

## Traumatic Divisions: the Collective and Interpersonal in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*

Alan Ramón Ward  
Goldsmiths, University of London

Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969) tells the story of Makhaya, an emotionally scarred black African liberationist, who crosses the border from Apartheid South Africa into pre-Independence Botswana. Escaping the racism and inhumanity that he has experienced, Makhaya finds himself in Golema Mmidi, a quiet village in the east of the country, governed by the sometimes conflicting interests of the hereditary chief, his tyrannical brother, the colonial administration, and Gilbert Balfour, a white English agricultural expert. Makhaya attaches himself to the village and through an alliance with Gilbert takes a position of leadership among its people. Though it is easy to read the novel in a straightforward manner, as a tale pitting good characters against evil characters—indeed many commentators have lauded the novel for this (Garrett; Fielding)—I find that such a reading cannot account for certain tensions and resonances felt throughout the book. Head's novel is widely read as a pitched battle between the good in Gilbert and Makhaya and the evil in Matenge, the Village Chief. Sophia Ogwude, for instance, reads the novel as the destruction of a ruling class by the visionaries, Gilbert and Makhaya, as they lead the commoners (79, 80). For Maureen Fielding, Gilbert is the "Christ-like" saviour, preaching toward a future utopia (18); and for Maxine Sample, like James Garrett, Matenge is an incarnation of the terrible, self-obsessed dictator (Sample 41; Garrett 125).

To read the novel this way is to delight in the possibilities of a new future: the resuscitation of great African leaders, the uplifting of a people together with advances in technology (the introduction of new tractors and machinery), agriculture (Gilbert's cooperative methods), and family circumstance (reuniting families broken apart by the old ways of rearing cattle). The novel becomes a resolutely hopeful one in such a reading, answering the frequent call for a utopian vision of Africa in many studies of social development of the continent.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the novel, there is very little obstruction to stop or even stall progress in the village. People are accepting and enthusiastic; the authorities end up tacitly supporting everything. In fact, the only isolated obstacle to progress, the evil Matenge, disappears without a trace at the story's climactic ending, leaving the path clear for Gilbert and Makhaya.

And yet the ending does not feel wholly positive. When, at the head of a crowd of protesters, Makhaya strides up the mansion steps and knocks down Matenge's front door, he gets lost in the power of his actions, frightening the people he represents, including his wife. As the

book ends, “everything [is] uncertain” (185); even Gilbert becomes unsure and disoriented: “What was he looking for? What was he doing? Agriculture? The need for a poor country to catch up with the Joneses in the rich countries?” (181). Perhaps it was not well thought through; perhaps it was all “to excuse himself for the need to live in a hurricane of activity” (181). 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. Moreover, his death is itself a surprisingly solemn moment. His last stand is affecting, humane: he dies “crying like a forlorn and lonely child” (174); upon finding him, “Makhaya paused and a twisted spasm of pain swept across his face” (175). Makhaya is moved to the point of wanting to protect Matenge: he wonders, “could the man hang like that with all the villagers staring in?” (175). How can we account for the feeling of solemn severity, even of tragedy, following Matenge’s death?

I prefer not to read *When Rain Clouds Gather* as a straightforward narrative of fortuitous interpersonal relationships and the incremental triumph of good over evil. Head’s fiction here is deeply symbolic. It concerns good and evil but not directly, and gives neither a representation. Evil is not given a face but is an ominous presence that can only truly show itself from within its opposite.<sup>2</sup> Characters that appear to be good have aspects within them that are drawn toward evil: as Head remarks elsewhere, “people and nations do not realise the point at which they become evil; but once trapped in its net, evil has a powerful propelling motion into a terrible abyss of destruction” (*Woman* 69). True fear of evil is thus revealed, not in relations with evil characters, but in the insidious possibility that the good can be corrupted surreptitiously, without announcement. By creating expectations of archetypal characters in both the reader and in the villagers of Golema Mmidi, Head hints at the pitfalls of African liberation and the potential for misplaced trust. In the world of the novel, it is all too easy to take people for what they seem. I would like to re-evaluate Head’s cast of characters in this light.

Rather than reading Matenge singularly as a tyrant inflicting a “ruthless reign of terror” on his village (Sample 41), for instance, I believe he might also be read as a buffoon, loud but in some ways harmless, and totally out of touch with his true position in the world. He has bought himself a throne-like chair and “a deep purple, tasselled and expensive dressing gown” in which he paces “every morning, lost in a Napoleon-like reverie” (Head, *When* 58); he makes “imperious gesture[s]” (60); his movements are contrived and deliberately “regal, kingly, spectacular” (60-61). And yet he is powerless to remove a single refugee from his village, or even to fire a man in his employment (50, 20). No matter how loudly he bellows or whom he threatens, his pleas are dismissed as the pleas of a child both by his brother, Paramount Chief Sekoto, and the colonial administrator, George Appleby-Smith (50-53). Even in the wake of his suicide, Matenge remains an almost cartoonish narrative element: “Oh, oh, the mess and fuss and bother. The talk, talk, talk. [Sekoto] closed his eyes.

Even in death his brother upset his digestion for the whole day . . .” (176). Perhaps Matenge could be read as the effete and angry counterpoint to the uniformly harmless and hilarious side of Sekoto that has him “waddl[e] like a duck when he walk[s]” (45).

Despite their often nearly comedic status in the narrative, however, Matenge and Sekoto play a vital role. If we read them as assuming the roles of angry and happy clown, they provide the pantomimic backdrop of an old order being inevitably overturned. Their positions of supposed stature and authority and Matenge’s loud resistance to technological and social development create the expectation—in the villagers and perhaps the reader—of an ensuing power struggle with Gilbert and Makhaya. But this context only occludes a different, deeper and more pertinent discord. I believe that the story’s reliance on the key interpersonal relationship between Gilbert and Makhaya serves not to engender a transparent bond and alliance, but to reveal the deep complexities of a conflict between them.

In the context of a crumbling colonial structure, including both the waning influence of colonists like Appleby-Smith, who is loath to interfere in the changes going on, and the dissolution of the chieftaincies that have been artificially upheld, the issue of most concern is what will come next for the village -- the country, and the continent. Sue Kim suggests that Head’s novels tend to describe a “landscape of the social body beset by problems that call out for a ‘great leader,’” who has the ability “to resolve the clash between modernization and traditional cultural patterns by developing a type of character [that] everyone gives way to” (119). Though Kim argues that Head’s world successfully resolves itself in this manner—and consequently accuses Head of being “inwardly simplistic” (119)—I believe that Head is only creating this expectation in order to watch it unravel.

We are presented with two popular leaders in the novel who find common cause against the old order, and who share a general vision for technological and social development. Significantly, both Gilbert’s and Makhaya’s alternative visions for “Africa” are accepted as one and the same by the villagers and, again, perhaps by the reader as well. Yet the approaches and personalities of the two men are rather distinct on closer inspection. In particular, though both men are generally devoted to the ideal of progress, Gilbert is consistently of the opinion that progress must be imported by poorer countries from richer ones with the requisite knowledge, and that it must be forced upon a people if necessary. Makhaya, by contrast, envisions an organic development of progressive ideas and their democratic implementation, whether or not the end result is a mess. Gilbert is determined: “what we need here is a dictatorship that will feed, clothe and educate a people. I could work well with a dictatorship, which says, Look here, Gilbert, fill in this poverty programme” (78). In response, “Makhaya return[s] an almost hostile look”: “I don’t think I approve of dictatorships in any form, whether for the good of mankind or not. Even if it is painstakingly slow, I prefer a democracy for Africa, come what may” (78-79).

Taken at face value, Gilbert's stated position here would seem to represent an encroaching post-colonial administration ready to take the reins from the old regime with as little democratic involvement as possible. He wants the people to become more efficient, to increase the value of the country, but not to become more reflective or self-assertive. Though we are told that Gilbert left England for Botswana because he would rather live in the woods than participate in the stilted upper middle class society to which he was born, he is still nostalgic for England and even thinks of returning there with his wife to start his family (26, 98-99). At times, we may get the sense that Gilbert is an Englishman satisfying his youthful need for adventure. Perhaps he is not a foreigner who has made Africa his home, but a visitor whose home will always exist elsewhere. His vision is an entirely imported one, of great tobacco and "high-grade beef" production, where the women "worry about the ladder in their new stockings or discuss their children's ailments over dainty cups of tea" (112).

Makhaya, on the other hand, is after something quite different and far less specific. His vision is not simply one of progress but one of freedom; the novel itself stems from his initial desire "to step on free ground [...] 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" (4). At the same time, he shows deep interest in the construction of a new way of life for Africa. He is immediately drawn to Gilbert's plans for new agricultural methods in the village, and stares with "pure delight" at a child's dedicated attempt to build an intricate model of her village, which he immediately helps to construct (27-29, 103-104, 109).

Makhaya represents, then, an honest and convincing African nationalism, in contradistinction to the meaningless, corrupt and bureaucratic nationalism of Joas Tsepe, who aligns himself with Matenge (59). As is often noted by people around him, Makhaya is almost too simple, and yet "prove[s] himself the magician who [can] make tobacco co-operatives appear overnight" (26, 93, 152). Makhaya is seductive precisely for not being political. Once he assures Dinorego that he is only after "peace of mind" rather than "fame and importance," the old man immediately thinks: "the young man was very attractive, and he had a difficult daughter whom he wanted married before he died. The man's speech and ideas also appealed to him" (14).

Makhaya's politics are a kind of anti-politics. He presents himself as disinterested in the ideological tensions of his country; he appears to be interested only in freedom and common sense: "more than anything, he hated politics," yet he holds a "private anxiety to put his life to a useful purpose" (79). In fact, his politics are seldom more than just a reaction to injustice, in which he is compelled to act, and to give his life to, if need be: "Why not be shot dead rather than live the living death of humiliation? And this agony piled up on all sides in a torrential fury because it was not just that one thing was wrong, it was a thousand others as well" (121). When he acts, it will not be by legal means: "taking another man's life meant little to him"; "the chief is not going to die of high blood pressure [...] I am going to kill him" (62).

We might wonder what is really at stake in Makhaya's seductive, action-based approach.

Makhaya's extreme nature, in contrast to Gilbert's gentler manner, is tested as a strategy for leading people by the insertion of two strong-willed and independent female characters. Maria and Paulina are both active and industrious women. When Maria is shown a picture of a modern British kitchen with shelves, she sets about moulding shelves out of earth in her hut so well that her model is copied by all the women of the village (22); similarly, Paulina is known for her ability to successfully organise people: she is "the only woman who would have the courage to persuade the other women to attend lessons at the farm" (96). They are also similar in their character, frequently exhibiting a jealousy over their men or their particular skills (75, 113). Early on, we are made aware of an emerging love triangle between Gilbert, Maria, and Makhaya: Maria, who is attracted to Gilbert, is singled out as an ideal wife for Makhaya (27). It is, in fact, this strange attraction between Maria and Makhaya that forces Gilbert's hand in proposing to her. Immediately before his frenzied proposal, Gilbert confronts Makhaya: "I hope you don't love Maria, too," he says seriously (80). In the face of Makhaya's charm and presence, Gilbert moves quickly and aggressively to secure Maria for himself. And when Paulina enters the frame later, we see by the ease with which Paulina falls in love with Makhaya, that Gilbert was perhaps right to be nervous.

I read Gilbert and Makhaya's courtship of these leading women in tandem with a more general courtship taking place -- of the villagers, of the Batswana, and finally of the African people in general.<sup>3</sup> The task of convincing a people is vital for a leader; as Gilbert and Makhaya attract Maria and Paulina, respectively, so we imagine they may attract followers and disciples to their cause. For Gilbert, the process is somewhat painful. His courtship is persistently awkward. Maria is perhaps more "self-absorbed" than Paulina, and makes Gilbert work very hard (23). She refuses his first proposal and, while clearly liking him, toys with the man until he feels forced to go directly to her father, "trembling from head to foot": "I'm going to marry your daughter," he tells Dinorego (27, 81). Though Maria tells her father that she agrees with the marriage, she remains unsure. Mma-Millipede, the elder, picks up on her hesitations: "'are you sure you want to marry, my child?' she asked, kindly. The young girl shrugged, helplessly. 'I don't know my own mind, Mama,' she said, in despair. 'I don't know what I want. You must help me'" (85). We get the sense that Gilbert's match with Maria is an imperfect if not an uncomfortable one, a position of compromise; they love each other, but she feels uneasy following him: "You will have to go back to England by yourself," she tells him firmly (98). He scolds her "in a quiet threatening voice," and she corrects herself in the moment, but he is overcome "with a sudden, deep loneliness" (99). The scene ends with him "pull[ing] Maria by the hand [. . .] far into the bush" (99). It is true that Gilbert ultimately imposes his will over her coyness, and overpowers her uncertainty, but he must do so by a show of force that exposes his jealous vulnerability.

He himself is forced to act on his insecurities. He asserts himself powerfully only to feel how his display of power unsettles him.

Makhaya's experience with Paulina is quite different. She too is apprehensive at first, and confrontational at their first meeting, but like almost everyone who encounters Makhaya, she falls for "the magic of Makhaya's personality. He could make people feel at ease. He could change a whole attitude of mind merely in the way he raised his hand or smiled" (105, 102). It is no wonder that critic Leloba Molema likens his name to *Umkhaya*, meaning "home boy" or "home girl," suggesting a person of deep familiarity, and that his full name, Makhaya Maseko, brings together "feelings of warmth, security and belonging" when spoken in Zulu (27). Paulina quickly falls deeply in love with Makhaya. Despite the panic and worry over the safety of her son, Paulina tells him softly: "you mustn't think I'm a cheap woman, but I love you" (Head, *When* 154). Though we trust Makhaya's capacity for firmness and self-assertion, he controls Paulina not directly but by the sheer force of his character. He retains control while giving nothing away.

Maria and Paulina thus show us different facets of our heroes. Whereas Paulina devotes herself completely, putting Makhaya in command, even as regards the arrangements for her dead son, Maria makes Gilbert so jealous that he contemplates leaving Africa (158). If they have both vied for a status of symbolic leadership, Gilbert is circumscribed in his role as husband while Makhaya carries a new weight of authority. After Paulina falls in love with Makhaya, he is elevated somehow to the unofficial leadership of the village. It is his prerogative to follow Matenge's lead at the end of the novel; the whole village waits for him to arrive and to do so (175). Makhaya's facility with women conveys metaphorically his popularity in the village. His courtship produces his pairing, not only with Paulina, but also with the village as a whole.

Makhaya is trustworthy and a natural leader, dependable for matters of life and death. But the novel ends with the question of Makhaya's character unattended. From the outset, people feel "in Makhaya's attitude and utterances a horror of life" which is respected but not understood (93). Notwithstanding his background, full of "the terrors of rape, murder and bloodshed," he is nonetheless believed to carry a useful "understanding of evil" (93). Yet the novel seems to interrogate whether this understanding of evil has not insidiously created favourable circumstances for him.

There is, indeed, an alternative reading of Head's novel as the story of an angry man without vision who adopts a new progressive stance to secure his own position. Is there anything impossible for Makhaya, one might ask, when given the right circumstances? He disagrees with Gilbert to favour democracy over dictatorship, but when presented with the opportunity at the end of the novel, he develops the commonality with Matenge: the empathetic "spasm of pain," his concern for the propriety of the chief's dead body (175). Someday he may well wish to explore the possibility of being God to his people, as he has already mused with Paulina: "the whole superstructure would

be there, glittering with gold walls [. . .] ‘sometimes,’ [he tells her,] ‘I think I am God’” (139-140).

This is how I read Jacqueline Rose’s exploration of the place of the unconscious in Head’s writing. Where a person is deeply and irreparably conditioned by a past or ongoing social trauma, what is the nature of his belief in the progressive ideologies that he espouses? Is Makhaya’s belief in progress even comparable to Dinorego’s, for instance? For all that Makhaya has lived and suffered, his unconscious, his mind, operates differently. Rose wonders whether, “once you grant [that] the unconscious [plays a role], how do you deal with what can appear as, not just its self-creating, but also its self-destroying laws?” (417). The traumatic inception of a person’s unconscious must be accounted for in discussing the adoption of socially progressive ideas and programmes. And hopeful ideas must be understood in the context of the traumatic experiences that condition their adoption. Trauma, lodged in the unconscious, is a model for an historical memory that cannot be forgotten.<sup>4</sup> Rose is right to remark that “pathology is the place where history talks in its loudest, most grating voice” (412).

As such, Rose’s excellent essay posits a particular functioning of the unconscious that brings the possibility of a universal humanist historical position in Head’s writing into question. As mentioned above, for instance, it is all too easy to promote a straightforward reading of Gilbert and Makhaya as united and singularly good, standing for humanist liberal principles in an antiquated world in need of development. In doing so, however, we are presupposing the common applicability of a particular universalism to explain a loose set of events and cross-cultural relationships. Moreover, to do so we must ignore many of Makhaya’s darker moments, the asides of his character that chart his own development through the novel. What if these are not meaningless moments of inexplicable madness but incongruities that signal the full potential breadth and depth of his character? Rose cautions precisely against “the risk of sliding into imperial diagnosis of the type that has rushed to read derangement where legible political protest [or, I would add, political manoeuvring] was in fact what was being expressed” (403).

The political protest here, I argue, belongs not to Makhaya but to Head. Her objections are not directed against the Matenges, the hereditary chiefs, or even the colonial administrators of Africa; instead, Head’s novel presents a caution respecting the visionaries, the Gilbert Balfours, and especially the Makhayas. Makhaya represents not the saviour of Africa, but the implicit potential for such saviours to go awry, to find within themselves the degeneration of the promises they made and once believed even in their very cores. Writing between the dictatorial seizures of power by Joseph Mobutu in 1965 and Idi Amin in 1971, Head’s novel explores the African revolutionary leader’s mind caught between two main forces: the universalist ideology of progress promoted by Gilbert, and what is perhaps its darkest potential underside, represented by Makhaya’s own traumatic experiences of South African apartheid.<sup>5</sup> As Rose remarks: “If Head seems at moments to be promoting something which might be called

universal humanism [. . .], it would seem to be [. . .] its deranging, unacceptable side” (416).

For Head, the problem seems to lie in underestimating the potential underside of universal ideas of good. It is perhaps also worth mentioning that her novel was published only a year after the powerful South African Communist Party (SACP), working closely with the ANC, stood in faithful support of the brutal Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, as they had stood for the invasion of Hungary in 1956 (Ellis 148). Moreover, as Stephen Ellis reports, “the SACP and the armed organisation in which it had overwhelming influence, Umkhonto we Sizwe, [was] the most important armed opponent of the South African government” (149). There was reason for concern over the way Africa’s progressive struggles would develop; the potential slippage from enlightened ideals, be they overtly Marxist or not, to their dark oppressive underside was ever present.

Gilbert’s programme for development acts as a universal promise of prosperity for everyone: “This is Utopia, Mack. I’ve the greatest dreams about it” (Head, *When* 25). His personal work ethic and ideology of efficiency provide a convincing backdrop for the collectivising measures he wishes to introduce. These measures seem radical to some but address at least one pressing injustice suffered by the villagers at the hands of their chief. Matenge buys cattle from the villagers for six pounds when

in his heart he knows he will get sixteen or twenty pounds for the same beast at the abattoir. This is the only way that a poor man may sell cattle because he cannot order railway trucks to transport his cattle. On this business [Matenge] became very rich, then along came Gilbert with a new idea: the cattle co-operative belongs to the people and each member is to get a fair price. (20)

The amendment of this concrete injustice seems a worthy cause to anyone, and indeed represents the principle of collectivity.<sup>6</sup>

And yet, is there not some kernel within this principle that immediately belies its explicit claims? The question must be asked whether, as this principle is adopted and pushed through, its expression does not implicitly produce its own betrayal. Is it not possible, for instance, that a humanist promise of progress such as Gilbert’s might give expression to an overly ambitious and potentially inhumane drive to impose itself? In fact, we learn from Gilbert himself that this *is* possible, both directly when he makes his plea for dictatorship, and also, more shockingly, when he divulges more fully the details of his plans (78). As the village is beset by its worst tragedy, the death of its cattle in droves, Gilbert’s expertise is sought. The village men are proud to be members of the cattle co-operative. They think with hope that “Gilbert, who had new ideas each day, would tell them what to do [. . .] ‘Come, let us go and see Gilbert’” (145).

But Gilbert’s reception is different from what is expected. In the face of their acute tragedy, Gilbert behaves “like a gambler who foresees only the gains that will come without any of the losses” (150). To Gilbert’s mind, the village’s tragedy is a great boon: “the cattle population of Golema Mmidi had been too huge and unwieldy for his



plans. For planned and scientific production of high-grade beef, he needed a drastically reduced herd” (150). In his sociological study of Christian missionaries in Africa, E.M. Uka remarks on “an apparent lack of congruence between the missionaries’ utterances and their actions” as they are perceived by local communities (21). Gilbert speaks of the fairness of collectives but goes on to preside over “an accelerated slaughter of emaciated beasts at the abattoir,” in order to make money for the co-operative (Head, *When* 151). Like the missionaries in Uka’s study who can become “too strongly identified with European political and business interests” (21), we feel that Gilbert, and not the villagers, has taken charge of the fate of the village. One might almost be reminded, as Molema is, of Gilbert’s namesake, the British Prime Minister Lord Balfour, who sought to bring order to South Africa without “native” involvement following the Second Boer War: “You cannot give them equal rights without threatening the whole fabric of civilization” (Balfour qtd. in Molema 28).

To impress on the reader the significance of this distinction between Gilbert’s will and the will of the people, Head’s narrative lingers in detail on the deaths of the village cattle, describing the full weight of the tragedy that Gilbert seems to applaud. The Batswana, we are told, are close to their cattle: “Both were as close to each other as breathing, and it had never been regarded as strange that a man and his cattle lived the same life. No doubt the cattlemen [. . .] at first stared in disbelief when their cattle began dropping dead before their very eyes” (Head, *When* 143). We are told that “a Motswana without any cattle at all might as well be dead” (138). Around the village, bewildered people try to make sense of this disaster: “I had two hundred cattle just yesterday. Out of this, one hundred and twenty have died. I have just counted the beasts. I now have eighty [. . .] what has Gilbert to say about the deaths?” (144-145).

We are told that it is usual for Botswana to undergo a sweltering and scorching dry spell in mid-August that lifts columns of red dust to the sky until the summer rains come. Instead of “the rain clouds [which] always gathered in September,” an extreme draught besets them (142). Still, “the cattlemen were not unduly worried”; the Tswana cow, like the Batswana, is well equipped to deal with starvation and has never died of drought: “there were always droughts. There had been many in each man’s lifetime, but never in the memory of man had the cattle dropped dead” (143). What does it mean, then, that on this occasion, in this year, the cattle begin to die in droves?

The natural symbolism of Head’s narrative has been often commented on. Joyce Johnson, for instance, discusses Head’s sun, that “dominates both the physical and the social environment and influences people’s mental outlook” (59); Johnson emphasises the sun’s role as representing “power that is exercised suddenly and recklessly” by the proponents of progress (60).<sup>7</sup> In this case, the sun’s unprecedented force signals a rejection of Gilbert’s plans by the natural order. A symbolic link can perhaps also be drawn to the amaXhosa Cattle Slaughter of 1856-57. Four hundred thousand head

of cattle were killed in compliance with a prophesy articulated by a fifteen year old girl, Nongqawuse, who promised the return of their ancestors along with new herds of cattle (see Wenzel). The result was devastating: as forty thousand people starved following the failed prophesy, fifty thousand more left their land to become labourers for the British (Wenzel 18-19). A prominent suggestion that British colonial power was behind the prophesy (see, for instance, Scheub 308-11) remains unproven but, as Jennifer Wenzel remarks, “regardless of whether [colonial administrator] Sir George Grey had a hand in what Nongqawuse saw and heard, he took maximum advantage of the movement’s aftermath” (19), and forced the amaXhosa off their land with labour contracts.

Unlike the Batswana, who actually feel spiritually close to their animals, Gilbert and Makhaya treat the cattle as simple possessions. Like Gilbert, who has organised plans to cull so many head of cattle for sale as cut-priced “corned beef,” Makhaya is also oblivious to the importance of cattle to the people: “he was silent for a moment, making a swift mental calculation. ‘You must sell the damn beasts,’ he said. She looked up, shocked” (Head, *When* 151, 138). In this vein, one can read a greater affiliation in Makhaya toward the jackal that hovers for a whole night near a dying cow in order to devour the newborn calf to which she gives birth. Makhaya is “shocked,” but perhaps most shocked by his own empathy for the jackal (155-156). Makhaya identifies with the jackal looking to feed at the site where Paulina’s son has died. Alone with the animal, he notices the beauty behind its “sharp, jagged teeth” and “savage snarl”: the way it shows its “beautiful amber eyes in honey-gold flashes,” its “soft, thick, honey-gold coat” (160). He remarks to himself that there is no need to be afraid of the animal because it simply wanted “to retreat as far from man as possible” and that “in essence most of his [own] reactions had been like those of the jackal, from the day he had been born” (160). If anything, he feels jealous of the animal for having “a jackal society where he felt sane and secure, [while] no human society was sane and normal” (160).

Makhaya finds himself required to constantly negotiate a place for himself. He must be a tireless diplomat, reconciling the ideas in his own mind with those of the majority or with what is generally acceptable. This is not to say that his ideas do not grow in tandem with those of his new community, only that the ideas of the community get distorted in Makhaya’s mind as he adopts them by exploiting their dark underside. The problem lies in an incongruous understanding of the same principles as held by the villagers on one hand, and by Makhaya on the other.

We know from the outset that he is entirely alien to the villagers of Golema Mmidi. Head describes a culture in the village in which the being of each person is lived as a kind of exteriority, as habit, role and ritual: what it is to be a man or a woman, what they do, or what the village expects of them. This kind of collective existence allows the internalisation by each person of certain values and ideas. Like Gilbert, Makhaya is an outsider to communal culture. He is an individual

through and through, unable to quite believe in anything with the intensity or faith that is expected among the villagers. His inner life is entirely his own: intensely personal, self-reflective, and suspicious. Though he believes that Golema Mmidi should be helped to realise a free and full collective life, this remains for him an intellectual idea; Makhaya does not participate in a collective belief. His belief is a considered allegiance to a community that he has begun to lead. Consequently, he is unable to participate in the villagers' adoption of the universalist ideas that he understands so well. To use Rose's turn of phrase, his "universality therefore is a part of interiority—I realise that to say that universality is a part [of something] is oxymoronic, but I want to avoid suggesting that the psyche is being wholly universalised here" (415).

A distinction is therefore being suggested by the narrative between a *belief* in a set of ideas, and *living* these ideas. Whereas the former is a reflective attitude, and thus prone to shifts, changes, distortions, and reversals, the latter is an accepted and, for the most part, an unquestioned orientation which directs the entirety of one's perceptions. Makhaya's relationship with his beliefs—for instance, in the idea of a collective—is constructed subjectively, and subordinated to his complex individuality. The villagers, such as Paulina, on the other hand, develop their belief in collectives on the basis of their implicit accommodation of its principle at the level of habit and labour. Their perceptions and attitudes are organised externally, collectively, rather than inwardly on an individual, subjective basis.

Though Makhaya's individualism, which is comparable only to Gilbert's and George Appleby-Smith's, could be read as a suggestion that the man to lead the Batswana must share a similar character with the old colonial administrators, I read Makhaya as too much in his own head, more egocentric than worldly. Rose points out that Head, writing against the "dominant mythology [that] African identity was [. . .] more dependent, immature," and lacking interiority, stages her critique by questioning the terms of the debate itself (405). Why should the representation of tribal African identities founded upon a collective rather than a western-style individualism infantilize participants of African village life?<sup>8</sup> Though it is true that Makhaya, like Gilbert, stands out from the people in the village as an individual with a distinct set of thoughts and reflections that make him less naïve, a close reading of the narrative seems to suggest that the inference that he is thereby made more adult is intrinsically wrong. We see at various points for instance that Makhaya's individualism operates at times as an almost traumatic effect within him. On occasion, he is destabilised and even controlled by his violent temper. Immediately upon encountering Matenge's rudeness, for instance, Makhaya becomes a "murderously angry man": "there was a wild element in Makhaya. [He] looked at [Dinorego] with a pained, dazed expression and his eyes glistened with tears" (Head, *When* 62).

He is angry, clever and strong, but Makhaya's goodness cannot be taken at face value. His allegiance to the principles of fairness and justice is, as to all ideas, too intellectual and reflective to be trusted. It

is not a habit or a way of life. There is a reason that Gilbert's programmes, plans, and adjustments work so well in Golema Mmidi. The cattle co-operative, the tobacco operation, and the new agricultural system are massively efficient and successful because the people of the village accept his ideas as part of the pre-existing ideas that frame their lives. They live collectively, and view themselves as only part of a greater village life, which in turn includes them. The introduction of Makhaya portends the potential danger of being misled by one who does not share the framework by which they live life. As the village waits together in front of Matenge's house until Makhaya arrives to break down the door and proclaim the tyrant's death, the future seems full of hope but also seems at its most vulnerable.

Can we not read a sense of this vulnerability in the novel's very last scene where Paulina, frightened by what she has seen in Makhaya's eyes as he enters Matenge's house, says yes to Makhaya's marriage proposal "a bit too quickly" (185)? In the suddenness of change and the frenzy of expectation, Makhaya wins a prize representative of the people that he may well lead, but it all happens "too quickly," and perhaps without sufficient consideration on either side. Elsewhere, Head asks: "How does one communicate with the horrible?" (*Tales* 143). A sad reality of communication is that agreements can be made without both sides agreeing to the same thing. A damaged man like Makhaya cannot communicate with the villagers, and cannot be known. His speech is alien and cannot be read transparently.

In its own way, the novel thus warns against the inherent potential for ideological misrecognition, especially present within the wheels of western progress and development. The gentility and generosity of Gilbert's ideas and vision to collectivise, for instance, conceal the potential for their callous and aggressive implementation. Still, we feel that there is a natural limit to Gilbert's influence. Were he to assert himself too much, press the villagers with ideas that are too radical, he would lose them. He feels this instinctively: "Gilbert had been fearful of being critical about the African way of life" (Head, *When* 96). As with his interactions with Maria, any show of direct force would somehow weaken him and lose him the appearance of control. Makhaya's power, on the other hand, is to lead beyond Gilbert's, to disarm the villagers with the strength and depth of his character, to make them love him while he pushes Gilbert's scheme to collectivise. In both cases, the villagers' misrecognition is not of the intention of either of the two men but of the dangers implicit in the very ideas of "development" and "progress".

Significantly, however, the novel is not anti-western in its outlook. We can hardly imagine leaving the village in the hands of Matenge.<sup>9</sup> Sekoto too, though he seems amiable, gives us the sense that he is impartial not so much because he does not crave further power but primarily because of his "three great loves: fast cars, good food, and pretty girls" (49, 45). The old ways have to change; there should be great hope when the rain clouds gather to bring progress. And yet, there is more at stake in the struggle for progress than the

exchange of knowledge for ignorance, good for evil, or black for white. Ideas of universal good in development—the fulfilment of Gilbert’s “utopia”—often occlude the onerous presuppositions (such as what it means to be made more “efficient,” or where “development” must necessarily lead) that secure their universality. Head’s novel manages to caution against the liabilities of a Makhaya who understands these presuppositions all too well amidst a people who do not. It does so without prescription or lengthy premonition but by colouring the narrative with the subtle traces of a certain subjective potential that exists even in the great attributes of an exceptional person’s character. And certainly, recent African history—in particular that of neighbouring Zimbabwe—gives readers reason to take heed.

## Notes

1. Such studies recently include Malunga and Calderisi. The common view is that “the way to get heart commitment for mobilization for the struggle for the continent’s economic independence is by communicating and entrenching a strong enough vision that people can buy into” (Malunga 93).
2. For a discussion of the ambiguities affecting “good” and “evil” as categories in Head’s work, see Ibrahim 124-170. Ibrahim reads Head as searching for “the point where individuals and the hierarchies they represent manifest evil design and intent,” often without warning (124-125).
3. “Batswana” refers to the people of Botswana. A “Motswana” is an individual member of the Batswana.
4. See Durrant 82-89, for a detailed account of how a traumatic violation can function as a “prehistory” to subsequent events; see also Cherki, who highlights “the relationship between trauma and history, which creates a stasis in the human psyche from one generation to another” (133).
5. Makhaya’s trauma serves most potently as a reminder that European ideologies of progress imported to Africa have in the past based themselves on what Durrant calls their own “excluded interior”: there exists an unbreachable “negation of subjectivity at the heart of apartheid” by which certain subjects are excluded in order to *found* subjectivity (5, 17-18). This is the dark underside being referred to here.
6. There are resonances here of a Marxist “collectivity” being presented as Gilbert’s solution to injustice and inefficiency. Coreen Brown suggests, for instance, that Gilbert’s dreams of “utopia” are Marxist ones (54-55). We know that the notion and potential uses of Marxism are on Head’s mind: “I bow to Marxism and stand close to it in the sense that it is important to feed and clothe and house mankind”

(Head qtd. in Brown 196). Indeed, Gilbert is generously disposed toward “what the British Socialists and the trade union movement had done [for] the poor” (Head, *When* 78). As I address the issue in the text, however, aspects of Gilbert’s drive to collectivise overlook the human beings that are supposed to benefit. The reference being made is not to Marxist ideas so much as the appropriation of such ideas in a potentially undemocratic consolidation of power. Another article might chart the ways in which the idea of collectivity is itself denatured as Gilbert and Makhaya pursue it.

7. For further discussion of Head’s symbolic use of the natural world, see Johnson; Molema; Ogungbesan; and Ward.

8. For an in-depth account of the historical, cultural, and philosophical infantilisation of the figure of the African, see Simon-Aaron. Simon-Aaron refers to “the platform of the political myth of liberal individualism” used as a standard against which to construct “the African” (9-11).

9. For an extended reading of this position across the works of Head, Chinua Achebe, and Dambudzo Marechera, see Gagiano. Gagiano isolates a particular rejection of “western rationality” that also rejects “a supposedly pristine, precolonial situation that would, in any case, be impossible. What the battle for redress aims for is a recognition of the human worth and value of Africans and other ‘bypassed’ peoples” (8).

#### Works Cited

- Brown, Coreen. *The Creative Vision of Bessie Head*. London: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2003. Print.
- Calderisi, Robert. *The Trouble With Africa: Why Foreign Aid Isn’t Working*. London: Yale UP, 2007. Print.
- Cherki, Alice. “Fanon Fifty Years Later: Resisting the Air of our Present Time.” *Living Fanon: Global Perspectives*. Ed. NC Gibson. New York: Palgrave, 2011. 131-138. Print.
- Durrant, Sam. *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: JM Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison*. Albany: SUNY P, 2004. Print.
- Ellis, Stephen. “The South African Communist Party and the Collapse of the Soviet Union.” *Marxism’s Retreat from Africa*. Ed. A Hughes. London: Frank Cass, 1992. 145-159. Print.
- Fielding, Maureen. “Agriculture and Healing: Transforming Space, Transforming Trauma in Bessie Head’s *When Rain Clouds Gather*.” *Critical Essays on Bessie Head*. Ed. M Sample. Westport: Praeger, 2003. 11-24. Print.
- Gagiano, Annie. *Achebe, Head, Marechera: On Power and Change in Africa*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000. Print.

- Garrett, James M. "Writing Community: Bessie Head and the Politics of Narrative." *Research in African Literatures* 30.2 (1999): 122-135. Print.
- Head, Bessie. *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*. Oxford: Heineman, 1990. Print.
- . *Tales of Tenderness and Power*. Oxford: Heineman, 1991. Print.
- . *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Oxford: Heineman, 1995. Print.
- Ibrahim, Huma. *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1996. Print.
- Johnson, Joyce. *Bessie Head: The Road of Peace of Mind*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2008. Print.
- Kim, Sue J. *Critiquing Postmodernism in Contemporary Discourses of Race*. New York: Palgrave, 2009. Print.
- Kgafela, Nono. "The Representation of Women in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*." *Writing Bessie Head in Botswana: An Anthology of Remembrance and Criticism*. Eds. M Lederer, S Tumedi and M Daymond. Gaborone: Pentagon, 2007. 97-107. Print.
- Malunga, Chiku. *Oblivion or Utopia: The Prospects for Africa*. Lanham: UP of America, 2010. Print.
- Molema, Leloba. "The Politics of Naming in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*." *The Life and Work of Bessie Head: A Celebration of the Seventieth Anniversary of her Birth*. Eds. M Lederer, S Tumedi and L Molema. Gaborone: Pentagon, 2008. 22-36. Print.
- Ogungbesan, Kolawole. "The Cape Gooseberry Also Grows in Botswana." *Présence Africaine* 109 (1979): 92-106. Print.
- Ogwude, Sophia O. "Protest and Commitment in Bessie Head's Utopia." *Research in African Literatures* 29.3 (1998): 70-81. Print.
- Rose, Jacqueline. "On the 'Universality' of Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*." *Critical Inquiry* 20.3 (1994): 401-418. Print.
- Sample, Maxine. "Space: An Experiential Perspective: Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*." *Critical Essays on Bessie Head*. Ed. M Sample. Westport: Praeger, 2003. 25-46. Print.
- Scheub, Harold. *The Tongue is Fire: South African Storytellers and Apartheid*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1996. Print.
- Simon-Aaron, Charles. *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Empire, Enlightenment and the Cult of the Unthinking Negro*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2008. Print.
- Uka, EM. *Missionaries Go Home? A Sociological Interpretation of an African Response to Christian Missions*. Berne: Peter Lang, 1989. Print.
- Ward, Alan Ramón. "Using the Heart: The Symbolism of Individual Change in Bessie Head's *Maru*." *International Fiction Review* 31.1 (2004): 19-26. Print.
- Wenzel, Jennifer. *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009. Print.