessie Head's another novel *Maru* revolves around the exploitation meted out to a Masarwa woman; Margaret who has been raised by a white missionary. It portrays her efforts to become a part of the black society of Dilepe, a rural village in Botswana. The term Masarwa in the Tswana language refers to the people who live in the dry and arid regions of the Kalahari. These Masarwas were treated as slaves in the small village of Dilepe. Margaret being a Masarwa consequently becomes a pariah in Dilepe. Her missionary training made her intellectually superior to the other Bushmen and she has earned for herself the job of a teacher. The plot delineates the tussle between the two community leaders, Maru and Moleka, to win her love.

Margaret's biological mother is dead. She died during childbirth on the outskirts of a small village. Being a Masarwa, she obviously had fallen a prey to the heart wrenching poverty-stricken life. The Masarwas were

treated as outcasts by the dominant Botswana. Masarwa is the equivalent of 'nigger', a term of contempt which means, obliquely, a low filthy black. The Bushmen were treated as if they were less than human.

The young child, Margaret Cadmore, is adopted by an English missionary, Mrs. Cadmore, who bequeaths her name to her ward. Head's ironic portrayal of Mrs. Cadmore makes her a representative of the phenomenon of colonialism. These are the people who have little or no interest in the natives as individuals. Since Mrs. Cadmore has abundant supply of common sense rather than her love of mankind, she makes use of her virtue to serve the natives.

Head gives the reader glimpse of the human prejudices through the eyes of the Missionary Cadmore. The nurses in the hospital refuse to wash the soiled body of a dead woman because she is a Masarwa. When they are forced to do so, they are unable to disguise the 'expressions of disgust' on their faces which are captured by Margaret Cadmore in her sketch pad. These human prejudices make her wonder,

if they so hated even a dead body how much more did, they hate those of this

woman's tribe who was still alive. However, we cannot lose sight of the fact

that Cadmore analyses the racist bias of the white nurses somewhat

dispassionately. It is a mere observation on her part rather than a condemnation

of the attitude of the nurses (Maru 35).

Post colonial studies have focused on the nature of post colonial cultures as strength than weakness. It is not

the case of oppressor obliterating oppressed. The clash of culture can impact as much upon the colonizer as the colonized. The multicultural fiction did not ready to accept a cultural tradition. The protagonist like Makhaya and Margaret feels uneasy with their cultural traditions and motifs. Homi K bhabha a post colonial theorist stresses the interdependence of colonizer and the colonized. Hybridity is often used term in post colonial discourse which means a cross cultural 'exchange'. Bhabha urges us into this space in an effort to open up an international culture through hybridity'. Bhabha believes that this space made us to find words to speak of ourselves and others.

Head gives a realistic view of the possibilities for a better world. There is a blend of the ideal and the real in her works a balanced account of the conditions of women in contemporary Africa. It is evident that Head's commitment is largely influence by her identity. Being multicultural, her characters are thrown into the 'inbetween' spaces. The novel presents hybrid as a bridge which bonds the multicultural oppositions through these characters and they wish to redefine their identity as bhabha's theory.

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