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Feminism and Representation of Women in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*

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Abstract:

"*I hate to hear you talk about all women as if they were fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives.*" (Austen 2)

As an impact of globalization, the society as well as the ideas is changing day by day. Jane Austen's quote in *Persuasion* explores the conditions of women in modern times that women do not want to be suppressed in the society; rather they too want to create the image of 'new woman'. Feminism advocates the inner potentialities of women for their ultimate development in the social and literary fields. Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) justifies the idea of the 'new woman' in the global platform. The presentation of women in her novel and the actual identity of women in Botswana provide a real picture about women's potentialities to fight against the conventional model of patriarchy.

Keyterms: Feminism, Patriarchy, Racism, Unity in Diversity, Women empowerment.

Introduction:

"*If any female feels she needs anything beyond herself to legitimate and validate her existence, she is already giving away her power to be self-defining, her agency.*" (Hooks 23)

Feminism is an ideology which seeks to establish equality in rights for women through the improvement of the female status. It is rooted in ending men's historical power over women. It particularly focuses on issues that disproportionately hurt females, such as enacting voting rights for females and restructuring the position of women in the wider patriarchal framework. The 'otherness' of females does not indicate their inferiority in the society. It is the constructed rules of history that shape women as 'other'. Simon de Beauvoir comments,

"*It is not women's inferiority that has determined their historical insignificance: it is their historical insignificance that has doomed them to inferiority.*" (325)

The history of feminism can be categorized into three parts. The first wave feminism is a period of feminist activity and thought that occurred within the time period of 19th and early 20th century. It focuses primarily on women's suffrage. It also reflects the rise of liberalism, progressivism and communism. The second wave feminism first began in the early 1960s in the United States of America and gradually spread through the western part of the world and beyond. It focuses on the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left. The third wave feminism encompasses several diverse feminist activities starting in the early 1990s to the present. Rebecca Walker coined the term 'third wave' to highlight the queer and non-white women. The third wave feminists have broadened their goals focusing on ideas like queer theory and abolishing gender role expectations and stereotypes.

The concept of Black feminism is a school of thought which argues that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism are inextricably tied up together. This movement became popular in the 1960s in response to the sexism of the civil rights movement and racism. During the dynamics of racism, the vast majority of African women were brought to the United States and other European nations to work as slaves in a situation full of oppression. Oppression, in general describes any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among others constitute major forms of oppression in the white occupied nations. However, the convergence of race, class, and gender oppression characterize the slavery in most European nations. It also created the political context for Black women's intellectual work. The exploitation of Black women's labour symbolizes Black women's long-standing ghettoization in service occupations which also represents the economic dimension of oppression. Survival for most African women has been such an all-consuming activity that most have had few opportunities to do intellectual work as it has been traditionally defined. The drudgery of enslaved African women's work and the grinding poverty of 'free' wage labour in the rural South tellingly illustrate the high costs Black women have paid for survival. The millions of impoverished African women ghettoized in Philadelphia, Birmingham, Oakland, Detroit, and other U.S. inner cities demonstrate the continuation of these earlier forms of Black women's economic exploitation. The political dimension of oppression has denied African women the rights and privileges dynamically extended to white male citizens. Forbidding Black women to vote, excluding African women from public office, and withholding equitable treatment in the criminal justice system, all substantiate the political subordination of Black women. Educational institutions have also fostered this pattern of disenfranchisement. Past practices such as denying literacy to slaves and relegating Black women to underfunded, segregated Southern schools worked to ensure that a quality education for Black women remained the exception rather than the rule. The large numbers of young Black women in inner cities and impoverished rural areas who continue to leave school before attaining full literacy represent the continued efficacy of the political dimension of Black women's oppression. The controlling images applied to Black women that originated during the slave era attest to the ideological dimension of European Black women's oppression. Ideology in this context refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interests of a group of people. Within white culture, racist

and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this aspect, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression. Taken together all these aspects, the supposedly seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African women in an assigned, subordinate place. This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect elite white male interests and worldviews. Denying African women the credentials to become literate certainly excluded most African women from positions as scholars, teachers, authors, poets, and critics. Moreover, while Black women historians, writers, and social scientists have long existed, until recently these women have not held leadership positions in universities, professional associations, publishing concerns, broadcast media, and other social institutions of knowledge validation. Black women's exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite White male ideas and interests and the corresponding suppression of Black women's ideas and interests in traditional scholarship. Moreover, this historical exclusion means that stereotypical images of Black women permeate popular culture and public policy.

Representation of women in *When Rain Clouds Gather*:

Africa is the hub of blacks where racism has first come into the global framework. The colour difference between the blacks and the whites portray the picture of racism which is unacceptable for the blacks. Botswana is a neighbouring country of South Africa where racism expanded with the ongoing changes of time and situation. Bessie Head was originally an inhabitant of South Africa who became the victim of apartheid. Her parents also suffered a lot from the negative impact of racial segregation. In the later part of her life Bessie had to flee to Botswana to recover her individual identity amidst the Tswana people. She is a great supporter of black feminism and constructs her women characters of her novel on that ground.

Her novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* also attempts to focus on the empowerment of women and formation of history during the period of apartheid. The racial discrimination between the blacks and the whites provides a new way of looking at history which encompasses issues of nation, identity and nationalism. The narrative of the novel develops around different characters emerged out from diverse sections of the society bringing new aspects of unity amidst diversity. The consciousness of women about their role in society makes them strong to challenge the complexities of racism. Logically, the cruelties of racial discrimination are primarily a mental construction where the term 'black' becomes useless without the projection of the word 'white'. As Franz Fanon puts in, "*not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man*". (110) It is not confined to the colour consciousness of the Negros from European vision, rather a constructed

conception of domination which gives birth to the 'other' in postcolonial terms. Fanon argues that the Negro plays the role of 'other' to the Europeans that is analogous to the role of 'other' played by the female with regard to the male. This kind of identity crisis has for so long divided mankind. In Botswana, the people before independence have lived under the British protectorate. The nation has got its name from the Tswana, the largest ethnic group during British colonial period. The uncivilized and cruel practice of Tribalism in Botswana continued after its independence in 1966. This form of tribalism is an offshoot of colonialism which is much like the British rule and which is implemented through power and authority. Gender violence, the unfavourable treatment of a social construction, based on prejudice, race, tribe, place and sex is often assumed to mean the use of physical, emotional and mental intimidation employed in order to cause emotional, physical and mental domination.

Talking about the story of the novel, it is observed that the story starts with the protagonist Makhaya Maseko, who is in the process of disengaging with the past. He feels certain about his desire to leave it behind but is uncertain about the future he wishes to embrace. A young Zulu activist, recently out of prison, Makhaya has defied the South African government banning order against him by fleeing the country. His desire is to live in a free country, although he has no illusions about the quality of freedom he will enjoy in a country as miserably poor as Botswana. Makhaya opts for a future that might grant him basic human rights. His new goal as a refugee in Botswana is to seek life and nurture it. However, his experience in South Africa has left Makhaya bitter and distrustful. In Botswana, He meets an old woman from whom he seeks shelter for the night. Her selfish attitude towards this hapless refugee informs Makhaya that Botswana is no paradise, but a place that has its 'vultures'. After he registers as a refugee, Makhaya happens upon Dinorego, a wise old man from Golema Mmidi, who helps him settle down into a quiet search for peace. The village of Golema Mmidi is a unique refuge for Botswana and South African people who are fleeing tragedies in their lives. Though dry and arid, the village is well suited to Makhaya, who finds this rural community radically different from his urban ghetto existence in South Africa. After being ruthlessly divorced by her womanizing husband, the elderly Mma Millipede sought refuge in Golema Mmidi. She, like Dinorego, exemplifies an innocent embrace of life in Botswana. Gilbert has helped the villagers start a cooperative farming project that is yielding a good return, and his dream is to see Golema Mmidi become an internationally renowned agricultural community. Though Gilbert's origin is English, yet he comes forward to do everything good for the people of Botswana. It's a sign of mixture of the culture of the high society and the low. Makhaya is appointed as the leader of the women, who also come to the forefront and engage themselves in the process of cultivation. Paulina Sebeso, a widowed woman having two children leads the entire women folk of Golema Mmidi to a concrete state of agricultural development. She also desires to have Makhaya as her future life partner which is symbolic of women's activeness and empowerment in building the nation. The tribal chiefs- Chief Matenge and his brother Sekoto often disturb the activities of the people, but to no avail. People under the guidance of Gilbert, Dinorego and Makhaya became so strong that in the end they removed the entire process of tribal rule in Golema Mmidi. Chief Matenge committed suicide under the pressure of the people which is an evidence of unity in diversity in the social construction of Botswana. Bessie Head throws

light on the changing nature of history which captures the documentation of events in different periods and situations. In this process of historical change the women of Botswana have also played a significant role.

Conclusion:

The migration of people from South Africa and the colonial settlement of the British in Botswana have given a new form of historical and cultural identity to the people of this nation. An enquiry about the source of the nation's unique socio-historical existence finds its place in the various constructed and inherited identities of race, tribe and gender that have controlled Botswana for a long period. It is a reality that Bessie Head brings out in her novel through its portrayal of the interconnectedness of apartheid and racism in the formation of history. Besides, Head is not only seemed to act as an advocate for racial tolerance and equality, rather she is evidently put forward as a crusader for justice. Her writing is a clear attempt to involve women into history from whence they have been resolutely and traditionally excluded on the basis of their femaleness. In this paper, Head not only confronts the issue of gender discrimination in patriarchal society, but also seeks to restore and rehabilitate images of women in her present nation, Botswana. She presents herself from the inconceivable and seems particularly drawn to women who press the limits of what is locally imaginable. As far as identity is concerned, her women are thus portrayed as strong, decisive, intelligent dignified and rational women quite capable of meeting their male counterparts on an equal structure. In this present paper attempt has also been made to justify the stereotypes regarding identities that come under intense imaginative scrutiny as Head creates a vision that seeks to transcend such stereotypes by resisting a world in which people are divided into neat categories. Women in Botswana are good competitors in the patriarchal set up. They follow some stereotypical rules which define their identity. By encouraging women in all the fields, the novelist advocates a universal vision of humanism in which all forms of diversity should not be seen as offensive and divisive, rather as enriching our existence in the practical world. While asserting the above ideas, this paper will also analyse how the women characters of the novel struggle within their selves to adapt to their new identities and how the historic ideologies of Botswana have constructed the socio-political scenario in the process of recreation and change.

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