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When Rain Clouds Gather

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When Rain Clouds Gather Summary

When Rain Clouds Gather

by Bessie Head

Bessie Head was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, in 1937. Until she was 13 she was raised by a foster family in a poor section of the coloured community in the Cape Province (that is, the community for South Africans of mixed descent). She spent the next six years at St. Monica s Home, an Anglican mission school for coloured girls, where she learned through a shocking revelation from the principal that her white mother had lived and died in a mental asylum because she had sexual relations with an African stable boy. She was made to understand that she herself was being monitored for any sign of mental aberration. After her teacher training education at St. Monica s, Head taught elementary school from 1956 to 1958 in Durban, and then worked for several newspapers in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Port Elizabeth. Her political involvement as a member of the Pan Africanist Congress led to her brief arrest after anti-pass-law demonstrations that climaxed with police shootings of African protestors in Sharpeville in 1960. She attempted suicide shortly thereafter. The traumatic impact of these experiences was evident in Head s troubled marriage, her sense of alienation in Botswana where she lived as a refugee from 1964 until she was granted Botswana citizenship in 1979 and her intermittent mental breakdowns. Almost all her writings are based on her personal experiences in these two countries. Her first novel in exile, When Rain Clouds Gather examines her decision to live in exile rather than stay and fight the apartheid system inside South Africa.

Events in History at the Time of the Novel

The geopolitics of 1960s Botswana. When Rain Clouds Gather is set in the fictional village of Golema Mmidi, in a remote eastern section of Botswana. Golema Mmidi

represents Serowe, the village in which Head settled after moving to Botswana in 1964. Known then as the Bechuanaland Protectorate, Botswana, a former British colony, became independent in 1966. Geographically, the country is dominated by the Kalahari sands, and is mostly unsuitable for permanent residence. Regular rainfall may occur over a ten-year period, followed by ten years of below average rainfall, often accompanied by severe drought. Apart from the peak years of the wet cycle, rain is often highly localized, irregular in amounts, and otherwise unpredictable (Ramsay, p. 2). Consequently, only about 5 percent of the land is arable. Bessie Head uses the nation s constant desire for water as a backdrop for the hopes and aspirations of the people she describes in her novel. Despite the harshness of the land, people constantly look with hopefulness for rain clouds. Pula, meaning rain, is the general term of greeting among the Batswana. (Botswana refers to the country, Batswana to the Tswana people who live in the country, and Motswana to an individual member of the community.)

At the time the novel takes place, Botswana had recently gained its independence from the British colonial administration (1966). The Bechuanaland Protectorate was often referred to as an orphaned society to which the British had extended protection,

mainly because of the appeals of prominent members of the London Missionary Society and powerful Botswana chiefs, who wanted to prevent other European powers in the surrounding countries the Dutch, the Germans, and the Afrikaners (or descendents of European, mainly Dutch, settlers in South Africa) from swallowing their territory. Administratively, the British Empire held Bechuanaland to be part of South Africa, and the protectorate was administered from Mafeking, South Africa.

Few Europeans settled in the region because of the brutal Botswana climate, and, beside the burdensome task of collecting taxes and maintaining law and order, Britain itself did not see much to covet in the land. It consequently did little to improve the country s infrastructure. Botswana s major usefulness was that it was mostly flat land and thus served as a major transportation link between South Africa and the central African nations.

Historians have argued that the colonial administration s indifference to the future of Botswana led to social and economic underdevelopment, low agricultural productivity, and a legacy of economic dependency on South Africa. This colonial indifference to economic development was also responsible for the poor state of Botswana education in the 1960s. Primary-level education was available to only a few, and, in fact, many local teachers were insufficiently trained. Bessie Head was one of the few expatriates from South Africa willing to work as a teacher in Botswana. To obtain secondary-level education, a select number of native-born Batswana went to South Africa. For a small minority higher education was available in Lesotho and overseas. In 1963 only 45 Batswana were attending institutions of higher education (Parson, p. 58). Thus, with an undeveloped rural economy and a negligible educational system, many people (especially those with skills) sought employment in the more developed nations surrounding Botswana. By 1964, out of a national population of only half a million, the absentee population was estimated at 42,000 (Parson, p. 59).

Botswana s traditional economy is based on herding. Culturally, cattle herding is done by men and boys, who spend a significant part of the year at cattle posts far from home. The raising of crops (such as sorghum, millet, beans, and maize) is done mostly

by women, who also gather fruits and vegetables while the men hunt game. Examining the traditional economy of the country in When Rain Clouds Gather, Head focuses on agriculture and the need to resist the encroaching desert through technological improvements in farming. The Botswana government also recognized poor agricultural output as one of its major challenges, and initiated largescale dam construction and irrigated farming projects to overcome cycles of drought (Ramsay, p. 4).

Independence. When the winds of political change blew across Africa in the 1960s, Britain exercised unusual goodwill in the smooth transfer of power to the people of Botswana. Sir Seretse Khama, the son of Sekgoma II of the BaNgwato people, became the first president of the Republic of Botswana. He and his uncle, Tshekedi Khama, former regent of Botswana (1925-50), initially fought to preserve the rights of the traditional rulers of their class; however, in 1956, they both renounced their rights and the rights of their offsprings to bogosi, or kingship. Thus, a decade before Botswana achieved independence, they fostered a spirit of democracy in the nation. Botswana s long history of democracy has since become a model for other African nations. Bessie Head succinctly points out in When Rain Clouds Gather that some chiefs did not appreciate the changes they were facing, and indeed, relinquishing power to a democratically elected government proved difficult for many traditional rulers. Nonetheless, Seretse and his Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) enjoyed overwhelming support from the people. Seretse is credited with transforming Botswana from a neglected protectorate and tragically impoverished nation to an international model of human rights, stable democracy, and improved economic development (Ramsay, p. 217).

It is generally believed that Britain would not have handed over power so readily to the people of Botswana if the mineral resources for which many agencies had desperately scoured the land had been discovered before 1966. Commercial deposits of diamonds were discovered in 1967, making the mining industry (which in colonial times had explored for copper, nickel, and salt) the most significant foreign exchange earner for the country.

Botswana, land of exiles. Almost entirely surrounded by the white-dominated countries of South Africa, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and South West Africa (now Namibia), in the 1960s Botswana became a natural refuge for many who were fleeing white oppression. In fact, for the past 200 years warring ethnic groups and violent encounters with Europeans in the more habitable regions of southern Africa led many ethnic groups to take refuge in Botswana. Consequently, although the people of Botswana are deeply traditional, they are at the same time generally tolerant of foreigners.

Geographically and politically Botswana occupies a strategic position in southern Africa. However, the country is completely landlocked and mostly dependent on South Africa for road outlets for its goods and services. Also, migrant workers from Botswana have found employment in South Africa, serving as a labor reserve in that country s economy. Botswana s economic dependency on rich, powerful neighbors placed it in a difficult position in the 1960s. While Botswana sympathized with and welcomed traumatized refugees, it meanwhile remained intolerant of militant or political expressions that could jeopardize its relations with its neighbors. Botswana adopted the compromise position of staying neutral in the politics of the region. It can be argued that the nation itself underwent a psychological and economic state of exile.

Apartheid in South Africa. The repressive policies of apartheid in South Africa forced Bessie Head to flee into neighboring Botswana. As she saw it, her nightmarish experience of racial segregation, the unfathomable logic of white hatred, and her own inescapable involvement in South African politics created such tension that living in the country became unbearable. Many of Head s own experiences found their way into When Rain Clouds Gather, especially her questioning of political and social life in South Africa.

Although racial segregation had been practiced since Europeans first dominated southern Africa in the late eighteenth century, it was in the twentieth century that it came to involve the exclusion of all non-Europeans from the privileges of citizenship in South Africa. Apartheid, which means apartness or its later modification,

separate development, promoted the exploitation of black Africans, coloureds, Indians, and other non-Europeans. Basically, it rested on the white South African notion that the country consisted of separate nations that ought to live in their own distinct areas or homelands, with nonwhites entering the white homeland only temporarily, to work. The term apartheid came into common usage in 1948 when the Afrikaner s National Party, led by H. F. Verwoerd, used it as a political platform to win the national election. A revolutionary, totalitarian doctrine, apartheid trumpeted separation as the ideal to be applied as consistently and vigorously as possible (Saunders, p. 17). Economically, socially, and psychologically, apartheid has meant untold suffering for nonwhites. Black South Africans and foreigners from other African countries were put on the lowest social rung, and they were forced to obey repressive legislation, such as the pass laws, which required nonwhites entering white cities to carry papers explaining their purpose for being there. Further, the practice of petty apartheid, which was similar to the Jim Crow laws of the South in the United States, enforced segregation in public buildings, on public transportation, on beaches, in libraries, on sidewalks, and in social activities such as sporting events.

After her teacher training in 1956, Head entered a world of racial politics that was increasingly tense and conflictual. The late 1950s and 60s witnessed extreme violence on the part of the South African police, and numerous defiance campaigns and strike actions on the part of black resistance movements. The white regime had the full support of the legislative arm of government, which passed many laws further restricting the rights of non-Europeans. In 1956 Parliament sanctioned the removal of the coloured vote. In 1957 it amended the Native Laws Amendment Act, further restricting contact now deemed inappropriate between blacks and whites, such as the free association of persons with the same political or religious beliefs. (Blacks, for example, could no longer attend church in nonblack areas.) Two years later, through the University Education Act, apartheid was introduced to institutions of higher learning. By 1960 political representation for Africans in Parliament was abolished; the same policy was applied to coloured representation in 1968. Blacks and coloureds employed numerous strategies to resist such oppressive laws. For instance, women staged mass anti-pass demonstrations at the Union Buildings, Pretoria, in 1956.

Groups organized stay-at-home strikes, in which workers refrained from reporting for work. Passive resistance such as the stay-at-home strikes and protest journalism, along with overt resistance such as riots, random attacks on whites, or organized underground campaigns of violence, both played parts in the opposition to white domination.

In response, the government unleashed a reign of terror that included arrests and detentions, with or without trial. Police brutality led to many deaths in police custody, rapes, unprovoked assaults and harassments, and the banning of political parties such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). On March 21, 1960, during a PAC pass-law defiance campaign at Sharpeville that Head helped organize, police shot into the crowd, killing 69 people. Around the world people decried the actions of the South African police, and a few days later the PAC enjoyed a small victory when the pass laws were suspended. However, this apparent victory in fact worked to the advantage of the South African regime, because the government s action made unnecessary an important pass-law campaign that the ANC had scheduled for March 31, and thus defused the anger that had been growing both in and outside South Africa. The government took the opportunity to place a

banning order on the ANC and the PAC after arresting and jailing many of their leaders, and, in April, quickly resurrected the pass laws. The government s determination to continue its apartheid policies was evident in its decision to risk international disrepute rather than share power with non-Europeans. In March 1961 South Africa withdrew its membership in the British Commonwealth and became a Republic two months later. In November 1962 the United Nations voted to impose economic and diplomatic sanctions on South Africa. These measures, however, did not deter the South African government, which became even more repressive after the assassination of H. F. Verwoerd and the election of John Vorster as prime minister in 1966. Formerly in charge of police security, Vorster enacted the Terrorism Act in 1967, advocating indefinite detention without trials, and later, the forced deportation of black Africans to segregated homelands, the Bantustans. The government also established, among other infrastructures of apartheid, the Bureau of State Security, well-known for its notorious treatment of political prisoners and for its covert attempts to trap activists both inside and outside the country.

Throughout the 1960s many black intellectuals and political activists and white liberals either went underground with their activism or fled the country. Those arrested often spent many years in jail and suffered unspeakable torture. Head s choice of exile over underground sabotage may have stemmed from the psychological tension that came with life as a radical; she has claimed to have such a delicate nervous balance that when faced with danger or secret activity I tremble violently. The spies of the Boers [Afrikaners] would have long found me out and sent me the parcel bomb (Head in Eilersen, p. 49). The unhappy political situation in the country; the crisis in her marriage; the nightmare of raising her son in the desperate poverty she and her husband struggled through; and the impossibility of flourishing as a writer in a climate of oppression all these factors encouraged her to start life over in a foreign land. When Rain Clouds Gather captures these years of struggle in South Africa. The main character in the novel epitomizes Head s attempt to abandon the past and to embrace all that was new and free in Botswana.

The Novel in Focus

Plot summary. When Rain Clouds Gather opens at the South African border fence with Botswana. The protagonist, Makhaya Maseko, is in the process of disengaging with the past. He feels certain about his desire to leave it behind but is uncertain about the future he wishes to embrace. A young Zulu activist recently out of prison, Makhaya has defied the South African government banning order against him by fleeing the country. His one desire is to live in a free country, although he has no illusions about the quality of freedom he will enjoy in a country as miserably poor as Botswana. Rejecting his political activities a campaign of violence against the South African government and his Zulu upbringing, which he holds partly responsible for nurturing people who could allow themselves to be so brutally oppressed by whites, Makhaya opts for a future that might grant him basic human rights. In South Africa he had deliberately courted death by carrying on his person the plans for blowing up buildings; his new goal as a refugee in Botswana is to seek life and nurture it.

However, his experience in South Africa, a land where a black man s identity amounted to that of a black dog, has left Makhaya bitter and distrustful. His dreams about changing the world are reduced to simply satisfying his own personal needs. As he says to an old man who helps him cross the border into Botswana, I just want to step on free ground. 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 (Head, When Rain Clouds Gather, p. 10). Makhaya s decision to flee is not based on any overt political motive, but rather on a strong desire to calm his jangled black sensibilities and to come to terms with his personal inner chaos (Heywood, p. 176). He meets an old woman from whom he seeks shelter for the night. Her selfish attitude toward this hapless refugee informs Makhaya that Botswana is no paradise, but a place that has its vultures (Rain Clouds, p. 14). After he registers as a refugee, Makhaya happens upon Dinorego, a wise old man from Golema Mmidi, who helps him settle down into a quiet search for peace.

The village of Golema Mmidi is a unique refuge for Botswana and South African people who are fleeing tragedies in their lives. Though dry and arid, the village is well suited to Makhaya, who finds this rural community radically different from his urban ghetto existence in South Africa. Dinorego best expresses this difference when he describes Botswana as God s country : God is everywhere around here. People can t steal a thing from you, not even a sixpence. People can t fight, not even to kill an enemy (Rain Clouds, p. 21). Dinorego and the villagers of Golema Mmidi have no concept of the deep-seated hatred that people like Makhaya have felt directed at them from whites and which they had internalized in their struggle to survive apartheid.

After being ruthlessly divorced by her womanizing husband, the elderly Mma Milipede sought refuge in Golema Mmidi. She, like Dinorego, exemplifies an innocent embrace of life in Botswana. She combines ancient wisdom with the Christian religion of the missionaries; so secure are the Batswana in their own identity that foreigners and their new ideas are examined and courageously absorbed into the Batswana way of life. An Englishman, Gilbert Balfour, for example, can afford to live and dream in Golema Mmidi because of his belief that people are open to change and to those things that promote progress. His study of agriculture is an attempt to counteract his stifling middle-class upbringing with the life-giving force of growing things. Gilbert has helped the villagers start a cooperative farming project that is yielding a good return, and his dream is to see Golema Mmidi become an internationally renowned agricultural community.

Gilbert s commitment to the land is evident in his marriage to Dinorego s daughter, the quiet but unpredictable Maria. Makhaya s timely appearance in Golema Mmidi further accelerates Gilbert s dream of a transformed economy for a people who are dirt-poor. Makhaya s philosophical rejection of tribalism and even his disillusionment with politics are appealing to Gilbert, who needs someone willing to invest his energies in the agricultural development of the village. Makhaya s task is to help the women of the village move beyond subsistence farming to cash-crop tobacco farming, since their men are out of the village in faraway cattle posts at this time of year.

Without the cooperation of the women, both Gilbert and Makhaya note, the agricultural miracle they envision will die. With the help of Mma Milipede, they enlist the young Motswana widow, Paulina Seboso, who persuades the women of the village to join the new tobacco-growing scheme.

Makhaya s preoccupation with this absorbing world of innocence and growing things is alternately disrupted by the harshness of the land, the often fatal drought conditions, the painful poverty around him, and, worst of all, the African grade of evil personified in the embittered subchief Matenge and the politician Joas Mtsepe. Matenge has been appointed administrator over Golema Mmidi by his brother, Chief Sekoto, who is trying to rid himself of the contentious and greedy subchief. Matenge is disliked by the villagers, for he stands in the way of progress. Having been trained in the old school of masters and slaves, oppressor and oppressed, this traditional ruler regards the change sweeping the country as a disheartening development. Slowly he is losing his grip on power and his privileged lifestyle, and he fails in his attempts to banish Gilbert and Makhaya, whom he sees as encouraging rebellion through their zealous advocacy of change. Matenge s chief supporter, Joas Mtsepe, who represents the new breed of African nationalists, is also bitter; he is part of the opposition that has lost an election and become a destructive force against all forms of national progress. Mtsepe and Matenge become partners in criticism, connivance, and conspiracy. Matenge s continual juridical onslaught against the villagers meets with successful appeals at the higher court, where Chief Sekoto, who despises his brother, always sides with the appellants. As the chief administrator of the region, Matenge holds power over the villagers but his ruling is always subject to that of the chief.

Matenge s unyielding attachment to tradition finally leads to his self-destruction, when he decides, against his better judgement, to humiliate Paulina for an unstated crime. Paulina speculates that her crime might be that she failed to inform the subchief of the funeral of her son, who died of tuberculosis at a cattle outpost. It is more likely that Matenge is simply jealous of her immense influence over the women of the village and is angry that the tobacco project has been initiated without his permission. In any case, Paulina s tragic loss of her son, Isaac, and the loss of all her cattle to the

severe drought do not deter the selfish Matenge. He has also not offered any help or words of comfort to the grieving community of villagers who have suffered the loss of most of their cattle and are now looking for ways to preserve the rest of their herd through the remainder of the unpredictable drought season. His misjudgment in summoning Paulina to court at such a critical time angers the villagers. Assembling in front of Matenge s house, they quietly wait for the subchief to declare his case against Paulina. But Matenge never makes his appearance. Barring the door to his house, he promptly takes his own life. Makhaya is the first to discover Matenge s tragic decision.

By this time in the story, Makhaya has become a welcome member of the community. He remains, however, a security risk, a former political prisoner who is allegedly violent, and does not know how long he will be able to maintain his place in Golema Mmidi, a village he now loves. From the many ironies and riddles he has witnessed in this remote village, he comes to the conclusion that freedom lies not in rejecting everything but in confronting life in all its contradictions: you had to concentrate the mind on all that was still alive and treat it as the most precious treasure you had ever been given. . . . Therefore, he Makhaya, could run so far in search of peace, but it was contact with other living beings that a man needed most (Rain Clouds, pp. 164- 66). Makhaya s marriage proposal to Paulina, which she gladly accepts, marks his realization that although life is harsh, its magic lies in creating a world fit to live in, rather than in succumbing to the death wish of the oppressor. Golema Mmidi offers a means of personal and economic independence and interdependence, where the qualities that count are benign austerity, reverence for the lives of ordinary people . . . and, above all, the ability to break out of the prison of selfhood without destroying individual privacy and integrity (Ravenscott in Heywood, p. 177). In the end, Makhaya learns that a peaceful haven is not a retreat from responsibility but a place one creates through hard work, risk-taking, and involvement in the lives of others.

Women and representation. In her work Bessie Head has always foregrounded the problems of gender relations in Africa. She is one of very few male or female African writers of her generation to not only focus on gender discrimination but also to proffer

a solution to the problem of sexism. When Rain Clouds Gather highlights the oppressive effects of centuries of male privilege. A woman was something to buy at some stage, the way you bought a table you were going to keep in some back room and not care very much about (Rain Clouds, p. 124). Makhaya s pronounced sensitivity to apartheid has made him intolerant of the discriminatory practice of female subordination in his Zulu culture. His denunciation of racism is inextricably linked to his rejection of tribalism, male chauvinism, and the sexual and cultural exploitation of women.

Yet, when he crosses the border into Botswana, he is shaken by the reality that female exploitation is not just a South African problem but an African problem. The old woman he encounters while looking for shelter for the night is crude and emotionally hardened from years of labor. Her shrill, discordant voice pierces the pastoral night as she attempts to exact as much money as she can from Makhaya for the miserable shelter she provides. Her hostile response to Makhaya is representative of her bankrupt relationship with men in general. For a fee, she is even willing to offer her underaged granddaughter to Makhaya for a night of sexual pleasure. The young girl, well schooled in servicing men, promptly shows up in Makhaya s hut. Disgusted by child prostitution and the greed of the old woman, Makhaya rejects the offer but hastily gives the girl the money to get rid of her. The old woman exclaims in shocked surprise to the child: You mean he gave you the money for nothing. . . . This is a miracle! I have not yet known a man who did not regard a woman as a gift from God! He must be mad. . . . Let us lock the door to protect ourselves from the madman! (Rain Clouds, p. 15). Her response links sexual exploitation to the material survival of women, and suggests that male sexual domination of the female body has led to the widespread acceptance of such denigration by women themselves.

It is also important to note that, although South African racism always provides the overarching thrust of this and other major novels written by Head in exile, a feminist portrayal of gender relations seems to be her most expressive way of alluding to racial discrimination. She tackles racism and sexism at once, for example, by having Gilbert marry a black woman, whom he treats with respect. Through this relationship, Head

counteracts the novel s scattered references to South African racism; in South Africa, the marriage would have constituted a crime against the state. The almost angelic Gilbert is neither racist nor race conscious; his love-match with Maria is Head s response to myths of white supremacy. Likewise Makhaya s refusal to raise a family in his home country is an indictment of a racist system that denies basic freedoms to black people.

Thus, Head examines two major evils in When Rain Clouds Gather oppressive traditional structures and white racism. Both culminate in the oppression of black women, who traditionally bear an unfair share of family burdens. With the men away at cattle posts most of the year, women must fend for themselves, maintain the homestead, care for the children, and grow all the food necessary for their family s survival. Even when the men return to the village, the women engage in petty jealousy and rivalry because there are indeed too few men to go around. In the 1960s nearly one-third of the Batswana male population had to seek employment outside the country (Parson, p. 58). The labor reserve force that Botswana produced for the South African economy, in particular, led to the breakdown of the family, and to indescribable hardship for its womenfolk. The situation was hardly different in South Africa, where most black women were restricted to designated rural homelands, while their menfolk were employed in cities. Women in urban areas faced sexual exploitation from black men deprived of their families, and from white men whose rape of the nation was often literally enacted in the rape of black women. In this and other ways, black women paid a high price for the oppressive racial and economic policies created by the South African apartheid regime that dominated the region. The moral breakdown has been measured in escalating crime rates, birth rates, prostitution, alcoholism, and other forms of moral destitution in the black and coloured communities.

For the widow Paulina, the burden of single parenting in such a harsh environment takes its toll in the untimely death of her young son, who is forced to do the work of a grown man. Fortunately for her, Makhaya chooses to become her husband and protector during this tragic season in her life. Although to a large extent their

reltionship is traditional, Makhaya encourages mutual respect and equality in their dealings with each other. Moreover, Makhaya s attitude to the women in the tobacco project is respectful and generous. He in fact sees generosity of spirit as the key to eliminating gender inequality. Makhaya has one criterion for judging the world: generosity, of soul and of mind. Many experiences had led him to the belief that the peace of the world rested with that one word. Because of this, it had become a policy with him to give immediately whatever was asked of him, and he really only felt hatred towards people who consistently displayed selfish attitudes. (Rain Clouds, p. 124)

In essence, When Rain Clouds Gather is a romantic, optimistic story that reflects its author s faith in humanity s essential goodness, and her belief that love between individuals can overcome the universal problems of race, class, and gender oppression.

Sources and literary context. South African literature in exile has come to mean the use of literature to expose the horrors of apartheid to the international community. According to some critics in the 1970s and 80s, this definition does not include Head. As James Garrett points out in Writing Community, critics such as Lewis Nkosi, Gillian Stead Eilersen, and Virginia Ola tend to categorize Head s writing as personal rather than political, forgetting that such a separation is impossible in South African thinking and writing:

Those who stress the personal and private odyssey of the soul . . . to the exclusion of the political and social world (and history) in which such odysseys take place are doing Head a great disservice by perpetuating the false dichotomy between the public and private which has been used to dismiss Head s work. (Garrett, p. 123)

For both black and white South African writers in exile during the apartheid regime, the personal simply was political.

This is particularly true of Head, whose short stories and novels have been predominantly autobiographical in context that is, they reflect South African reality. Although Head has stated that she modeled Makhaya after a young Zimbabwean refugee who was disillusioned with the political future of Africa, Makhaya and Paulina are, in a way, two sides of the author herself. Paulina s passionate personality reflects Head s own strong desire to live a fulfilled life, and Makhaya s refugee status, along with his responses to racism and sexism, reflect her attitudes and refugee experience. Like Makhaya, who discovers and develops his potential to love, create, and contribute positively to human society, Head was also able to find access to self-development through her participation in the Bamangwato Development Association, an agricultural project many miles from the village of Serowe. Her soulful journey to define herself, which she explores in all her novels, appears to have been impossible for her in the stifling political climate in South Africa. She wanted to write about innocence and laughter, magical things that could displace the trauma of the past. Indeed, Head found the stimulus for these positive elements in the real-life village of Serowe, which throbbed with the echoes of an ancient Africa left almost intact to dream along in its own way. . . . It was this peaceful world of black people simply dreaming in their own skins that I began to slowly absorb into my own. It was like finding black power and black personality in a simple and natural way. (Head, Witchcraft, p. 72)

The characters in the novel, according to Head, are representative rather than specific. Thus, Joas Tsepe stands for corrupt politicians, Matenge for greedy chiefs, and Gilbert for European expatriates all well-known types in Botswana. Gilbert, however, is believed to be closely modeled after Vernon Gibberd, an agriculturist who was the director of the farm project on which Bessie Head worked and who greatly impressed her with his brilliance and energy (Eilersen, p. 100).

Head claims an affinity with Olive Schreiner s pioneering artistic spirit and social critique of South Africa (see **The Story of an African Farm,** also covered in African Literature and Its Times). Head, however, is unique in that her lack of identification with an environment with tradition, current customs, or parentage makes her

fearless in her engagement of diverse issues of class, race, religion, feminism, and sociopolitical philosophies (Mackenzie and Clayton, p. 15). Not feeling at home in South Africa or Botswana gives her what some perceive to be an advantage. She lacks the roots that could give her particular prejudices; this rootlessness also makes her writing expansive in its attempt to embrace universal issues. Head s themes of exile and social injustice also fit in with the uniquely South African body of literature that was emerging in the 1960s and 70s on the international scene works like Alan Paton s **Cry, the Beloved Country,** Alex La Guma s **A Walk in the Night,** Peter Abrahams s **Mine Boy,** and Nadine Gordimer s **Burger s Daughter** (all also covered in African Literature and Its Times).

Reviews. When Rain Clouds Gather is the first book of a trilogy that also includes Maru and A Question of Power. These texts not only demonstrate Head s increasing artistic maturity but also affirm her strong moral idealism. Her first novel was positively reviewed as an intelligent, passionate, and compelling analysis of the African crisis of dispossession. Head s exploration of the place of women in Africa is considered particularly moving and innovative. In her work, African women emerge painfully from the chrysalis of tribalist attitudes into a new evaluation of their relationship to men and their position in society (Borg, p. 696). Although the novel is considered didactic in places, Head s humorous yet ironic distance from the narrative succeeds in blending the ideal and the actual, especially with regards to the issues of power and identity, [which] has had the effect of making her novels the most ambitious by an African woman (Brown, p. 161). Iyunolu Osagie