

**Patriarchal Ecopolitics and Ecofeminist
Consciousness in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather***

PATRICK, Charles Alex, PhD.

*Department of English and Literary Studies, Osun State University,
Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria.*

charlespatrick282@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-4028-184X

+2349050454092

OYELEYE, Olamiposi, PhD.

*Department of English and Literary Studies, Osun State University,
Osogbo, Osun State.*

olamiposi.oyeeye@uniosun.edu.ng +2348031543656

OLADIRAN, Damilola Peju, PhD.

*Department of English and Literary Studies, Osun State University,
Osogbo, Osun State*

Oladiran.damilola@uniosun.edu.ng +2347057335335

EFEH, Kenneth

*Lecturer, Peaceland College of Education, Agbor Study Centre,
Delta State*

kennethefeh@yahoo.com +2348130610012

Abstract

Bessie Head's *When the Rain Clouds Gather* (2008) has been examined by several scholars from varied perspectives, including climate change, ecocriticism, the apartheid system, etc. However, the interconnectedness of humanity and environmentalism has not been adequately scrutinised. Hence, this paper aims to probe the impact of politics on the natural environment and women, highlighting how land and its resources are used to oppress women. Since the data involved is textual, the study adopted a qualitative research method and content analysis in unravelling the ecopolitical power structure that undermines the environment and women in the text. This paper reveals that land and its resources are also utilised to oppress women who are already victims of patriarchal systems. Our arguments are anchored on two theoretical frameworks; Marxist theory and Catherine Acholonu's *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995), both of which provided a formidable canvas for interrogating patriarchal ecopolitics, ecological injustice and ecofeminist consciousness in Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008). The novel was purposefully selected because it highlights women's role in environmental regeneration and cultural preservation. The study concludes that ecological justice for women is essential for preserving the natural environment.

Keywords: patriarchy, ecopolitics, ecofeminist consciousness, environmental regeneration, Head

Introduction

Though South African-born, Bessie Head relocated to Botswana where she wrote many of her works. She settled in Serowe, a large village in Botswana, where she worked as a teacher and personally encountered many of the challenges faced by rural women. These firsthand experiences shaped the backdrop of several of her novels, informing the themes and struggles portrayed in her writing. Head consistently emphasises the importance of the natural environment in the social and economic well-being of people in society in her fictional works. In prose works like *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *A Question of Power* (1973), *Serowe, Village of the Rain Wind* (1981), *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984), *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1992), etc., Head foregrounds the interplay between humanity and the natural environment, highlighting the impact of politics, gender and ecological injustice on the well-being of society. In some of these works, Head narrates the effects of harsh natural phenomena like drought, epidemics, etc. on rural farmers, crops and livestock, highlighting the broader consequences of such natural disasters on the family unit, especially women and children as seen in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968).

When Rain Clouds Gather which is the primary text for this study is set in a fictional village named Golema Mmidi supposedly located in Botswana. The story revolves around Makhaya, a South African refugee, who runs away from the sordid apartheid regime in South Africa to Golema Mmidi to start life afresh. Makhaya arrives at Golema Mmidi where the rural populace suffers a double yoke of an oppressive administrative system headed by two brothers; Chief Sekoto and the hotheaded Chief Matenge coupled with the natural disasters which destroyed their farm and livestock. He joins forces with some other proactive persons like Gilbert Balfour and Dinorego in galvanising the women with modern agricultural knowledge in regenerating the earth that has refused to yield crops. The assignment of training the women on modern agricultural practices brings him closer to the rural women and he finds love in the heart of a woman, Paulina, who had had a son from a previous marriage. The farmers experience severe drought which ruined their crops and livestock, a situation that results in the death of many of the villagers. The draconic rule of Chief Matenge in Golema Mmidi, especially his land tenure system which marginalises women, compounds the traumatic experience of the women. This situation brings about a revolution which results in the death of Chief Matenge.

In this novel, Head spotlights the major issues that other African women writers also address in their writings. These writers show that African women's roles (and sometimes men's roles), which are often linked to the land, have seen drastic changes following the movement from colonialism, through independence, to the postcolonial era that has 'reshaped' African societies, histories and cultures. They contend that women's lives tended to be the most affected by these local and global shifts. This background informs some of the arguments we intend to raise in this paper.

1. Literature Review

A good number of scholars (Alan, 2013; Bayer, 20219; Nwoma, 2019; Pangmeshi, 2019 Nwanyanwu, 2022; etc.) have examined Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008) from several perspectives. Alan (2013), for instance, examines the traumatic divisions in the novel, arguing that "Though the narrative has been promoting plans of a workable "utopia" from the first, Matenge's death seems to mark their potential disintegration rather than their possibility" (p.2). Nwanyanwu

(2022) examines the interplay between language and power in the social relationships among the characters in the novel. Nwanyanwu reveals that “modality and linguistic structures encode diverse ideologies in the narrative” (p.82). Nwoma (2019) explores climate change in the novel, revealing that “climate change is represented as a direct result of human's negative interactions with the natural environment in the novel” (p.90). Bayer (2019) explores the physical realities of the land and the cultural agricultural practices defined by ethnic and colonial influences. He observes:

What I detect in Bessie Head's novel is a way of engaging in the physicality of agriculture as a means of overcoming the culturally over-determined conflicts both between Africa and the West, between different ethnic groups within Southern Africa, and between various segments of society that are defined by their relative status of affluence (p.454).

All of these works open up layers of meanings for fruitful discussions around the significance of Bessie Head's literary vision, especially if one considers the refreshing insight of Bayer who quarries the culture in Agriculture.

In this study, however, we will be probing the intersection between ecopolitics, ecological injustice and ecofeminist consciousness to establish how women are marginalised within the patriarchal structures in Botswana society. Bessie Head thematises the intersectionality of nature, conservation, human activities on the environment and women's rights within the oppressive socio-political structure in *When the Rain Clouds Gather* (2008). The novelist fashions a period in history when humanity will return to nature and assume its once rustic innocence. Her works are mainly informed by her relationship with the countryside of Botswana, creatively advocating for a spirit of environmental consciousness in which the ecosystem is preserved from the collaborative efforts and understanding between the sexes. She thinks that society will progress better if humanity reconciles itself with nurturing the natural environment in which everyone is given a sense of belonging and selfhood. This and the patriarchal nature of the ecological politics that marginalises the people of Golema Mmidi shall frame our discussion.

3.1 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach since the data involved is narrative. This approach is most appropriate since understanding the context and subtleties of patriarchal ecopolitics and environmental injustice suffered by the female characters in the selected text is central to the argument we intend to make in this study. By adopting this research design, we will be able to engage in a deeper interpretation of the underlying power dynamics and the ecological disequilibrium which is at the heart of the conflict in the chosen text.

The text was purposefully selected based on its rich exploration of environmental oppression of women which offers a fertile ground for the argument we intend to make in this study. To critically analyse the text, we shall engage in a closing reading of the text, meticulously observing underlying patterns, motifs and structures which enhance the gendered ecological injustice which informed this study.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Theoretical inspirations are derived from two theoretic sources; Marxist theory developed by Karl Marx and Catherine Acholonu's *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995). Karl

Marx propounded a model for understanding the power structures in any society as it relates to the economic life of the people. He argues that society is polarised into two; the poor and the rich who exploit the labour of the poor to maintain their hegemonic positions. This theory adequately explains the patriarchal structures in the selected text, especially as it relates to the catastrophic reign of Chief Matenge in Golema Mmidi where the commoners work very hard only to have the fruits of the labour nourishing the chief and his household. Similarly, Acholonu's seminal work, which is an African variant of Ecofeminist theory, serves as a critical tool to navigate the gendered environmental injustice suffered by the female characters in the selected text.

4. Patriarchy and Ecopolitics in *When Rain Clouds Gather*

Socialist-Marxist orientation holds that whereas other philosophers merely seek to understand the world, Marxism seeks to change it. According to Marxism, social mobility is a result of power struggles between various social classes. Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008) offers a few moral lessons for everyone living in a socioeconomic system similar to that of Golema Mmidi as the pursuit of materialism has grown more pronounced in post-colonial African societies. What is disturbing is the way people like Matenge, Chief Sokoto, and Joas Tsepe go about it. Central to their philosophy is the tendency to lose conscience and unleash terror on the helpless masses. Fortune-seekers like Chief Matenge step on people's toes. The net result is that nothing ever works again and man's worth depreciates before God. The narrator captures the social difference between Chief Matenge and his subjects. For its aptness, the passage is worth quoting in full:

Matenge came back to Golema Mmidi in mid-August and found himself faced with the *progress of mankind*. Commoners were up and about everywhere, busy like ants, building dams for themselves. They were also laughing and had some new language up their sleeve, like 'cash crops. This sets Matenge into a fuming rage. Barely ten years ago the commoner had always to approach a chief or sub-chief and ask him for permission to progress. This desire for progress had usually taken the form of wanting to build a small brick house with a tin roof. But brick houses were for chiefs alone, and how could an ordinary commoner want to bring himself up to the level of a chief? Or again, he might desire to set up a borehole for watering his cattle. The chief could say yes or no. if in some demented mood, he said yes and then the commoner prospered, it would not be for long. This unfortunate man would one day be notified by the chief that a road was to be built in the pathway of his borehole. Would the commoner please quit? Not so many months after that the chief acquired a new watering place for his cattle (*Emphasis ours*, p.152)

The above passage reveals the brutal nature of the antagonist, chief Matenge, who will stop at nothing to see that the poor people of Golema Mmidi, are wiped out from the face of the earth. The rural peasants who generate the bulk of the country's wealth are the commoners referenced in the passage. It is consequently ironic that those same individuals who fight to prevent humanity from extinction are viewed as insignificant appendages. Bessie Head, as a social crusader, here reminds us of the necessity of brotherhood. One may want to ask; is life worth living if the poor remain at the mercy of the oppressor? *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008) argues on the contrary. By all accounts, Bessie Head supports social change and is on the side of the underdog. The opinion of Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Writers in Politics* (1984) is worthwhile. He maintains that:

Literature cannot escape from the class power structure that shapes our everyday lives. Hence the writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense, economic, political, cultural, and ideological struggles in society. What he can choose, is one or the other side on the battlefield: the side of the people, or the side of the social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics (p.30).

Ngugi's statement is appropriate for our discussion. The brutalities of her South African experience are glaringly captured in Bessie Head's novels and short stories. Head's main character in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008), Makhaya, assumes her personality and through him, we can reflect on the political upheaval in South Africa, the consequences of which have spread to other regions of southern Africa, especially Botswana. Owing to the draconian policy of apartheid in South Africa, those living in the backwaters suffer untold misery, poverty, hunger, loneliness, insecurity, subjugation, and so on.

Migrant Makhaya, the hero of the novel, encounters human degeneracy and moral depravity when a ten-year-old granddaughter of a poverty-reduced old woman offers herself to him in return for money. The narrator captures it succinctly:

He lay quite still as the door of his hut was carefully and quietly pushed open by the child and equally quietly and carefully closed behind her. She dropped lightly on her knees and moved her hands over the covers until they reached his face.

'What do you want?'" he asked.

The hands darted back and there was a brief silence; then she said, 'You know'.

'I don't, he said.

She kept quiet as though puzzling this out. At last, she said, 'My grandmother won't mind as long as you pay me'.

'Go away', he said, abashed, humiliated.

'You're just a child' (p.9).

Such is the situation that now pervades the poverty-stricken countryside of South Africa. The citizenry is reduced to commercial sex hawkers, drunks, refugees, and the like. One expects that given the vast resources of the country; the little girl should be in school. But here she lives with her grandmother, sleeping with different men simply to eke out a living. Makhaya refuses to have sex with the little girl, not because she is ugly, but simply because he considers such 'child abuse'. Had a man like paramount Chief Sekoto been made such a juicy offer, he would have accepted it without the slightest conscience. Paramount Chief Sekoto would have capitalised on the poor girl's status to abuse her innocence.

In Golema Mmidi where Makhaya seeks solace, the order has been supplanted by disorder, and safety by danger; corruption has become a subject of the national convention and vain glory a subject of a national award. With this type of setup, insecurity reigns supreme in the village. The two brothers, Matenga and Sekoto are at war:

At first, Matene hated his brother because he felt the chieftaincy should be his, and this hatred drove him to overreach himself until he was discovered in a plot to assassinate his brother. For this, his brother smilingly and politely banished him to Golema Mmidi under the guise that he was being given an administrative post. The shock of it kept him quiet for some time but soon he transferred his hate to the villagers, most notably Dinorejo, who had refused to sit on his advisory council... (p.43)

Dinorego, a man of repute has refused to sit in Matenge's advisory council to avoid tarnishing his image. But Matenge sees it differently. And this is the case with every corrupt politician. They lure pious people into politics and end up mangling their conscience. Matenge, therefore, considers Dinorego's refusal as a challenge to his authority and banishes him from the land. It is only the intervention of Matenge's elder brother, Paramount Chief Sekoto that brings Dinorego back to Golema Mmidi. And from that moment, he becomes one of Matenge's arch-enemies. A similar point is made of Odili, Achebe's hero in *A Man of the People* (1966). But unlike Dinorego, Odili is unable to resist the power and prestige that come with moving into the 'circle' of the likes of Chief Nanga. Unknown to Odili, however, Chief Nanga has used the occasion of his visit to his palatial mansion to mangle his conscience and make him see life afresh. Still unlike Dinorego, but like Armah's hero, the man, in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), Odili 'joins' the system, rather than remaining in the opposition. Thus, Odili and the man are used by both Achebe and Armah to portray revolutionary characters who lose their stand in the face of materialism. Bessie Head's Dinorego, as we have seen, represents the class of revolutionaries who would rather die than yield to political pressure. He stays aloof till the end.

Characters like Makhaya, Dinorego, Gilbert, and Mma-Millipede belong to the revolutionary struggle, although in varying degrees. Gilbert, whose intention is to transform Golema Mmidi into a haven, faces opposition from Matenge. Gilbert's presence in Golema Mmidi is a threat to Matenge's existence:

The along had come Gilbert Balfour, who with his brother's backing, destroyed Matenge's lucrative cattle-speculating business overnight. The hatred, which had by now become a mountain, was once more transferred to Gilbert. And if the times had not changed, he might have won this last battle and got Gilbert removed from the village by the colonial authorities (p.44)

But Matenge has not had enough opposition, Gilbert's opposition to his cattle business is only the tip of the iceberg. Makhaya's arrival in Golema Mmidi as a political refugee stirs Matenge's hornet's nest. With the collaboration of his only friend, Joas Tsepe, a rather corrupt politician, he plots Makhaya's removal:

The whole weekend Matenge stewed and simmered. Gilbert had overshot himself. If there was anything the new government disliked, it was a refugee, and because of this, no man in his right senses would harbour or employ one. Early Monday morning, Matenge climbed into his cream Chevrolet and drove to the village of his brother, Paramount Chief Sekoto (p.47).

Matenge's visit to his brother turns awry, much to his chagrin. The following conversation between the two brothers is worth reproducing here:

'I wish to be relieved of the administration of Golema Mmidi,' said Matenge
Chief Sekoto furrowed his brow. This was most unexpected. He dreaded what was coming next. 'have you had another clash with the young man, Gilbert? He asked lightly.
Matenge turned his deep down-ridden eyes on his brother. 'He is now harbouring refugees at the farm.'

'Oh, is that all, brother? Chief Sekoto asked, relieved

'I see no harm in that, the world is full of refugees. How many has Gilbert taken in? (p.53)

Forced into submission by oppressive powers of any kind, revolutionaries everywhere challenge the authorities of those who try to pull them down. This is the case with the down-to-earth Mma-Millipede whose reputation soars like an eagle when she challenges the pride of the chronic womanizer, Ramogodi;

The family of Mma-Millipede was one of the poorest in the village. But the recognition Mma-Millipede had gained for her religious views soon brought her to the attention of the chiefs, in particular one named Ramogodi, a drunkard and dissipated beaster and the son of the reigning chief. It was Ramogodi's pride that he was sexually attracted to women. This was true. Few women in the village had not been his bedmate at some time or other. But whenever he waylaid Mma-Millipede, she just stared at him, seriously. Thus, Mma-Millipede unconsciously challenged the pride of a vain man, and he became determined to have her as a wife (p.69).

This is the situation in societies where the rich oppress the poor and wield their power over them. Because Ramogodi is powerful, being the son of a chief, he can have any woman without seeking their consent. And until revolutionary struggles such as the one demonstrated by mma-Millipede are initiated, the oppressive class will continue to gain an advantage over their helpless victims. Bessie Head, of course, seems to be saying that the only language that can suppress the inhuman treatment meted out to the marginalised poor in society, is resistance. In his opinion of literature and art in class society, the Chinese communist Mao Tse-Tung comments:

Revolutionary literature and art should create a variety of characters out of real life and help the masses to propel history forward. For example, there is suffering from hunger, cold, and oppression on the one hand, and exploitation and oppression of man by man on the other. These facts exist everywhere and people look upon them as common-place. Writers and artists concentrate on such everyday phenomena, typify the contradictions and struggles within them, and produce works that awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm, and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their environment ("Talks at the Yanan Forum of Literature and Art", 1985, p.25).

At the centre of this revolutionary change and transformation in Golema Mmidi is Makhaya, who is forced by the apartheid regime in South Africa to abandon his job as a journalist and migrate to

Botswana. He tells Gilbert of his truncated revolutionary consciousness back in South Africa:

I worked for a newspaper in Johannesburg... you keep a piece of paper in your pocket with a plan to blow something up, and you get thrown into jail for two years before you've blown anything up (p.30).

Marxism adopts a class approach to society and art, dividing the world into the class of the haves and that of the have-nots as we see in Golema Mmidi. The poor masses produce and create wealth for the sustenance of mankind; yet, they are alienated from the products of their labour. Literature, which is seen as one of the elements of the superstructure, is seized upon and converted into an effective weapon of social mobilisation and revolutionary will to power and change. As pointed out earlier, Mao Tse-Tung in his renowned "Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art", submits that art functions to promote and develop what is 'revolutionary' and what unites people. Art should 'extol' the masses and 'expose' the hypocrisies and the wickedness of the oppressive ruling class. Thus, art empowers the oppressed to unshackle their collective consciousness. But we are told in Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008) that:

Not in Africa had the outcry been raised, but in the well-fed countries. Something had to be done about the man who lived on subsistence agriculture because without his cooperation the world could not be properly fed. Gilbert took this a little further. Voices had to be raised in Africa too, and they had to come from men like Makhaya who deeply craved a better life, not only for themselves but for all these thousands and thousands of people who walked around with no shoes (p.128).

While suffering abject poverty, new crops of politicians litter the environment with their party programs. They have come to deceive the masses once again. One group is the sons of slaves, while the second is called the party of the sons of chiefs. The narrator tells us that:

...they pushed ahead, all the same, glibly spouting meaningless phrases. They invaded people's homes on hut-to-hut campaigns, blindly gesticulating and shouting that they were in the grip of the force and direction of the law of change', as they were wont to call this new phenomenon, African nationalism (p. 63).

The narrator presents the second party thus:

The other political party – the sons and relatives of chiefs – was more cunning. It kept its distance. It played catchy little folk songs everyone knew. It talked about cattle and crops and all the familiar Botswana problems. People were soothed, perhaps even a little disappointed. The latter crowd was too well known; all their faults and failings and private evils were openly discussed in the village (p.63)

The narrator goes further to explain the general atmosphere that surrounds the two campaigns:

Then the pamphlets started circulating, each party stating its views. The sons of chiefs collected the data from the experts and issued neat little manifestos outlining the problems of the country-water, agriculture, and cattle developments. The sons of slaves attacked the "imperialists and neo-colonialists; who were still skillfully manipulating the affairs of an

oppressed people. But they put over their ideas very badly, with many spelling errors: 'You will get a pseudo-independence if you do not vote for us', the pamphlets stated. 'Do not stumble. We are people in the clear who know the line. We will eliminate ignorant disease (p.63).

We find this malaise in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966), and more prominently in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991). Okri's Azaro recounts:

It was around this time that the political season started up anew. Suddenly one morning we heard amplified voices again. The voices urged us to join the Party of the Rich. The voices told us that they were going to stage the greatest political rally in the world that the most famous musicians in Africa would be performing on the day and that there would be gifts for children, prizes for women, and jobs for men. Later in the day, we saw the vans driving past slowly, making their extravagant announcements... I thought people would remember how the very same party had forgotten, and those that hadn't merely shrugged and said that it was all such a long time ago, that things were too complicated for such memories, and besides the party had new leaders (p.387).

Azaro narrates further:

That evening the van of the Party of the Poor also paraded our street. They too blared music and made identical claims. They distributed leaflets and made their promises in four languages. When the two vans, each packed with armed bodyguards, passed one another, they competed with the amount of noise they could generate... we kept expecting some sort of war to break out, but both parties seemed restrained by the healthy respect they had developed for one another. The truth was that the time hadn't come (p.390).

In a class-conscious society, the only relationship that exists between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is a relationship between the poor serving the purpose of the rich. This is demonstrated in the Chief's Sekoto judgment between the people of Bodibeng and the supposedly old watch. Sekoto acquits the woman of the charge of witchcraft and takes her into his home to serve his purpose. He says:

I cannot allow you to go and live once more among the people of Bodibeng. It is only hatred that the people of Bodibeng feel for you, and this has driven them out of their minds. As hatred never dies, who knows what evil they will not plot against you? I have a large house, and you are welcome to the protection it offers. Besides, I suffer from an ailment for which I am always given penicillin injections at the hospital. Now I am tired of penicillin injections and perhaps your good herbs may serve to cure me of my troubles (p.53).

But if we consider Bessie Head a socialist-Marxist then it stands to reason that it is no accident that her novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008) hinges on hope for a better society. But if a change is to be realised, then conflicting ideas about religion and politics should be relegated to the background. Religion and Marxism are not compatible; they are opposing forces. Therefore, Mma-Millipede's argument that Makhaya should consider everyone on earth as his brother is sure to hamper progress. Makhaya states his points clearly:

I don't think I understand you, "he said. "I don't think I accept the other man as my brother.

Do you know what's going on in Golema Mmidi? Well, the same thing is going on wherever there are poor people. Chief Matenge is one lout, cheat, dog, sivine. But Matenge's everywhere get themselves into a position over the poor. I hate the swine. Sometimes I don't know what I feel about the poor, except that I, being poor too, say I've had enough swine (p.136).

We shall argue here that societies like Golema Mmidi have remained the way they are because their religious beliefs conflict with their revolutionary consciousness. The moment a man's conscience prevents him from carrying out his struggle against the oppressor, injustice reigns. Makhaya, who represents Marxism, eschews Christianity. But people like Mma-Millipede who follow Christianity 'like a sinking star' advocate the philosophy of gradualism. But why would a suffering African allow her memory to be demented by Christianity? Does Mma-Millipede even understand the religion she professes? Does she know its workings? Makhaya's sarcastic comments are evident: Apart from one or two missionaries and Gilbert, she had never known white people. She had never had to live with a trusted perverted mentality that pinned up little notices over a whole town that said: this town is for white people only. Black Dogs may only enter through the back door because they are our servants and we are God, permanently, perpetually... (p.139).

However, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008) at once ends on a note of hope and optimism. This aligns with the Marxian creed, which stipulates that once the consciousness of the masses is aroused, change becomes inevitable. The once threatened and divided village of Golema Mmidi finally embraces peace and harmony as the arch-enemy of 'progress and civilisation', Matenge, dies of a heart attack. Matenge's death thus inaugurates communism and abolishes private property. David Mc Lellan, in *Karl Marx* (1975), quotes Marx as saying:

Communism is the positive abolition of private property and thus of human self-alienation and therefore the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man. This is communism as the complete and conscious return of man himself as social, i.e. a human being. Communism as completed naturalism is humanism and as completed humanism is naturalism. It is the genuine solution to the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man. It is the true solution to the struggle between existence and essence, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individuals and species (pp.32-33).

Our criticism of Head here, however, is that she allows divine providence to take the place of the masses. If as argued earlier Marxism eschews mysticism, then it follows that Head shows a weakness in her resolution of the conflict between the opposing forces. The end sounds too mysterious and religious. One expects that given the nature of the novel from the beginning; a more thought-provoking method would have been adopted by Head. The consciousness of the masses is aroused as one of them, Paulina Sebeso is summoned by Matenge. The heart attack that suddenly grips the blood-thirsty Matenge takes the form of divine providence intervening on behalf of the masses.

5. Ecofeminist Consciousness

Bessie Head is not a radical feminist; she appears to believe in some of the African variants of

feminist ideology such as *Womanism* or *Motherism*. Catherine Acholonu's variant of ecofeminist theory, *Motherism*, is appropriate for our discussion because, aside from focusing on the African woman, it embraces both feminism and environmental concepts. She argues, "Motherism sees the woman as a custodian of the Earth, a preserver of life and nurturer of nature. It is through her that the harmony between humanity and the environment is maintained" (1995, p.73). The emphasis on the nurturing and sustaining roles of women in both human and environmental aspects of society in Africa in Acholonu's feminist concept resonates with the picture of the women that emerge from Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008):

The women were the traditional tillers of the earth, not the men. The women were the backbone of agriculture while the men on the whole were cattle drovers. But when it came to programmes for improved techniques in agriculture, soil conservation, the use of pesticides and fertilizers, and the production of cash crops, the lecture rooms were open to men only. Why give training to a section of the population who may never use it but continue to leave it to their wives to erode the soil by unsound agricultural practices? Why start talking about development and food production without taking into account who is really producing the food? At each turn, he had been struck by the complexity of the structure. Golema Mmidi was, for most of the year, a village of women with all the men away at the cattle posts. Dinorego was the only full-time male crop producer in the village. All the rest were women (p.31).

We are further told in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008) that while men are cattle drovers, the women are agriculturists. The women are the tillers of the land and are on the land 365 days of the year (p.40). The arid nature of the land, coupled with unpredictable weather patterns, and women's central role in farming, led Gilbert Balfour to believe that perhaps, "all change, in the long run, would depend on the women of the country and perhaps they too could provide several solutions to the problems he had not yet thought of" (p.41). These would be women like Paulina Sebeso, who would rally the others and help prosper history and development forward.

Acholonu believes that the survival of the family and society rests on the shoulders of women: "Motherism is concerned with the collective well-being of the community. It is a socio-political and ecological philosophy that underscores the importance of women in the healing and nurturing of the earth and society" (p.89). In *When the Rain Clouds Gather* (2008), characters like Maria, Paulina Sebaso Mma-Millipe and other women contribute positively to the general development of Golema Mmidi.

No men ever worked harder than Botswana women, for the whole burden of providing food for big families rested with them. It was their sticks that thrashed the corn at harvesting time and their winnowing baskets that filled the air for miles and miles around with the dust of husks, and they often, in addition to broadcasting the seed when the early rains fell, took over the tasks of the men and also ploughed the land with oxen (pp.108 -109).

Here, Head underscores the importance of preserving indigenous systems of agriculture mostly practised by women. She tries to disabuse the mind of the reader from the masculine definition of agricultural practice with its gendered systems of cultivation. Through the energies and innovativeness of the female characters, the impact of patriarchal ideology and bad leadership

becomes crystal clear.

Apart from the ecofeminist concerns that permeate the novel, Head's feminist vision in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008) also embraces the socio-cultural marginalisation of women. The patriarchal hegemony is felt at the very beginning of the novel, especially considering the encounter between Makhaya Maseko and the old woman who gives out her underage granddaughter to sleep with him for money. Even after he rejects the offer, Makhaya gives her money and tells her to go away. When the grandmother discovers this, she remarks:

You mean he gave you the money for nothing?" she said, beside herself with excitement. "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! I know it all along in my heart that he was mad! Let us lock the door to protect ourselves from the madman! (pp.9 -10)

It becomes clear that the society which Head writes about does not only marginalise women ecologically but also indulges in sexual exploitation of women; they are treated as objects good only for sexual gratification. Hence, Makhaya's refusal to take sexual advantage of the teenage girl even after giving her money amazes the grandmother.

6. Conclusion

The nature of commitment in African fiction varies from writer to writer. In our discussion, Head shows how the ecosystem is connected to social and political issues, and how oppression and exploitation of land and resources are used to maintain power and oppression over women. She emphasises the importance of indigenous knowledge and traditional ecological practices in understanding and preserving the environment. *When the Rain Clouds Gather* (2008) emphasises the importance of respecting the land and women who cultivate it and how they have been connected to it for centuries. Head's vision and commitment hinge on hope for a better Africa. Bessie Head's concern for the environment speaks volumes. She fashions a period in history when humanity will return to nature and assume its once rustic innocence. Her relationship with the Botswana countryside mainly informs her works. She creatively advocates a spirit of environmental consciousness in which natural sanctions are preserved. She believes that society will progress better if humanity reconciles itself with the natural environment in which everyone is their brother's keeper.

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