

## Immigration and Integration Issues in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*

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### **Abstract**

Chronical instability in Africa is the main cause of regular exodus. Most of adventurers escape from endangered places in quest of peace of mind and happiness. Therefore, immigration becomes an alternative to grasp life under better outlooks as Bessie Head attempts to justify in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Through Makhaya and Gilbert, this paper examines expectations of immigrants 'characters in the novel who are either fleeing Apartheid or looking for opportunities to recover a sort of dignity and consideration. Sometimes, Immigration appears at last as a possibility to provide a meaning to those immigrants' life even if the expected results can be more or less questionable, for those immigrants encounter the reticence and prejudice of local population most of the time. With sociocriticism's theory, a thorny analyse will take into consideration human mobility, immigrant's integration and multiracial cohesion.

**Keywords :** immigration, integration, crisis, Africa, movement.

### **Résumé**

L'instabilité chronique en Afrique est la principale cause d'exode régulier. La plupart des aventuriers fuient les endroits menacés en quête de tranquillité d'esprit et de bonheur. L'immigration devient donc une alternative pour appréhender la vie sous de meilleures perspectives, comme Bessie Head tente de le justifier dans son œuvre *When Rain Clouds Gather*. À travers Makhaya et Gilbert, cet article examine les attentes des personnages

immigrants du roman qui fuient l'apartheid ou cherchent des opportunités afin de retrouver une sorte de dignité et de considération. Parfois, l'immigration apparaît enfin comme une possibilité de donner un sens à la vie de ces immigrants même si les résultats attendus peuvent être plus ou moins discutables, car ces immigrants se heurtent aux réticences et aux préjugés des populations locales le plus souvent. Avec la théorie sociocritique, une analyse épineuse prendra en compte la mobilité humaine, l'intégration des immigrés et la cohésion multiraciale.

**Mots-clés :** immigration, intégration, crise, Afrique, déplacement.

## INTRODUCTION

The quest of a sense of wellbeing triggers the movement of people toward better places to explore new opportunities. Thus, Immigration appears as a resort to provide a sort of momentum (booster) to people starting from scratch. Such movement of population sometimes takes place in Africa among African people because of numerous crises all over the cradle of humankind. But the incorporation of new comers in their occasional shelter is almost a never-ending struggle for they are subject to gossips and stereotypes. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Bessie Head explores the issue of immigration and immigrants' integration through two main characters and raises a thorny question: what are the barriers against immigrants' integration and how can they be overcome?

As Sociocriticism is the method "for texts' social interpretation" (Amossy, 2005:125), it will help better to examine integration issue of immigrants in such a context. To that effect, four points need a relevant attention. Firstly, the roots and causes of immigration, then the socio-cultural barriers against immigration and the political and economic obstacles against immigration, and at last the clues of a harmonious cohabitation between immigrants and natives.

### 1) ROOTS AND CAUSES OF IMMIGRATION

Immigration can be defined as "a process by which non-nationals move into a country for the purpose of settlement" (Richard & Jillyanne, 2011:49). For a long time, Immigration has been considered as an ultimate resort to get a peaceful mind, free of fears of all kinds. In any areas where people were powerless before injustice, they attempted to set up a welfare state through the respects of their rights and duties. Once those efforts were fruitless, those freedom fighters became laughing stock in their country and a manhunt was directed against them. The traumatic experience undergone by many black south Africans during Apartheid period did

not provide any choice but exile or immigration. In fact, Apartheid is considered as “white supremacy, (...) white domination (...) and the preservation of white western or Christian civilization against numberless savage black hordes” (Landis, 1961:2) and Apartheid policy divided south African society because it damaged black Africans to the benefit of white south Africans. The Afrikaners owned the main economic sectors, that is why they ill-treated black people with a stark segregation. It was almost impossible for black to grasp and fructify any opportunities in such a place since they were categorized and stigmatized as Bessie puts it: “His reasons for leaving were simple: he could not marry and have children in a country where black men were called boy and dog and kaffir, (Bessie, 1968:11)

In other words, they were not considered and treated as human beings in their own country. They were almost at the same stage with animals because of their skin colour. Although numerous, they were over exploited and deprived of the most elementary rights. Such living conditions did not allow them to hope for a good outlook personally and even start a family. Being called ‘Kaffir’ was the baseness of humanity since it symbolized the balkanization of south African society with Blacks at the bottom and Whites at the top. In other words, “When a black man is called a kaffir by somebody of another race, as a rule the term is one which is disparaging, derogatory and contemptuous and causes humiliation” (Rabkin, 2017:8). This sort of dehumanization stirred up claims. black people wanted the rehabilitation of their honour and dignity because they were exhausted to be stripped of their rights and possessions, and tortured. So, they attempted the intensification of their struggle at different levels, above all political, economic and cultural. Politically, they wanted to be admitted inside the sphere of decisions to change their tragic destiny as it is emphasized below.

Boer and British leaders established the Union of South Africa, whereby both ethnic groups agreed to govern South Africa to their mutual interest and advantage. Most Africans, coloureds and Indians were excluded from this political arrangement (apart from a small number who were eligible for the qualified franchise in the Cape Province) and it was against this backdrop that the first rumblings of mass-based urban resistance to racial segregation and political exclusion occurred. (Rocky, 2006:7)

The political exclusion of black clan condemned them to be subject to total hazardousness with a plausible negligence of their interest. It implies Blacks and Indians were at the mercy of white people about the leadership and ruling of South Africa. Since Blacks did not have any representatives to defend their interests nationally, they felt unfavourably treated with the others. Their interests were not enough taken into account and economically, discrimination continued to belittle Africans and the coming quotation is the illustration.

The broad conclusion ...is that the survival of color privilege is more a consequence than a cause of economic color discrimination and injustice ... demographic exploitation of the moral weaknesses from which all races suffer has perpetuated restraints on the competition of the non-whites and thereby maintained them in a position of economic inferiority. (Hutt,1964 :30)

In addition to the political domination, black south Africans did not have any hold upon the economy of the country. That double frustration deeply tetanized them so that they could hardly believe in the construction of a bright future. As they were carried along by events, black south Africans engaged in armed struggles through sabotages, loot and guerilla warfare. Therefore, they became wanted all over the country and even beyond national borders as stated here:

A British colonial Police officer sat behind a desk on which was piled a jumble of papers. (...) he bent down and picked up a newspaper that had been carelessly flung on the floor. Makhaya's picture was on the front page under a headline: DANGEROUS SABOTER FLEES BANNING ORDER. (Bessie, 1968:14)

Thus was the case of many black south Africans whose militancy cost them expensively. For his activism in favour of his skin siblings, Makhaya was wanted. A warrant allowed the media to stick his picture in the front page of their newspaper. Makhaya became sadly famous because of criminal accusations against him. His life was endangered and required him to take all sorts of precautions to protect himself, and among those measures were exile and immigration. The implementation of such discriminatory policy imploded life in southern Africa for almost all social stratum. It destroyed the capability of citizens to have common interests about the future of their settlement. Like Makhaya, black damned citizens set for displacement towards a new place for a potential better adventure. But, such an initiative was strewn with serious difficulties.

## 2) SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS AGAINST INTEGRATION

Once outside his native land, Makhaya expected to have a restful haven. To be far from injustice and terror of South Africa could lead him to tackle a new departure radiated of a bright future. This hope always inhabited exile and also adventurer when setting up in a new place. Unfortunately, things can be upset by new circumstances and the cultural and social changes did not favour Makhaya and other expatriates. The first inadequateness came with a proposal of prostitute act as the author stipulates in the following extract:

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

The hands darted back and there was a brief silence; then she said, you know.  
I don't, he said

(...)

At last, she said, my grandmother won't mind as long as you pay me. (...)  
Here's the money, he said fiercely. Now go away.

(...)

From the hut next door he heard the brief plaintive explanation of the child and the  
land surprised chatter of the old woman. (Bessie, 1968:9/10)

Prostitution as a human devaluation for it is “the business or practice of engaging in sexual relations in exchange for financial reward” (Gungul & Audu, 2014: 3) is offered graciously to a refugee in exchange of a derisive amount of money. This bad habit seems to be normal for this host family. Although she is minor, she seems to be at ease with such a practice. It is like she is accustomed with sex for money which only benefits her mother. This cupidity goes against the values of Makhaya who hardly understands such a moral and cultural depravation. This sort of attitude does not favour a rest time as Makhaya really needs. Therefore, Makhaya's values and convictions begrudge to consider this place as a haven. He particularly condemns and rejects the upbringing's trampling of this girl without any remorse for money. The second inadequateness is perceived through the stratification of society and races which causes a sort of barrier and mistrust between people. Inhabitants from different viewpoints and interests hardly accept to share the same ideals in a common place. Thus, Gilbert (a white immigrant) got terrible difficulties to have a wife in Botswana because local citizens did not admit him in their class. Bessie therefore writes:

When I first came here I asked her to marry me and she said, 'I can't marry you Gilbert because I'm not an educated woman. You won't be happy with an uneducated woman. So I said, 'All right, get educated then. Now I'm sorry I ever said it because I've been teaching her English in Exchange for lessons in Tswana. All I've got out of it is an inferiority complex over my inability to grasp Tswana.  
(Bessie, 1968:29)

There is a real complex between the relationship of Gilbert and Maria. She does not consider herself as having the same status with him for she is illiterate. She believes she is inferior to him since the fact for her not to be educated sets up a barrier between them. She hardly imagines to make up for her lateness despite external assistance. As for Gilbert, he is uncomfortable when communicating with people and his attempts of help to bring them to the threshold of modern education is hardly understood. Such villagers' comprehension does not ease his integration in that place. And yet, Gilbert only expects to bring his expertise in the village to make up for illiteracy through teaching.

The third inadequateness is the nonacceptance of a social scourge, especially corruption indexed as “the intentional non-compliance with the arm's-length principle aimed at deriving

some advantage for oneself or for related individuals from this behaviour “(Begovic, 2005: 2). Gilbert’s mind does not match with such evil, which is only profitable for a tiny clan and in parallel sets up frictions inside people. This is clarified in the following sequence:

The agricultural authorities also believed they had a monopoly over the future development of the country and they were not inclined to favor development initiative, nor outsiders.

Development was ‘in’ business, for locals only. They were prepared to welcome Gilbert ‘in’, as he was a white man, but to their extreme chagrin, they found that he had independent ideas about that too. (Bessie, 1968:44)

Gilbert is of an incorruptible morality. But the current society adopts a cattle bargain with a monopoly of the market which is only profitable for them. They are at ease as it provides them with a lot of interests. Those authorities do not want any change that can only disturb their social position. So, they are ready to convince everyone to join their clan. Unfortunately, the opposition of Gilbert is misinterpreted as a threat to an established rule. Up to now, he turns to be a potential danger that can destabilize a very old practice. In short, the difficulties related to social and cultural environment difficulties do not favour Makhaya and Gilbert’s fulfilment in their new living place. They are rejected for they are viewed as pioneers of a change of which the current local decision-makers strongly oppose.

### 3) POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS AGAINST INTEGRATION

Both immigrants (Makhaya and Gilbert) misadventures continue under other aspects, specifically for political and economic motivations. The expected mind peace they hoped for in their asylum, encountered new challenges that troubled them. In a world of Individuality, free assistance is almost inexistant in human relationship. It is the first economic obstacle which set up before them.

The fixed stare never wavered. She said, curtly, I have a spare hut. You may use it but only for tonight. You must also pay, I want ten shillings.

She held out a shrivelled old hand, cold and hard with years and years of labour. He stepped towards the fire and handed her a ten-shilling note. (Bessie, 1968:7)

It is clear there is no proof of generosity for a trouble soul of a refugee. The young man is in quest of rest and peace after a traumatizing experience in his country. As a wanted, he wishes to be welcomed and assisted for a certain time. He expects to get protection freely as it is a reality in African tradition for foreign people. He could not imagine to encounter the same realities of his root countries there. The received service in exchange of money allows to understand that money guides relationship among people no matter the predicament they undergo. Even refugees do not escape that rule. If refugees achieve not to be denounced, they have to pay for all kinds of required services. Thus, there is no action of solidarity towards

immigrants and even among natives, there is submissive and financial domination kept by chieftaincy.

Before Gilbert came, Pelotona used to work for the chief because he was the big cattle speculator of the village. A cattle speculator works like this: a man brings his beast to him which he looks over and then says, 'oh, I shall pay you six pounds for that beast'. But 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. (Bessie, 1968:21)

It turns out the local chief put up a system of cattle trade in which he was the cornerstone. No one could sell his oxen outside that system. So, he was able to make great profits over his population. This system allowed him to dominate and control the economy of the village. He became rich and his inhabitants poorer and more dependent. His will was the continuation of this trend to keep the different advantages. No one had to disturb his comfort's area and the cattle business was his private property and had to be left as such. The arrival and moving in of immigrants constituted a threat to the lucrative business of local authorities for they set up with innovative projects profitable to the whole population. Two main projects were really appreciated. The first one dealt with the improvement of the system of selling.

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. To get this fair price each beast is weighed on a scale and the owner is paid the same live weight as would be given by the abattoir. Seeing this good fortune, the whole village joined the cattle co-operative, putting our chief out of business. (Bessie, 1968:21)

The idea of cooperative brought by Gilbert was an economic revolution if we focus on its meaning as "a democratically controlled business, ...owned and controlled by the members and gives benefit to the members" (Chukwu, 1990). It was a great change never observed in the village before. It brought a new method of cattle trade, but for the benefit of the members (villagers). The idea of Gilbert set the crowd at the centre of his preoccupation. Their living standard was about to change in short time if it was implemented. Gilbert led them to think and act together for cooperative brought the idea of socialism very profitable to the majority of villagers. This cooperative opposed the interests of a tiny elite very determined to keep and protect their mean advantages. The second project involved the improvement of the system of production as the following quotation mentioned it:

What Gilbert had in mind was to bring the two, cattle production and crop production, together. (...) If cattle were brought to the crop-producing areas, they could be fed on the crop residues and grain surpluses, and this would raise the grade of the beef. (Bessie, 1968:31)

Apart from cattle marketing, Gilbert dreamt of increasing the number of cattle to help villagers have more inputs. He helps villagers to care about them in appropriate places. Those places would provide them with foods of better quality and they would be shelter from diseases. If so, beef would be overweight and financially beneficial to the interest of villagers. Those actions were enough to trigger local authorities' wrath. Up to now, authorities looked for clues to charge and get rid of them and their wish has almost come into existence at the first opportunity.

But it was his enthusiasm for fencing and his criticism of the tribal land tenure system that first brought him to a head-on clash with the fuming Chief Matenge. (...) Chief Matenge, aware that he was about to lose his lucrative cattle-dealing business with the villagers, grabbed onto the fencing of the farm and cattle ranch to convince the villagers of Gilbert's evil intentions towards them. In alarm, the villagers called a meeting and sent a deputation of old men to Gilbert. (Bessie, 1968:34/35)

The reforms adopted by Gilbert got positive impacts upon population, but really displeased the political administration led by Chief Matenge. That is why, land fencing was considered like a charge to accuse him of ignorance and offence against law. Gilbert realized how far he has disturbed the established order. His projects do not go along with the assent of *Golema Mmidi* policymakers. It seems they were expecting Gilbert to fall in a trap so that they can impose on him tough sanctions. Thus, the kindness of Gilbert recoils him to his disarray. In short, the idea and will to alter economics rules was displeased and brought the personality of immigrants to be perceived as social outcast in their asylum. It was therefore an emergency to get rid of them no matter the way. Local authorities cared about their privileges and opposed to changes that threaten their interests.

#### 4) POSSIBLE HARMONIOUS COHABITATION

In the middle of all those difficulties and miscomprehensions which are real barriers for their fulfilment, immigrants should be strong enough to deserve their landlord trust; and as time passes, a peaceful cohabitation is possible. That is why, immigrant needs to be strongminded in the centre of so numerous uncertainties. Makhaya probably embraced such lifestyle to overcome all sort of adversity abroad as it can be perceived:

Makhaya smiled wryly (...) He could give up almost anything, and hatred might fall away from him like old scabs, but he would never stop putting people away from him. He would never let them rampage through his soul because, unlike Mma-Millipede, he had no God to clear up the rubble. He had only his own self, Makhaya, Black Dog, and that was all he trusted not to let down. (Bessie, 1968: 137/138)



An immigrant needs to get a very strong mentality that will help him to subjugate all sorts of obstacles in his foster country. He can be victim of potential stigmatisations that make fragile his mentality and push him to give up. A defeatist attitude could let him be guided in contradictory ways and impact his lifegoals. Makhaya is aware that each victory is first and foremost psychological. He has to be pride of his personality and interiorize his victory over exclusion and xenophobia which is ‘a form of attitudinal, affective, and behavioral prejudice toward immigrants and those perceived as foreign’ (Oksana, 2009:43). In fact, Xenophobia is intricately tied to notions of nationalism and ethnocentrism, both of which are characterized by belief in the superiority of one’s nation-state over others (Licata & Klein, 2002; Schirmer, 1998). Therefore, immigrant needs to prove in some way their utility in order to cut down any suspicion against them. No country is in need of lazy and idle person incapable to be an added value. Makhaya is involved in the daily life of his foster community through education (training) as it is stated:

Could Mma-Millipede persuade the women to attend lessons at the farm on how to cultivate Turkish tobacco and how to build a curing and drying shed? (...) I chose Makhaya for this side of the work because I think he will enjoy imparting knowledge to people. (Bessie, 1968: 102)

Makhaya makes himself indispensable through the provided services to his host country. He wishes to contribute to the progress of the village by teaching illiterate women. By means of instruction, those women will acquire technics to better their activities and living conditions. Thus, Makhaya becomes essential in the process of modernising lifestyle there. His input proves to be a key element which can facilitate people’s esteem for him.

In addition, an immigrant should give assistance to a native person in need as far as he can. In other words, he should have social responsibilities and care about people who share his living background. He has to reject a lonely life vision and curl himself up.

It’s nothing,’ he said, smiling down at her. The boy is young. It wouldn’t occur to him to come home with the cattle. We’ll go together to the cattle post tomorrow and bring him and the cattle back to the village. And was all he said before walking away, back to the farm. There was nothing else he offered her except his kindness and help. (Bessie, 1968: 160)

Assistance to desperate person is a key of acceptance. It is a way to testify the share of sorrow and predicament undergone around you. Natives realize the immigrant is not insensitive to their woes. He is touched and ready to give a support to appease his benefactors. Thus, the immigrant should be interested in the emotion and welfare of his neighbours, he needs not to settle and care about his business only in order to be considered individualist. Here, Makhaya does his best to comfort Paulina who is worried about the safeness of her child.

At last, the Immigrant can settle himself definitely by taking up his foster land culture. The ultimate piece of evidence of such loyalty is marriage as Makhaya did “So much has happened so quickly, he said. I forgot to ask you if you’d like to marry me. Will you, Paulie? (...) but even though Paulina said yes a bit too quickly, she hardly believed it” (Bessie, 1968: 199). The absolute key of immigrant’s integration in a host society is through cultural brewing. This brewing reaches his peak with marriage. It is advantageous for immigrants for it symbolizes a total abandonment in the host country. Thus, the new adopted person becomes assimilated and does his best to defend the interests of his new community. Marriage provides him with some rights but also duties. He is protected as well as his wife, children and even offsprings. This legal contract changes most of time the preconceived ideas and favours a peaceful cohabitation.

### CONCLUSION

Immigration remains a topical matter over the world for many reasons. As long as military and political crises occur in Africa, people will witness with the displacement of population in quest of better living condition. Such compulsory movement gets an impact on cultural, political and economic aspects of the departure and foster living conditions. Thus, immigrants’ integration proves to be an arduous and never-ending struggle due to preconceived judgements which spotlight them as dreadful threats. Through peaceful and tolerance values, a pleasant living framework can be a reality for them in the foster country unless it does not endanger the welcoming country identity.

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