

**The Reaction to 'White Colonial Oppression' in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather***

**Submitted by:**

**Heba Mohamed Mahmoud El-Koussey**

**Supervised by:**

**Dr. Jehan Farouk Fouad**  
**Associate Professor of English**  
**Literature**  
**Faculty of Women**  
**Ain Shams University**

**Dr. Magda Mansour Hasabelnaby**  
**Professor of English Literature**  
**Faculty of Women**  
**Ain Shams University**

**Dr. Aziza Al-Raey**  
**Lecturer in English Literature**  
**Faculty of Women**  
**Ain Shams University**

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A good amount of South African literature focuses on the psychological and mental disorders of South African people. Critics often shed light on white colonialism and its humiliating treatment of black people. They show the suffering of the South African people and how they are fighting black white colonialism. The impressive fact is that more often the South African people create wisdom out of the madness of apartheid.

This paper addresses the wisdom of madness in Bessie Head's novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969). The paper explores the theme of madness in literature. White colonialism is one of the main reasons for madness in South African people. This paper addresses madness from a Post-Colonial perspective as white colonialism effects the South African people mentally and psychologically. The relation between madness and colonialism is outlined with reference to Post-Colonial theory as this allows us to see mental and psychological disorders within the broader context of colonialism and oppression. The theoretical views of Frantz Fanon's are repeatedly referred to since he is one of the psychiatrists and theoreticians interested in the colonizer/ colonized relationship especially the disorders of the South Africans under white colonialism. Apartheid in South Africa is one of the main devices of control and humiliation to the South African people.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather* Makhaya, the protagonist of the novel, is the symbol of black South African anger. He and Paulina suffer psychologically from losing precious things and from identity crisis. This

paper expresses how Head sways between depression and hope throughout the novel due to white colonialism.

### **Madness in Literature:**

Literature has often probed into madness and speculated its mystery. Writers of different ages and races have been interested in this sad human phenomenon of losing one's mind. The literary texts that deal with suffering are always characterized by sadness due to the loss of something precious. For example, both Edgar Allan Poe (1809- 1849) and Feodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821- 1881) are interested in the theme of madness. They particularly focus on the psychological and mental disorders in people's lives. Dostoevsky is influenced by Poe's representation of "the irrational and weird in the human mind, or for the morbid and bizarre in human life" (Astrov 71). Dostoevsky is also influenced by Poe's view that a prose tale is supposed "to produce effects of horror, terror [and] passion" (Astrov 71). In his novel *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Dostoevsky explains how mental disorder is not easy to be comprehended by others who do not suffer from it. He believes that the visions and ghosts which the sick person sees are based on true suffering not just imagination. In other words, the apparently mad people are not really mad.

Dostoevsky sees that the healthy people will not understand the mental disorders unless they become ill. The same is true for Edgar Allan Poe who influenced Dostoevsky in expressing the mental pain of suffering people. Poe in *The Tell-Tale Heart* argues that the disease affects the patient's senses but does not destroy them. The patient is aware of his problem but cannot get over it. The people around him drive him to madness because they are not interacting with him. Both Poe and Dostoevsky show how the symptoms of madness reflect a vision in which

the mad person loses his senses but is not totally absent minded. EIS Van Dongen says:

Mad stories are perceived as evocative and metaphoric, but one does not understand exactly what is going on in them. They are full of symbols... They are often considered as incoherent and incomprehensible. Some authors have described mad stories as 'ununderstandable'. (208)

Dongen believes that when mad people lose control over their lives, they try hard to gain it back. It is very difficult for them to do that but they do not give up (209). A very remarkable text dealing with the mad people and stories of mental disorder is *King Lear* (1623) by William Shakespeare. Lear's shock and madness begin when he realizes the hypocrisy of his daughters as both Goneril and Regan change the way they treat him causing him madness. At this point, Lear begins to know that he is lonely and the conflict inside his heart and mind causes his mental disorder. N. Andreasen states:

Lear's **madness** can be explained in part as the development of a psychotic disorganization precipitated by severe stress in an elderly man already showing some signs of senile organic brain disease. (qtd. in Truskinovsky 6)

Madness as this Shakespearean masterpiece proves is a consequence of oppression and trauma which might have many forms especially under colonial rule.

### **Madness from a Post-Colonial Perspective:**

Madness is the common term for mental disorders and is often accompanied with hallucinations. The scientific term for madness is “neurosis”. Sigmund Freud says that,

Neurosis would be the result of a kind of ignorance, a not-knowing of the mental processes which should be known. This would approach very closely to the well-known Socratic doctrine according to which even vice is the result of ignorance (237).

The rage of the African people and the white colonialist fear that black people would attain their freedom and end colonialism are some of the reasons which lead the whites to oppress the blacks causing their madness.

Post-Colonialism is defined by Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge as a theory that “foregrounds a politics of opposition and struggle, and problematizes the key relationship between centre and Periphery” (Williams and Chrisman 276). In a Post-Colonial context, the relation between blacks and whites is based on tension and struggle as Africans are constantly fighting to gain equality and freedom. Post-Colonialism focuses on this struggle. African people were always rejected by the white colonizers, and were often considered as objects. Black people were marginalized in everything i.e. education, accommodation and work.

The colonized African people were not sure whether the colonizer treated them as objects or as human beings. Madness caused by colonization is a problem that concerned Frantz Fanon. Since he is a psychiatrist, he is able to understand the effect of psychological and mental alienation on colonized black people. Racial segregation and humiliation drive Africans to violence. Fanon sides with the use of systemized violence because he finds that this is the only way Africans can gain their freedom.

### **Fanon's Views of Mental Disorders:**

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth*, he represents the problems of black society. Identity crisis is one of the key ideas discussed by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. It is one of the effects of white colonization on the lives of African people (17). Fanon contends in *Black Skin, White Masks* that there are some Africans who humiliate other people of the same race to serve the whites because they do not want to feel exiled (17). The idea of controlling the mind and the land of Africans with all its rich resources is indicated in *Black Skin, White Masks* to enslave the black people and implant in them that the whites are superior than the blacks (60).

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon introduces many useful ideas for the Africans such as honest leadership, and party purity including the political institutions and its role in the African society (179). Fanon insists on the honesty of political leaders to make the Africans able to change and trust themselves. There are some whites who believe in the freedom of African people as Fanon indicates in *The Wretched of the Earth* (145). Another controversial idea of Fanon expressed in the same book is the use of violence (35). Fanon supports ordered violence rather than the chaotic one. The organized violence could be the Africans' only way to fight the white colonizer.

The madness of some African people is one of the sorrowful outcomes of white colonialism. It is one of the major problems underscored by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon talks about mental disorders giving examples from the Algerian colonized and the European colonizers so as to reveal the dark side of colonialism (249). Colonialism makes people ask "In reality, who am I?" (250). South African people are always

searching for their identity but according to the white colonialist it is erased. Fanon examined the symptoms of neurosis in both colonizers and colonized: “A European Policeman in a depressed state meets while under hospital treatment one of his victims, an Algerian patriot who is suffering from stupor” (264). Both are troubled by the experience of colonialism.

Fanon notices that he is friendly and he has a good relationship with his family and relatives (264). But at night, this patient hears screams which prevent him from sleeping. Sometimes he puts some music in an attempt not to hear those screams (Fanon 264). This policeman is suffering mentally from the screams of pain. Such fits and screams are like the screams of black people against colonialism, injustice and humiliation.

#### **Apartheid in South Africa:**

The idea of apartheid is a white colonialist idea that is used by white people to control the oppressed South Africans. The white colonialists who came in 1913 put all the institutions which were supposed to support the blacks under their control. The system of apartheid was enforced by a series of laws passed in the 1950s. The government segregated education, medical care and other public services through a number of strict laws to segregate the different races. Only whites enjoyed complete freedom to work and vote, while other races could move around only with Pass Laws (History of Apartheid). Timothy Keegan says that the British imperialism in South Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century subjugated the local people in serving the interests of the colonial economy (10). The segregation policy affected most fields of life in South Africa. Any relation between black and white people was forbidden. This was called the “Immorality Act” and was designed to preserve ‘racial purity’.

#### **Bessie Head and her Contemporaries:**

Through their works, many South African writers depicted the impact of colonization in a very realistic way. Black writers wanted their people to understand that because it is the only way for the black enslaved people to solve their social and psychological problems. A real life example for that is the South African writer Bessie Head (1937- 1986). Gillian Stead Eilersen pointed out that Head was the daughter of a white woman and a black man and that created an identity crisis for her (1- 3).

At Head's time, the marriage of a black man to a white woman was considered an "Immorality Act" because white colonialism despised the black man. Head is like all the African people who were trying to fight for their freedom. She has suffered from what psychiatrists calls "neurosis". She had many nervous breakdowns, and it was colonialism which brought her to madness. Head knows the problems of the black people but she can not help them because of the white colonial system. Although Head's mental sufferings continued for almost her entire life because she feels exile in her own land, she was only cured before her death. As a creative writer, she was sensitive to the voices of the African people who were tortured by the whites.

Head believed in love very strongly but on the other hand she believed that evil powers controlled the world. Head had a great belief in the soul no matter how much the suffering. Head's novels (*When Rain Clouds Gather*), (*A Question of Power*) and (*The Cardinals*) are a protest against racial discrimination, political segregation, identity crisis, psychological and mental disorders of the black people due to white colonialism. The same is true for Peter Abrahams (1919- present), *Tell Freedom* and Alex La Guma (1925- 1985) *A Walk in the Night* (Shava 33) and Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014) *The Conservationist* (1974) which is a representation of the severe subjugation of the Blacks. It also shows the effect of the colonial apartheid's oppressive and racist regime on the

colonial subject. The white master makes them poor, ignorant, oppressed, with no identity and without any political existence.

Head's novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a protest against racial discrimination. Like Fanon, Head in her novel, relates psychological disorders to colonialism. As an African, Head realizes that only by working hard the African people can regain their sense of importance and worth. The white colonizer brainwashes the black people into believing that they are only capable of serving the whites. Head is aware that creativity helps the Africans restore their value and power. As Craig Mackenzie points out, Head sees that "generosity, courtesy and respect for the common person are the touchstones to positive social, political and economic strategies" (Gurnah 115).

It takes place in Botswana in Golema Mmidi, and starts with Makhaya Maseko, the protagonist, who is imprisoned for a false charge. Maseko wants to help the African people but he feels exiled. It is the white apartheid that turns Makhaya into a "mad dog" (*WRCG* 129) with "a violent torrent of hatred" (*WRCG* 129). This is what Fanon refers to in *The Wretched of the Earth* when he emphasizes the use of violence to achieve freedom from oppression (35).

Makhaya knows that there is a conspiracy over his blackness and that the African people "had no life apart from being servants and slaves" (133). From the beginning, Makhaya is searching for inner peace. Like all the Africans, he realizes that the white colonization must come to an end so as for the black people to achieve their goal which is freedom. When Makhaya first meets Dinorego, he finds peace within because he likes him immediately and Dinorego understands his anger. The confusion,

oppression, silence and feeling of exile are the keys to Makhaya's character and the cause behind his suffering.

The hatred and humiliation are accumulated within Makhaya's soul and mind which leads him to call himself "Dog" while talking to Mma-Millipede "Do you know who I am? I am Makhaya, the Black Dog, and as such I am tossed about by life. Life is only torture and torment to me and not something I care to understand" (128). They use the same words such as the names given to them by the white colonizers like "Makhaya, the Black Dog" (WRCG 128) so as to express their huge anger against the racism of the whites.

### **The Concept of Hope in Makhaya's Life:**

The African people have confidence in their identity. The concept of hope in the middle of desperation is clear. Actually the most remarkable characters that help Makhaya are Gilbert Balfour and Paulina. Balfour is a white man who believes in the rights of the blacks. As Fanon shows in *The Wretched of the Earth*, there are some white people who believe that the Africans must have their freedom and live in welfare (145).

After meeting Makhaya, Balfour tells him that Golema Mmidi is a "Utopia" and that he has "the greatest dreams about it" (31). Balfour is helping the people in Golema Mmidi in an agricultural project. He finds that the people there are kind, strong and have the will to change in spite of all the obstacles in their lives. Head expresses the state of the country and the kind of help Balfour offers. Gilbert is a very active and optimistic man and that is what makes the people of the village like him.

Gilbert wants Africa to be a place with no discrimination. He believes that Africa can be a place where a white woman can marry a black man without problems. On the other hand, he wishes that the black man ceases to be a symbol of slavery and the white man a symbol of oppression. The Africans can restore their self-esteem and self-confidence. Head believes that even for women, work is a means of gaining strength and power. Work is an important aspect to reach utopias.

### **Love in Makhaya's Life:**

For Head both love and nature are very important. Throughout the novel Head is swaying between hope and depression. Gilbert, Dinorego and the other villagers believe in their agricultural project which can start with small crops “Things could start in a small way with crops like millet, with talks, with simple lectures, and with some practical work done on the land” (43). Gilbert says that the millet in this country can be imported to the world even if this crop is the only crop which can grow in the village.

The concept of love is represented clearly through Makhaya and Paulina’s relationship. The key for Makhaya and Paulina’s problematic love as presented by Head is the feeling of exile on their own land. Paulina falls in love with Makhaya, but due to their sufferings and confusion both of them are not able to recognize their love for each other. Makhaya shares with her the agonizing feelings of oppression and exile in his own country. After a while Mma-Millipede’s words come true and both of them discover their love for each other. She is the wise woman who Makhaya always goes to listen and is surrounded by her love and protection. In spite of her aging and weakness, she is one of the fighting forces in the face of the evil powers. Mma-Millipede represents the land for Makhaya, Paulina and the others who are distorted by painful feelings of alienation and exile.

Like all Africans, Head's main problem is the identity crisis. Fanon agrees with Head in *Black Skin, White Masks* that one of the major problems for the black people under colonialism is the identity crisis (17). In his opinion all the psychological patients can be cured by love and by feeling safe on their own land. Head expresses the sunset in Botswana as follows:

There, directly in the path of the setting sun, Makhaya was in the habit of coming to watch the sunset. Just as at dawn, the sun crept along the ground in gold shafts; so at sundown it retreated quietly as though it were folding into itself... he watched it all in fascination, the pitch black shadows of night seemed to sweep across the land like an engulfing wave. (77-78)

Here Makhaya is practising his habit of watching the sunset. This habit is a kind of emotional relief to him. He feels peaceful and serene when he is close to nature even if his problems are unsolved.

Nature, hope and love constitute life for Head. Head links nature with hope and love. The love story between Makhaya and Paulina is presented by Head through natural aspects. This is clear when Makhaya is surprised by a "spray of seed" and then "was struck in the eye" by Paulina's "bright" skirt and "captivated by a pair of large bold black eyes" (78). Head uses the seeds in her description of Makhaya's surprising way of looking to Paulina. Nature gives signs all the time in relation to people's lives.

### **The Psychological Suffering of Makhaya and Paulina's Tragic Loss:**

Nature can be often linked with the sad side of a human life. Paulina's son, Isaac presents hope for the future. Isaac is like his mother suffering from poverty because of colonization "Isaac, was tied to the cattle post and

received no education at all” (76-77). Through this child, Head portrays some of the obstacles that confront the African people. Isaac is sick; the sickness of this boy is an important incarnation of the weakness of the Africans in facing the white man.

Colonialism is the cause of the inhumane conditions under which the South Africans live. Isaac is supposed to be full of power and hope of change, but instead, he dies from tuberculosis because of his mother’s poverty. Paulina asks her daughter what she is doing “‘What’s this?’ She asked. ‘I am making a cap, Mama’, the little girl [Lorato] whispered” (120). Paulina keeps asking her and the little girl replied “‘When we were at the cattle post the other day, Isaac asked me to make him a cap’, she whispered faintly. ‘He said he had a bad cold and was coughing every day’” (120).

This is a symbol of killing the black hope and innocence by the whites. Head expresses this tragic scene by saying,

Long before they reached Paulina’s cattle post they saw the vultures circling above it in the sky... Once they drew close, they could see that not a living thing moved.... She somehow expected her son to creep out of the lone and solitary hut.... he swung around sharply with an expression of hurt surprise on his face. ‘The boy is dead’, he said sharply. (161-62)

Through Paulina’s tragic story, Head expresses how the loss of children leaves a scar in the African psyche that both weakens and deteriorates many African people. Makhaya is so affected by this young child’s death and this is an indication that in the middle of all the sufferings of the black people, they still can react with emotional events. This manifests the fact that the white colonizer has not destroyed them completely yet. This event proves that traumatic experiences strengthen the Africans rather than weaken them.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head underscores one of the main obstacles that negatively influence the African political life. She criticizes the African politicians who work for their own good rather than working for the welfare of their people. Chief Matenge, Chief Sekoto and Joas Tsepe are the most vivid symbols of evil in the novel. Head represents them as a counter force to Makhaya, Gilbert and all the other characters who seek progress. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon highlights the role of the political parties and the honesty of leadership in the political institutions (179). Head says,

The mansion, the slaves, and a huge cream Chevrolet, which he parked under a tree in the yard, were the only things that gave Matenge a feeling of security in the village. At least this part of it was in order. The chiefs had always lived in the mansions while the people had lived in the huts... Golema Mmidi was a village of commoners. (*WRCG* 44)

Head describes Matenge as being “an extremely cunning and evil mind, a mind so profoundly clever as to make the innocent believe they were responsible for the evil” (31). Head shows how Matenge convinces the South Africans that they are responsible for their situation. Matenge has the talent of arguing convincingly and logically, so the South Africans believe him easily. The truth is that Matenge is a liar, he prevents his people from changing.

Chief Sekoto is similarly corrupted as Chief Matenge. All what matters for him is how to become rich, comfortable and be able to achieve his aims. Because Head believes in utopia, she recognizes evil and says how the South Africans can overcome this evil easily. The evil power is not an unbreakable power; it can be changed by the strength of human beings. This

is exactly why Fanon thinks that love is important for the Africans to become strong and to be loyal to their national case. All the time Tsepe forges the elections for Chief Matenge's sake:

All this VIP treatment gave Joas a swollen head. He was already the minister of finance in the shadow government... since Joas was ill-equipped educationally.... Joas was a parrot.... Joas lived as the permanent guest of Matenge.... he had to educate the African masses in African socialism. (48)

Makhaya, Gilbert and Dinorego are impeded by Chief Matenge and his assistants as they try to improve the village. All the peasants suffer because of people like Joas Tsepe and these Chiefs.

Through the novel there is a struggle between them and Matenge because Matenge does not want that to happen. Chief Matenge and Tsepe try to plot against Makhaya to stop such project but they fail because Makhaya struggles for progress. Head believes that justice must prevail at the end. In spite of all this powerful control and oppression of the black peasants, they are able to understand the bad intentions of Chief Matenge and his men. Dinorego believes in the blacks' ability to react in the suitable time against all the evil power of these traitor leaders.

Because Head is convinced that there is justice, Chief Matenge reaches his end. Head portrays how the villagers gather and go to Matenge for revenge:

When they turned and walked towards the gate of his yard, he retreated indoors, in panic, running from window to window... The servants, observing his panic, crept like stricken shadows out of the back door and fled into the bush. He was left

alone.... And they would wait and wait... the rutted grooves of his cheeks as he stood there, watching them. (176)

Chief Matenge reaches his end by committing suicide. When the villagers come to take their revenge from him as a traitor to the Africans, he kills himself. Makhaya discovers the body when he enters the house:

A moment later they heard a tremendous crash as Makhaya broke down the door. Then a long silence. The villagers all arose and also climbed the steep stairway. Those in the forefront stood looking silently.... at the dead, still body hanging from a rafter. (178)

Chief Matenge is a tyrant who lives his entire life oppressing the Africans in order to maintain his goals of achieving richness from the white colonialist to be in a good social position and thus becoming powerful. He uses all people around him to control the Africans despite his belonging to them.

When the villagers realize that he is a traitor, they gather to take their revenge and he commits suicide because he knows that he will not be able to confront them. The white colonizers do not help him; he is weak now and thus he is useless for them. By the death of Chief Matenge, a big obstacle is removed giving a chance for the peasants to achieve progress and real development. Because of their deep faith and their powerful resistance Makhaya and Gilbert succeed at the end.

Head proves that hope wins over desperation. By the end of the novel Makhaya realizes that he can still love others and can achieve progress. He reaches peace of mind that he has been searching for. Sophia Obiajulu Ogwude says that "the author's thesis is that black people can work effectively for their own well-being in a free society" (7). Ogwude adds that

people's freedom is shown in eliminating bad leadership to have their chance to decide their own fate. This will break the whites' control and selfishness and this is the blacks' chance to get over their obstacles even if this happens slowly (7).

Mackenzie says that the harshness in the African people's lives and "the lack of any traditionally acquired wealth have forced them to become progressive, to break with traditional tribal agriculture" (Gurnah 114). When the villagers become strong, they overcome Matenge who symbolizes the evil force. Head shows that traditions help the South Africans to progress. People must stick to their traditions especially under colonialism. The colonial system is always trying to erase the roots of the South Africans but it fails at the end.

T. T. Monyana concludes that Head makes the reader "fall in love with human characters tenaciously clutching at each other as invaluable objects of love and personal concern" (Ogwude 10). Therefore, Ogwude says that Head's "protest is expressed indirectly by showing how apartheid and oppressive tribal prejudices thwart and negate such possible, rich life" (10) of the black people. When the South Africans unite together nothing can stop them from controlling their destiny.

### **Conclusion:**

Head's message in this novel is that South Africans can achieve their freedom despite the psychological disorders caused by the white colonizers. Through analyzing *When Rain Clouds Gather*, it is clear that the South Africans can overcome white colonialism through love and hope, and through sticking to their identity and their dream of freedom. Fanon agrees with Head that the South African people can one day achieve their freedom from white colonialism. Head's tactics are emotional representation to the

South African situation while Fanon's tactics are practical. Readers of Head's fiction, like the readers of Fanon, could thus gain a unique wisdom through having awareness of the link between mental and psychological depression on the one hand and oppressive colonial systems on the other.

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