

A Phytocritical Study of Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*: A Postcolonial Perspective in Anthropocene Context *

¹**Ashima Arora**, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Sanchi University of Buddhist–Indic Studies, Sanchi, Raisen (M.P), 464651, India. aroraashima95@gmail.com

²**Prof. Dr. Naveen K. Mehta**, Professor & Head, Department of English, Dean Academics, Sanchi University of Buddhist–Indic Studies, Sanchi, Raisen (M.P), India. naveen.mehta@subis.edu.in

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2025.25.1.33>

Abstract

Bessie Head's When Rain Clouds Gather (1968) is much more than a tale of survival—it is a powerful blend of environmental endurance and resistance to colonial exploitation. The portrayal of reclaiming land extends beyond ecological restoration to a powerful act of political defiance. Viewed through a lens that emphasises the role of plants in literature, phytocriticism, agriculture is reinterpreted as a dynamic interaction with vegetation, where native plants emerge as strong allies against the uniform, single-crop systems enforced by colonial powers. Women, whose intimate understanding of the soil nurtures both the earth and their communities, are central to this story. Their traditional farming methods gradually dismantle profit-seeking cattle empire of the village chief, reinstating indigenous ways of caring for the land. This occurs even as the fragile state of our current era (the Anthropocene), marked by degraded soil, persistent droughts, and damaged relationships between humans and nature, challenges the land. The novel challenges the colonial view of nature as inert property that treats land as a commodity to own and exploit. True decolonisation requires collaboration beyond humans. In this way, the text confronts two associated legacies to co-create resilience against dual violence of colonialism (dispossession and cultural erasure) and Anthropocene (human-caused climate chaos and extinction).

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Justice, Postcolonial, Anthropocene, Phytocriticism

Introduction

Plants actively help achieve liberation in the *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Through the resilient crops they cultivate, villagers demonstrate their strength against drought. Meanwhile, crops like sorghum and maize physically link them to their ancestors and homeland. But when crops wither under leaders like Matenge, the land itself resists oppression. Plants are the narrative tools Bessie Head used to drive the struggle to decolonisation. Their treatment (care vs. abuse) determines the success of reclaiming indigenous authority.

Against the backdrop of Botswana's aridity, the novel brings into focus crucial concerns of the Anthropocene – the era of significant human impact on the planet. Colonial agricultural methods, such as the mechanised farming championed by figures like Gilbert, transform the land into a mere object. This expedites the degradation of the soil and destabilises the local climate. Bessie Head perceives these ecological challenges as repercussions of imperial exploitation, connecting local drought conditions to a large-scale global crisis.

This analytical approach aligns with postcolonial ecocriticism, a field integrating environmental and postcolonial studies to examine the complex relationships between

* **Article History:** Full Article Received on 2nd June 2025. Peer Review completed on 14th July 2025, Article Accepted on 30th July 2025. First published: September 2025. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

colonialism and environmental exploitation. It emerged to understand ecological damage caused by imperialist systems, “Postcolonialism focuses on issues of conquest, colonisation and racism ... and the relationship between indigenous and invader societies and cultures” (Huggan and Tiffin 6; Woynarski 4).

It also looks at detrimental impact of colonial powers on the natural environment and the erosion of traditional indigenous knowledge, often leading to ongoing ecological and cultural devastation. *When Rain Clouds Gather* describes the arduousness of agriculture, the hardships encountered by displaced individuals, and the resilience inherent in communal bonds. In doing so, it exposes the environmental ramifications of colonial practices while presenting ecological harmony as a powerful form of resistance against these practices.

Having been born in South Africa and later exiled to Botswana, Head infused her writing with a thorough understanding of displacement and the intricate search for belonging. *When Rain Clouds Gather* exhibits her acute awareness of the issues that Botswana faced post-independence, particularly the tension between Western concepts of progress and sustainable indigenous methodologies. Head draws attention to the shortcomings of colonial agricultural methods, contrasting them with the merits of communal, ecologically sound practices. This approach positions the novel as a key text in discussions of environmental justice and decolonisation.

Postcolonial ecocriticism, as defined by scholars Huggan and Tiffin, aims to “unsettle the Eurocentric assumptions underpinning much environmental thought” (16). This aligns with Nixon’s concept of slow violence is the incremental and often unnoticed destruction resulting from colonial and capitalist exploitation, an out-of-sight environmental destruction with delayed, dispersed effects that disproportionately affect the poor. The novel portrays environmental degradation characteristic of slow violence experienced by marginalised communities. While Dinorego pragmatically collaborates with Gilbert’s agricultural project to lessen Golema Mmidi’s suffering, his actions block out a deeper tension between colonial progress and indigenous sustainability. Gilbert’s cash-crop monoculture, though initially embraced as a solution, ultimately threatens the village’s ecological balance, revealing that even well-intentioned colonial interventions damage traditional systems. Dinorego’s tacit resistance is rooted in his deference for communal land practices, and it positions indigenous knowledge as a counterpoint to Gilbert’s extractive model. Thus, Postcolonial ecocriticism helps to reveal this cumulative harm that wears away livelihoods, connecting the novel to the environmentalism of the poor, which resists such insidious violence often overlooked due to its lack of spectacle.

Makhaya, the central figure and a refugee from South Africa, becomes the painful yet hopeful meeting point between displacement and the need for ecological renewal. His journey from feeling uprooted and uncertain to embracing a role within a community of farmers mirrors a larger postcolonial quest: reclaiming control over the land and restoring personal identity. In his transformation, the novel speaks to a universal truth that healing the earth often goes hand in hand with healing the self. As Nixon points out, environmental stories in postcolonial contexts often focus on “the resilience of the poor” (4) who “forge survival strategies in the teeth of dispossession” (140). Likewise, the villagers’ united effort to manage the rainwater becomes a powerful example of how they collectively resisted both destruction of their land and erosion of their traditions. As Nwoma noted, even as the environmental crisis continues and the tragic loss of life for both people and animals mounts, there is no sense of abandoning their homes. Instead, all their energy is directed towards finding solutions to these pressing climate issues (104).

When Rain Clouds Gather reframes environmental stewardship as an act of profound defiance against the forces of colonialism. By offering a critical perspective on Western agricultural methods and instead valuing the wisdom of indigenous practices, the novel questions colonial

notions of progress. It suggests that a harmonious relationship with the environment can be a path toward cultural revival and strength.

Imposition of Colonial Agriculture or Slow Ecological Violence

The European imperial project embedded ecology within its practices which led to the exploitation of nature. Gilbert's tobacco farm demonstrates this violence when he imposed a cash crop on Botswana's dry land, draining the soil and deepening the dependency on unpredictable rainfall. He acknowledges that Northern Africa transformed into desert due to destruction led by goats, yet fails to realise that his own project is causing the same damage (Head 46). This involved transporting European/Western human and environmental relations to colonised lands, resulting in practices like clearing wild land for farming and pastoralism, which caused irreversible damage to indigenous ecosystems. This process was often driven by a belief in the abundant resources of settler colonies and a desire to make them profitable and productive using the same methods from their countries of origin instead of adapting local conditions. For example, Kenya's history of developmental deforestation rooted in the colonial era, linked to colonial narratives like "betterment" used for land appropriation, and the potentially ill-considered environmental impacts of introducing non-domestic livestock and European agricultural practices (Nixon 131–32). This disregard and forceful transformation of environment for external benefit constitutes ecological violence.

Postcolonial ecocriticism offers analytical criticism for understanding this phenomenon. It views environmental issues as fundamental to European encroachment and global domination, seeing them as rooted in imperial and racist ideologies. Postcolonial ecocriticism critiques Western development ideologies that perpetuate social and environmental abuses and highlights how the Western definition of humanity largely looms upon marginalising "not-human," including indigenous culture and lands, justifying their exploitation as "primitive," "unused, underused, or empty" spaces (Huggan and Tiffin 5). The novel disapproves notions of western 'progress' that tend to see the traditional knowledge and ways of learning of indigenous people as flawed or wrong. The field challenges universalist notions of land use, like those promoted by the pastoral mode in settler societies, revealing their political role in legitimising unequal relations and dispossession. It seeks alternative understandings of "natural history" (Huggan and Tiffin 117) and foregrounds human bias in historical narratives.

The environmental consequences of colonial agricultural practices often manifest as slow violence. Slow violence is prolonged, escalates in impact, spread out across time and geography, and lacks the immediate spectacle of sudden, catastrophic events. The long-term impacts of colonial land use, such as soil erosion, deforestation, and ecosystem degradation, often unfold gradually over decades or even centuries, creating a "protracted aftermath" (Nixon 41). This makes the damage difficult to perceive, represent, source, and hold accountable. The slow-increasing nature of this environmental degradation disproportionately affects the poor, whose livelihoods are closely linked to the environment, and can lead to long-term resource bottlenecks that fuel conflicts.

As in Golema Mmidi, drought and soil degradation unfold gradually, their impacts delayed but devastating. Paulina's son dies of tuberculosis, a disease linked to "dust in the lungs" from degraded land—a consequence of colonial mismanagement (Head 81). The drought also got worse every year, and the rainfall became hard to predict (Head 21). The delayed effects of environmental damage are connected to the concept of slow violence and postcolonial ecocriticism provides the necessary theoretical tools to analyse the ecological violence embedded in colonial agriculture, recognising how its historical impacts align with the definition of slow violence, particularly in its protracted nature and its lasting effects on postcolonial communities and environments.

Reflection of Ecological Memory and Ubuntu Philosophy

Ubuntu philosophy is the very root and foundation of African philosophy, serving as the wellspring from which African ontology and epistemology flow. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, this philosophy manifests in the villagers' collective labour, where women move barefoot throughout the day (Head 74) showing harmony between humans and nature. Ubuntu is understood not merely as a static state but as 'humanness,' a state of being and becoming, embodying openness and constant progression, deeply attuned to motion as the universal principle of being. Its ethos rejects colonial binaries of "rational" versus "emotional," as seen in Dinorego's reverence for ancestral land practices. He recalls the time when the land was covered in tall grass, and streams flowed year-round (Head 19), a memory that critiques the fragmentative logic of colonial agriculture.

This understanding constitutes the "ecosophical dimension" (Ramose 105) of Ubuntu, inherently linking human existence and activities, such as the pursuit of "self-preservation," (Ramose 108) to sustaining universal unity. Within this framework, Ubuntu emphasises universal balance, which must be actively protected and translated into harmony in every realm of living, including social, political, religious, and legal arenas.

A core tenet of Ubuntu philosophy is the profound interdependence between the individual and the community, emphasising principles of sharing, mutual care, compassion, and mutual respect. This communal orientation is central to its social and political philosophies like, 'being human means embracing one's own humanity by acknowledging and respecting the humanity of others, building compassionate connections in the process' and 'a crown does not make a king; the people define their ruler' highlighting collective responsibility and consensual decision-making. This ethos stands in stark contrast to Gilbert's individualistic project, which prioritises profit over collective well-being. In the novel, Makhaya joins the community, he observes how the women, though initially wary of Gilbert's methods, "became absorbed in following his explanations" of sustainable techniques (Head 57), illustrating Ubuntu's impetus on shared responsibility.

Colonial history significantly disrupted indigenous relationships with land and the environment through unjust conquest and the dispossessing of territory. Colonial ideologies, such as "terra nullius" (DeLoughrey 13) viewed colonised landscapes as uncultivated blank slates and indigenous people as uncultured obstacles to development, serving as justifications for the appropriation of land and resources.

This history involved suppression and misrepresentation of indigenous knowledge and practices related to the environment. In response, postcolonial ecocriticism highlights the importance of recovering and interpreting indigenous perspectives in the natural world, emphasising that different cultural understandings of nature are deeply shaped by the historical experience of colonialism.

Indigenous ecological memory, in this context, represents the historical and cultural knowledge, practices, and relationships with the environment that predate and persist through colonisation. This memory is tied to ancestral connections to the land and an integrated understanding of history, community, and the natural world. For example, Maori whakapapa, while distinct from Ubuntu, demonstrates how ancestral lineages are intrinsically linked to land and encompass all life forms and inanimate matter, serving as a vital counter-narrative to colonial accounts and a basis for sovereignty and land claims. Similarly, Wangari Maathai's environmental efforts incorporated local Kikuyu environmental practices, passed down through generations, alongside contemporary science, illustrating how indigenous ecological knowledge informs contemporary conservation efforts. The mobilisation of community members and those who have been overlooked by modern environmental agendas to fight back against the loss of livelihoods and traditional ways of interacting with the environment further shows the persistence and importance of this memory.

Ubuntu's emphasis on the universe as a complex, interconnected whole and its core principles of sharing and mutual care provide a philosophical foundation for a model of communal responsibility towards the environment. This approach contrasts with anthropocentric views that separate humanity from nature and aligns with the understanding that land use should be regulated by the perception of the environment as integral to inhabitants, not separate. The novel critically evaluates Gilbert's fencing proposal "controlled grazing" (Head 19) as neocolonial control, advocating instead for Ubuntu's harmonious whole. If it rains, it will not be a colonial handout but a communal triumph. It will be a symbol of the restoration of "cosmic harmony" (Ramose 46) through collective agency, aligning with Wangari Maathai's fusion of tradition and science.

Ambivalence of Identity and Cultural Hybridity

Bessie Head presents Makhaya as a figure caught between two poles, embodying the tension of postcolonial dislocation, the sense of being trapped between different cultural worlds as a result of colonial history. Leaving behind the trauma of apartheid South Africa, he longs for the freedom Botswana promises. Yet, his arrival in Golema Mmidi places him in a new state of uncertainty. Although he escapes the rigid and dehumanising racial hierarchy of South Africa (Agbo 62), he soon encounters skepticism from Chief Matenge, who remarks, that most of the trouble is caused by outsiders (Head 35). This moment reflects the continued barriers Makhaya faces—he rejects tribal divisions yet finds himself facing similar exclusions in Botswana.

Makhaya's identity resists rigid classification, reinforcing his sense of hybridity. He is described as being "either Xhosa or Zulu" (Head 3), highlighting his ambiguous origins. His ability to speak Tswana, despite his Zulu heritage, further complicates these boundaries, creating a space of cultural negotiation akin to Bhabha's concept of the Third Space. His partnership with Gilbert reflects fluidity. Their collaboration embodies Odhiambo's idea of "mutual borrowing," (66) where identities are constantly shifting and adapting.

Internal struggle is also reflected in Makhaya's psychological conflict. He firmly rejects tribal essentialism, stating, "I'm no tribalist" (Head 4), yet he cannot easily shake the identity shaped by apartheid's violence, an identity "defined by hate" (Head 66). His choice to adopt the nickname "Mack" (Head 15) suggests an attempt at reinvention. Odhiambo says that, even as Makhaya integrates into Golema Mmidi, the bitterness of past experience still weighs on him, reinforcing the instability that defines hybrid identities.

Despite these struggles, Makhaya finds a sense of belonging in the collective labour of the villagers. Their shared efforts in farming and dam-building allow him to transcend rigid tribal binaries and embrace the philosophy of Ubuntu, which centres on communal interdependence, I am because we are. Agbo suggests that Makhaya's journey, like postcolonial identity itself, remains in flux, marked by displacement yet open to new beginnings.

Traversing Colonial Patriarchy

The historical project of colonial power was linked to the dispossession of indigenous people from their land. This was often justified through European legal and philosophical concepts that failed to recognise existing indigenous connections and governance, sometimes treating the land as if it were empty or merely "dependencies" or "possessions" (Bhabha 97). Colonial land theft reinforced patriarchal structures often ignoring women's traditional knowledge in agriculture. This marginalised women. As a result, rural women began facing amplified burdens due to degradation of environment and dispossession, which affects their cultural connection and political autonomy. Resistance to colonial patriarchy and struggle for land sovereignty involves asserting claims that are based on deep, often gendered connections to land and environment. In a way, this resistance is an averment of traditional knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge systems can serve as “counter-memory” (DeLoughrey 213) to colonial accounts. The resistance and agency of women are central to this struggle. This includes direct action, such as women mobilising against the privatisation of public land, as seen in Wangari Maathai’s Green Belt Movement, which links environmental justice and land recovery to a gendered struggle against colonial and postcolonial mismanagement.

Bessie Head’s work, for instance, challenges not only colonial past but also the postcolonial present riddled with tribal politics and patriarchal ideology (Agbo 108). Her female characters resist patriarchal societies and challenge prescribed notions of power relations (Agbo 202–03). Resistance also involves challenging dominant narratives through cultural production, questioning existing power structures, and operating from the “in-between space” (Bhabha 216) or “third space” (Bhabha 217) created by the colonial encounter to forge new forms of liberation and justice.

Dichotomy of Ecological Harmony and Cultural Renewal

Bessie Head transforms rain from a simple weather event into a powerful symbol of hope and renewal that challenges the legacy of colonialism. The novel begins in a land devastated by drought a “waterless country” (Head 74) which serves as a vivid image of the ecological and cultural damage caused by colonial mismanagement. Yet, the approaching rain clouds offer more than a change in weather; they promise renewal achieved through communal effort and respect for indigenous practices.

The severe drought, which has turned fertile soil into a “sandy wasteland” (Head 19) is a direct result of colonial practices. Overgrazing, a problem inherited from colonial pastoralism, forces subsistence farmers to use unsustainable methods, leading to crops that burn to nothing under the pitiless sun. Although Gilbert introduces a mechanised farm as a modern solution, his tobacco monoculture, which is focused on profit, risks repeating these colonial plans by further depleting the land and increasing dependence on global markets. Head adds complexity to these issues by showing that Gilbert’s proposal for “controlled grazing” (Head 19) is based on scientific ideas, even though it conflicts with the villagers’ long-held ancestral knowledge. This difference of opinion shows the underlying conflict between the colonisers’ ideas of what progress meant and the inherent wisdom found in the traditional practices of the local people. In the midst of these difficulties, Makhaya steps forward to help bridge the gap. With the support of the community, he builds small, simple dams that are described as not very deep. These dams are a testament to the combination of new, innovative techniques and the tried-and-tested methods passed down through generations.

Head also challenges the idea of fixed cultural identities through the creation of a “Third Space” on the farm. This space is one where Makhaya (a Zulu refugee), Gilbert (a British agronomist), and Tswana villagers work together, blurring old boundaries.

Makhaya’s nickname reflects his fluid identity, while the farm itself becomes a place of shared labour and collaboration—a concept further explained by Nwoma as a means to dissolve old colonial hierarchies (103). As tribal and cultural lines fade, “ossified cultural norms” (Bayer 454) give way to practical solidarity and mutual respect.

Finally, in the story, rain becomes an act of radical reclamation. In this final moment, Head affirms that decolonial hope is found not in a return to a mythically pure past but in the messy, everyday work of caring for the land a process that revitalises both the soil and the human spirit.

Conclusion

Bessie Head’s *When Rain Clouds Gather* goes beyond a story about environmental struggle to put forward a clear vision of resistance against colonial legacy. The novel uses the ideas of postcolonial ecocriticism to show how colonial agriculture, like Gilbert’s cash-crop

monoculture, treats land as a source of profit rather than a living ecosystem. Plants such as drought-resistant sorghum and maize, and even the soil, are shown as vital allies in the people's struggle. Rather than lying idle in the background, these plants actively help resist those who aim to exploit the land's resources. Their ability to survive and thrive under harsh conditions is called vegetal defiance, which is a natural strength that stands against destructive resource extraction and challenges the idea that the land exists only to be exploited.

In contrast, Head emphasises the value of Indigenous ecological memory and Ubuntu philosophy. This approach shows that caring for the land together is both a sustainable way to live and a political act. The villagers' effort to heal their drought-stricken land becomes a means of reclaiming their sovereignty and questioning the supremacy of colonial patriarchy and modern exploitation. Makhaya's mixed identity captures the challenges of living between different cultural worlds. Yet, his integration into the community of Golema Mmidi demonstrates the positive change that can come when cultures work together. The cooperative farm in the novel acts as a "Third Space," wherein traditional practices merge with new ideas, breaking down old colonial divisions. The rain, which brings life to the parched land, serves as a metaphor for the slow, collective resistance of the people, a hope that is achieved through their own efforts rather than through imposed solutions.

Linking colonial land disruption to the climate crisis of today, the narrative depicts drought and soil erosion as early signals of human-driven changes characteristic of the Anthropocene. Head's novel presents a clear picture for environmental justice based on Indigenous wisdom and shared work. By showing that the healing of the land is closely linked with cultural renewal, she questions Western ideas of progress and argues for a future where people control their own land and identity. The story reminds us that taking care of nature is not just about environment but also about confronting and repairing the damage of colonial history. In the present time of climate crisis and neocolonial resource extraction, Head's vision continues to inspire community resilience, mutual support, and a deep appreciation for the earth and sustainable development.

Works Cited

- Agbo, Joshua. *Bessie Head and the Trauma of Exile: Identity and Alienation in Southern African Fiction*. Routledge, 2021.
- Bayer, Gerd. 'When Earth Matters: Bessie Head's When Rain Clouds Gather'. *Open Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 448–55.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M. *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. University of Hawaii Press, 2007.
- Head, Bessie. *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Heinemann Educational Publishers, 2008.
- Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2009.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Nwoma, Chukwu Romanus. 'Climate Change in Bessie Head's When Rain Clouds Gather: An Ecocritical Perspective'. *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2, Apr. 2019, pp. 90–106.
- Odhiambo, Elizabeth A. 'The Place of Identity and Hybridity on Literary Commitment in Bessie Head's When Rain Clouds Gather'. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, vol. 5, no. 3, Sept. 2015, pp. 61–72.
- Ramose, Mogobe B. *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. 3a ed., Mond Books Publishers, 2005.
- Woynarski, Lisa. 'Locating an Indigenous Ethos in Ecological Performance.' *Performing Ethos: International Journal of Ethics in Theatre & Performance*, vol. 5, no. 1, July 2015, pp. 17–30.