

Climate Change in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*: An Eco-critical Perspective

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Abstract

Generally, this research is an eco-critical study. It particularly interrogates the representation of climate change in the novel under study. Ecocriticism elicits considerable interests in environmental issues such as pastoral, pollution, landscape, biodiversity, migration and so on. When ecocriticism focuses on any environmental issue, it becomes a movement from the general to the specific. Ecocriticism as a relatively recent literary theory is fundamentally viewed as the study of the environment in literature although the environment has been an unavoidable phenomenon in literary studies, manifesting in the earliest literatures. This study explores, through ecocriticism, the representation of climate change in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* not only as a reading of the environment in literature but also interrogates and reveals the socio-cultural contexts that shape human attitude to the natural environment.. The discovery is that climate change is represented as a direct result of human's negative interactions with the natural environment in the novel. The novel is chosen based on its thematic and archetypal relevance to the study. The study advances the process of rethinking African literature and criticism

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Climate Chance, Bessie Head.

Introduction/Conceptual Background

Climate change is obviously not a literary concept. It is a trending discourse in the physical sciences, although some other disciplines outside the physical sciences usually participate on the discourse on climate change. This attempt to bring the concept of climate change into literary studies is motivated by the eco-critical literary approach. Ecocriticism as a literary theory is conceptually designed to interact with any discipline that has the environment as an existential issue. Consequently, it encourages interdisciplinary studies. It is from the foregoing that the concept of climate change is interrogated in this study and accounted for as a representation in *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

“Climate” refers to the average weather in terms of the mean and its variability over a certain time-span and a certain area. (Baede and others, 87). “Mean” here means an intermediate position between two extremes while “variability” is the condition of being subject to variation. This may be why climate is said to be the “average weather”, a condition of not being taken to any extreme by the propensity of variation but operates within an intermediate degree over a particular period of time and, also, a particular area. This can be measured using climate models. A particular climatic condition is a product of many factors. A place or an area that has vegetation, mountains or sea is bound to have a different climatic condition from a place or an area that has no such geographical features.

Climate change is a global issue that has attracted global concerns. This is because of its potential harm to the Earth. In its conceptual grasp, it seems to have been globalized as well as localized. It is a global issue because it affects the entire humanity and forms a discourse in global affairs. Its effects are felt in the activities of the remotest villages even when the people are unaware of the concept. What they could feel, perhaps, are its impacts. What is this thing called climate change? According to (IPCC, 2007) as quoted in Akpodigaga and Odjugo (2010), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defines climate change as a change in climate, which is attributable directly to human activities that alter the composition of the global atmosphere and which are in addition to natural climate variability

observed over a considerable time periods (65-66). This definition captures the two basic factors that cause climate change: the natural causes and the human causes of which the human factor is often the greatest force. Climate change cannot be ignored by the global community because the world temperature is on the increase annually as Noma reports that:

By the year 2030, we are told, the world climate will not be the same, but also will be too detrimental to its inhabitants. That our planet might experience about 1-2^oC increase in warmth by then and 14-24 cm increase in sea level resulting in flooding, erosion, salt intrusion, bad ecosystem, deforestation, etc (ii).

There seems to be no solution yet to this increasing trend in global temperature rise, in spite of the various efforts by scientists, rather the Earth has continued to warm up. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which was set up by the United Nations notes that, "a wide range of human activities result in the release of greenhouse gases, particularly CO₂, CH₄, CFCs, and N₂O, into the atmosphere" (xxix). Although there are some natural causes of climate change, human activities seem to be the most that negatively affect the climate. Most human activities directly or indirectly affect the climatic order and the results are the negative effects of climate change. Thomas Heyd observes that:

Despite thirty years of concern, both at the individual and at the institutional level, the rate at which the natural environment suffers degradation keeps on accelerating in nearly all spheres: chemical pollutants in the air, in the waterways, and in the ground continue increasing; wilderness areas continue to be logged, built on, and dammed, and are now colonized with genetically modified organisms; levels of radiation keep on rising due to the construction of microwave stations servicing cellular telephones, the continued use of nuclear power, and humanly diminished ozone layers in the atmosphere (5).

It is reasonable to argue that human activities contribute the most in climate change. The dangers of climate change are made manifest in global warming which is a continued rise in global average temperature.

The earliest account of the incidence of climate problem in literary studies and creative fiction is recorded in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the earliest literature that records the destruction of the natural environment. Gilgamesh goes to the extreme to display his uncommon heroism. This is portrayed in the destruction of the Great Cedar Forest in a bid to kill Humbaba, the monstrous guardian of the sacred forest. According to Sanders, "the cost of this heroic achievement is tragedy and irreparable loss". (38). Sanders' opinion of 'tragedy and irreparable loss' stems from the destruction of the forest, tragedy of unimaginable proportion. The forest has a great deal of environmental significance. Cutting down forests is capable of bringing more or less rainfall to a region depending on the interaction of the climate system. In the case at hand, the effect can be simply described as hurricane. Smog particles and dust may have been released into the atmosphere in the process of destruction of the forest. The forest is of large magnitude which makes its destruction to attract a hurricane. We note further in the Epic, "...the forest stretches for ten thousand leagues in every direction" (48).

Gilgamesh in his grief over the death of Enkidu destroys a part of the boat that ferries people across the waters of death so that the waters do not touch them. He is asked to go into the forest and cut a hundred and twenty poles for the reconstruction of the tackle he destroyed. Of course, Gilgamesh obeys the order for he also needs to cross the waters of death. The magnitude of all the forests he destroys can be imagined in the modern world; the first being a forest that "stretches for ten thousand leagues in every direction". Take it to be ten thousand miles in every direction and the landmass will be that of a country. Sanders' notion of tragedy and irreparable loss is substantiated by the magnitude of the flood that follows latter. The narrator says, "...even the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled to the highest heaven...." (62). This simply

means that nobody was saved. The flood is accompanied by a terrible windstorm. This is a portrayal of hurricane as an effect of climate change. The sea level rose and submerged the Earth. The loss is irreparable according to Sanders and order fails to be restored. The principle of homeostatic mechanism fails to apply. The situation persists that the gods got marveled. The gods may have been marveled because the situation is beyond both human and supernatural grasp.

Climate change is part of the provocations of some literary texts. Some authors have weaved it into their plot structures, consciously or unconsciously, to tell a story. This is because in the words of Lukacs, "...it is very difficult for the writer really to free himself from the currents and fluctuations of his time and, within them, from those of his class" (254). This study is, therefore, an interrogation of the shades of representation of climate change in the novel under study.

The Echoes of Climate Change in the Novel under Study

It is possible that Head never thought of the concept of climate change when she was articulating her novel but it is not the duty of the writer to guide the paths of the critic. The study of climate change in Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* draws from the existential evidence therein in the novel where the position of the study is similar to the position of a judge as the available information in the novel induced this position.

Overgrazing is a dangerous practice Bessie Head portrayed in her novel as capable of distorting the natural state of the environment and altering the climate system. Grazing contributes to deforestation just as some other agricultural practices do, with goats and cattle being the main destructive agents in the novel. The phenomenon of overgrazing seems to be one of the factors that bring about a complete environmental change in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The narrator observes what Gilbert tells Makhaya:

Much of Northern Africa is desert today because the goats destroyed the thornbush. I've nothing against the goats, you know. Without their meat and milk we'd

all starve in Golema Mmidi, but we'll have to do something about controlling their eating habits, one of these days (89).

Overgrazing negatively affects the climate of Golema Mmidi. Thornbush is said to be the toughest plant in Golema Mmidi but the goats have succeeded in destroying all of them, thereby wreaking havoc to the environment. These people need goats most because they are their source of food and income. The narrator says, 'it even seemed as though the population of goats exceeded that of people (127). This terrible situation ultimately aids the destruction of grasses and trees. This enormous kind of overgrazing definitely affected the growth of forests and grasses. This may be why the narrator says that much of North Africa is desert today because of overgrazing. Trees and grasses remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere through the process of photosynthesis. Removal of trees and grasses through overgrazing is capable of causing a decline in photosynthetic activities, which will bring about much retention of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Plants, through the process of photosynthesis use the presence of light to convert carbon dioxide into sugar and use it as food. The propensity of conversion of carbon dioxide in order to produce food makes plants to store carbon dioxide and give out oxygen as a byproduct. When the plants that are supposed to trap carbon dioxide and convert it to food are absent in the environment as in the case of Golema Mmidi, the atmosphere traps the carbon dioxide leading to trapping of more heat. When much heat is trapped in the atmosphere, it warms the earth, reducing the rate of rainfall and humidity. The narrator further notes:

...only Dinorego, one of the earliest settlers, retained a wistful memory of when the whole area had been clothed by waist-high grass and clear little streams had flowed all the year round. The pathways of the streams were still there but dry and empty now (34).

It may sound like a fairy tale to the younger generation of Golema Mmidi that there was a time when streams flowed all the year round and there

were waist-high grasses around the area. This is because it is now a very dry climate that experiences desertification and may have informed the narrator's description of Golema Mmidi as a 'waterless country' (142). The degree of climate change in Golema Mmidi leads to severe dislocation and social instability. The never-ending drought leads to the appearance of new deserts. The people seem not to have the technical know-how and the resources needed to combat the effects of climate change. The picture of abandonment of homes as a result of climate change is graphically represented as the narrator says:

Gilbert traveled all over the eastern watershed area and in dismay often came upon abandoned villages that had been turned into sandy wastelands through the grazing of the cattle and the goats.... These observations convinced him that only large-scale fencing of the land and controlled grazing would save the parts that had not yet become completely eroded and uninhabitable to both man and animals (34).

Although, Gilbert, an Englishman who lives in Golema Mmidi suggests fencing and controlled grazing as a means of saving the parts that have not been completely eroded, the means and the will to do these are lacking. Some villages have already become wastelands and completely abandoned. Gilbert should be commended for at least coming up with some suggestions to stop further degeneration.

Dinorego tells wandering Makhaya the situation of life in Golema Mmidi. This is in a bid to help Makhaya settle down as to understands the realities of life in the country. He says:

They say this is a country where people ought not to live and it is true. Batswana people often go without food and water and so do their cattle. Cattle are grazed where a bit of grass grows, but water may only be found ten miles away. Life is like this: you graze

cattle here one day; the next, you take them on a long search for water (20).

This is the current state of the country of Batswana. Dinorego accepts that it is a country where people ought not to live because of the harsh climatic realities. One should not think that Batswana has been like this from time. Its current state is as a result of degeneration that has become intractable. The narrator notes:

The distractions were immense. The drought became worse with each succeeding year, and the rainfall pattern became exceedingly unpredictable. At times a whole year's rain might fall in one month or one day or one hour Never mind if the hot sun of the drought years burned whole fields of sorghum and maize. Never mind if the rain was no longer what it used to be in the good old days when the rivers ran the whole year round and the dams were always full (37 & 40).

This shows that the degeneration has become a continuous process with the situation growing from bad to worse, so much so that the good old days have been confined to memory. This situation started with some anomaly in precipitation where the narrator notes that in some years, a whole year's rain could fall in a month, in some other years, it could fall in one day or one hour. The people of Golema Mmidi continue to plant their crops every year despite the harsh climatic condition. They are not downcast as the narrator observes that they never mind if the hot sun of the drought years burned whole fields of sorghum and maize. This is perseverance in the face of depressing realities. The people do not give up even when their dams are drying up and they are not deterred by the discovery and stories of abandoned villages in some parts of the country. It is possible that one day they too will abandon their land and run away, but so far, they have not given up. It would have been better for the people of Golema Mmidi to give up and migrate to wherever they can save their lives and those of their animals than to stay and die one by

one as a result of different health problems. Their animals too die in an unimaginable proportion.

Paulina's son is trapped in a grazing site, together with his herd of cattle. The boy has been sick because the weather is taking its toll on him and his cattle. Paulina demands to know from Rankoane why he does not persuade her son to come back home. The narrator notes:

'Your cattle post is near mine', Paulina said. 'Why didn't you persuade my son to come home with you? What's the good of him staying in the bush when there is no water and the cattle are dying?' 'I told your son to go home two weeks ago', he said. 'I expected him to be here, that's why I did not stop at your cattle post today'(157 – 158).

They do not know at their point of discussion that both the boy in question and his herd of cattle are all dead. The boy had gone to Rankoane sometime in the past to complain of his health condition at the grazing field:

'I don't know what's wrong with me, Uncle,' the boy had said. 'I am coughing up blood everyday' but Rankoane knew at one glance what was wrong. Tuberculosis was the one major killer in the country, and the small boy with his red feverish eyes was seriously ill with it.... 'We are all coughing', he said. 'The reason why? There is too much dust and no rain to settle it. Dust in the lungs causes one to cough up blood...' (158).

There is really too much dust in the air and the ravaging drought worsens it. One of the effects is lung problem and that is why tuberculosis is the major killer disease in the country according to the narrator. When dust is generated and the particles are inhaled, they injure the fragile and delicate tissues of the lung. This makes it easier for tuberculosis germs to

grow there. A lot of things cause the presence of dust in the country of Botswana although the major factor is the lack of rain.

The constant use of dynamite in the country may have contributed to climate change in Botswana. Dynamite is a highly explosive material whose power comes from detonation. The narrator notes:

Dynamite was commonly used to blast out pit toilets, as water flush cisterns were almost unknown in this waterless country. So, almost the day long, Golema Mmidi rocked to the blast of dynamite charges, and huge quantities of earth and rock were hurled high in the air (143).

The blast of this highly explosive material can generate some gases to add to the already existing greenhouse gases in the lower atmosphere. This will trap more heat and warm the environment. The narrator says it is a common practice. Being a common practice, it increases the tendency of large emission of gases and the tendency of more warming. This is what Golema Mmidi suffers in particular and Botswana in general. There should not be any element of doubts as to where the large quantity of dust that affects the entire people comes from. The narrator's account of this practice as a common occurrence and how huge quantities of earth and rock are hurled high in the air at each blast makes the characters vulnerable to tuberculosis. This is the very disease that killed Paulina's son. Some others have died of it and so many are living with it, waiting for their own death. The search party that went for Paulina's son is filled with both sympathy and empathy; sympathy for Paulina who has suffered a great deal of pains and empathy as the situation could befall any of them any time. The narrator describes the site of death of Paulina's son:

Long before they reached Paulina's cattle post they saw the vultures circling above it in the sky. This marked it out right away as one of the death points. Once they drew close, they could see that not a living

thing moved on the ground. All those eighty cattle lay scattered about, quite still, quite dead (169 - 170).

The narrator describes the remains of Paulina's son as 'only a heap of clean, white bones lying on the floor' (170). The narrator's use of the phrase 'one of the death points' shows that there are other death points he did not account for. The fact is that people are dying and their animals are also dying. An estimated six hundred thousand cattle have died so far and the entire country is restless as the people recognize that death stares everybody in the face. The narrator further observes:

It was as though everything was about to die. The small brown birds had deserted the bush, and the bush itself no longer supplied the coverage and protection for the secret activities of the scarlet and golden birds. Here and there, faint patches of green clung to the topmost branches of tall thorn trees, but not a green thing survived near the sun-baked earth. The sky had lost that dense blue look of the winter days and spread itself out into a whitish film, through which the sun poured out molten heat in pulsating waves from dawn to dusk. In this desolation the vultures reigned supreme.... They could afford to be imperious, indignant and important, for they were to be a burial society for over six hundred thousand cattle (167).

This is an extreme case of climate change that will always be a part of the history of the people. Even if there is a reversal at any point, a positive reversal, the people will never delete the episode in their memories. It may form part of their lore for generations to come. In that case, it may echo a similar legend and lore one encounters in *Things Fall Apart* about a climate problem.

The courage the characters in Golema Mmidi exude is great; courage that never allowed them to abandon their homes and run away like some others did in other parts of the country of Batswana; courage that gave

them strength to stand against the threats of death. The source of this courage may be the presence of an Englishman, Gilbert who came to teach them mechanized agriculture. Gilbert acquired two hundred and fifty plots to see if he can practice mechanized agriculture and teach the people how to cope with the worsening climate. The narrator notes that 'the main purpose of the 250-acre plot was to try and prove whether, if run with modern machinery, it could win crops under all but the most severe drought conditions' (37). Other parts of the country are not as lucky as Golema Mmidi whose problem of drought is being proffered with some solutions. Mechanized agriculture is introduced and new dams are constructed. In order to feed Gilbert's tobacco project with water, Makhaya, a foreigner and a fugitive opts to construct dams. The narrator notes:

Makhaya... started work on small dams which were to be a source of extra water supply, it was too risky to depend on rainfall alone to give the tobacco project a good start, Gilbert reasoned. Who knew when the drought would break, and already the one farm borehole was heavily strained with having to supply the whole village with good drinking water plus sustaining the cattle in the ranch (142).

These new dams will undoubtedly be a source of relief to the people of Golema Mmidi. The dams will encourage irrigation farming in order to cope with the effects of drought. The dams will also provide extra water to the cattle ranch.

Eco-critical Metaphors

The metaphor of the nomad exists in Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The nomad is in constant wandering for place. This state of 'placelessness' makes the nomad lack a sense of a fixed home. Makhaya and the rest of the characters in Golema Mmidi exemplify this metaphor but it is more profound in the history of Makhaya, who is a fugitive and who also tries to escape from the depressing realities of his country, South Africa. The convergence of these characters in Golema Mmidi is provoked by divergent factors. Makhaya is a fugitive

and is being pursued by the insensitive government of his native country. He searches for where his mind can find rest and he acknowledges it in a discussion with Maria's father in the course of his wandering. The old man affirms that Makhaya is a well- educated man, but Makhaya laughs and states his problem. He says:

Well- educated men often come to the crossroads of life ... one road might lead to fame and importance, and another might lead to peace of mind. It's the road of peace of mind that I'm seeking (15).

The concept of road here echoes a process; a process that leads to a state of being, a condition of existence. Road here is a metaphor for a process. Makhaya is seeking for the process that leads to peace of mind. The primary motivation of Makhaya to live in Golema Mmidi is to achieve peace of mind although the peace later eludes him because of environmental change. The motivations of persons like Paulina, Maria, Matenge, Mma- Millipede and some other characters follow divergent directions. They are crop growers and farmers who find Golema Mmidi a comforting place to engage in subsistence agriculture. In spite of the divergent motivations of characters to settle in Golema, Mmidi, there is a point of convergence in their motivations, according to the narrator, the motivation 'to escape the tragedies of life' (17).

The metaphor of the wandering nomad Makhaya and some other characters represent is in contrast with the metaphor for place which Golema Mmidi represents. Golema Mmidi's metaphor for place juxtaposes the metaphor of the wandering nomad because the sense of 'placelessness' aroused by the later is erased by the former through the provision of stability of place. Golema Mmidi becomes the melting point of these wanderers and provides a sense of place which overtakes the initial sense of 'placelessness'. Bessie Head's artistic use of these two metaphors enhances an ecocritical reading of the text. It shows how a non-human natural entity can offer stability of place to human beings. This is because Golema Mmidi, at the point of migration of these characters was a safe haven and also comforting to the

various aspirations of these characters. One can extrapolate from the metaphors the common aspiration of humankind, to search for comfort especially that which nature can provide which is often free. Even non-human living things also need conducive environment to thrive. Golema Mmidi provides a stable and conducive place for these wanderers although it experiences a sudden collapse in the course of its existence; environmental collapse. Holling's view captures the root of this collapse that 'periods of success carry the seeds of subsequent downfall, because they allow stresses and rigidities to accumulate' (399). The stresses and rigidities are now on the land of Golema Mmidi and the subsequent downfall seems unavoidable as the narrator notes that '...the majority of the people engaged in subsistence farming were using primitive techniques that ruined the land' (18-19).

Another metaphor for nature in the text is the land. The characters that live in Golema Mmidi initially chose there because the land was sustainable. They grew their crops on the sustainable land, grazed their animals on the same land and lived happily on the land. This was when the land remained in its natural state. The land is disturbed to a point of negative reactions and man's cordial relationship with nature is lost. The heavy burden on land is a heavy burden on the environment. This heavy burden sparks off some other environmental forces that interplay and threaten the existence of the characters.

Conclusion

Bessie Head reveals in this novel how human beings can contribute to the restoration of a debased environment. Makhaya and Gilbert are conspicuous agents of *catagenesis* in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Thomas Homer Dixon (2006) used the term *catagenesis* in his text, *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization* to describe 'the creative renewal of our technologies, institutions and societies in the aftermath of breakdown' (23). With their ingenuity and creative potentials, they work out alternative and better ways of surviving in the ecologically ravaged Golema Mmidi. The environment of Batswana has been negatively altered and many people

abandoned their villages in search of better places to live. That is not the case in Golema Mmidi. The environmental crisis continues and the death toll of both humans and animals increases but there are no efforts to run away and abandon the village. All efforts are geared toward solutions to the climate problems. The efforts yield success as there is light at the end of the very dark tunnel. Gilbert introduces mechanized agriculture with the help of Makhaya . He acquires '250 – acre plot... to try and prove whether if run with modern machinery, it could win crops under all but the most severe drought conditions' (37). Makhaya supports him by constructing small dams to serve as a sources of extra water supply to Gilbert's farm project. This is in a bid to solve the problem of unpredictable rainfall pattern. The introduction of mechanized agriculture brings about renewal and regeneration in the life of the village.

This is a potent structural tool used by Head to usher in hope after periods of hopelessness. Using mechanization as a structural tool to tackle ecological and climate related problems in the novel shows the propensity of humans to come up with solutions to environmental crisis. Head portrays a vision of hope and seems to affirm that the same agents that contribute to the devastation of their environment can as well contribute to the restoration of their environment. Mechanization seems to be one of the contributions man makes in solving environmental problems in the novel. This is made possible with the presence of foreigners like Gilbert and Makhaya who have the technical know- how. Left for the villagers of Golema Mmidi, perhaps, they could have abandoned their village like others who could not solve their ecological problems

Head portrays these two characters as the source through which Golema Mmidi can be revived and renewed. These are the only characters with deep insights of the solutions to the problems of Golema Mmidi. Another major step taken by Gilbert is to address the problem of overgrazing which causes ecological devastation. Gilbert is convinced that 'only large- scale fencing of the land and controlled grazing would save the parts that had not yet become completely

eroded and uninhabitable to both man and animals' (34). It takes someone who is environmentally conscious and environment-friendly to evaluate the practice of grazing to know when it is an uncontrolled grazing or over grazing. Such evaluation is one thing; another thing which is more important is coming up with possible solutions. Gilbert does not only evaluate the practice of grazing in Golema Mmidi but comes up with pragmatic solutions. His evaluation leads to the discovery that uncontrolled grazing leads to overgrazing and overgrazing leads to environmental problems such as denuded land, desertification, and so on. These discoveries lead Gilbert to propose controlled grazing and fencing of some areas as 'no grazing areas'. Gilbert and Mahkaya are well crafted agents of positive change through whom Golema Mmidi undergoes regeneration and transformation. Head's vision of a sustainable environment is achieved through them.

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