

CHILD SAFETY IN BESSIE HEAD'S MARU AND WHEN RAIN CLOUDS GATHER.

Jeannette Litha Gomis, KO

Université Cheikh Anta Diop

lithagomis@yahoo.com

Abstract

Bessie Amelia Emery Head was born in 1937 in South Africa. She settled in Botswana, where she wrote most of her books: novels, short stories, and autobiographical works before her death in 1986. Bessie Head is the author of When Rain Clouds Gather (1968) and Maru (1971), in which she raises the issue of child safety with different factors. MARU presents a child, Margaret Cadmore, as a student struggling to survive her classmates' verbal and physical hostilities because of her tribal background and, despite her adoption by a white missionary couple. Although Margaret Cadmore's adoptive mother works as the school's principal, the villagers considered racist and unkind. Therefore, it disqualifies her from trying to defend her daughter against verbal and physical attacks from other students. To find a solution to the frequent tribal humiliations that Margaret and the Masarwa tribe members suffer, the missionary, a white adoptive mother, decides to give her an excellent academic education. In the same context, the author introduces When Rain Clouds Gathers with disheartening cases of children dying of malnutrition, disease, or girls exposed to prostitution due to poverty. In addition to the phenomena that contribute to food insecurity, the lack of parental commitment to child protection affects the physical safety of children on the one hand and their mental well-being on the other. These conditions make the village children vulnerable to the seasonal lack of food and water due to the scarcity of rain. Therefore, the lack of commitment of parents to the protection of children affects their life safety, education, and growth.

Key words: *Child, Culture, safety, poverty, education.*

Résumé

Bessie Amelia Emery Head est née en 1937 en Afrique du Sud. Elle s'est installée au Botswana, où elle a écrit la plupart de ses livres : romans, nouvelles et œuvres autobiographiques avant sa mort en 1986. Bessie Head

est l'auteur de *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) et de *Maru* (1971), dans lesquels elle soulève la question de la sécurité des enfants avec différents facteurs. *MARU* présente une enfant, Margaret Cadmore, comme une étudiante luttant pour survivre aux hostilités verbales et physiques de ses camarades de classe en raison de son origine tribale et, malgré son adoption par un couple de missionnaires blancs. Bien que la mère adoptive de Margaret Cadmore travaille comme directrice de l'école, les villageois la considèrent comme raciste et peu aimable. Elle est donc disqualifiée pour tenter de défendre sa fille contre les attaques verbales et physiques des autres élèves. Pour trouver une solution aux fréquentes humiliations tribales que subit Margaret et les membres de la tribu Masarwa, le missionnaire, une mère adoptive blanche, décide de lui donner une excellente éducation académique. Dans le même contexte, l'auteur introduit *When Rain Clouds Gathers* avec des cas décourageants d'enfants mourant de malnutrition, de maladie, ou de filles exposées à la prostitution en raison de la pauvreté. Outre les phénomènes qui contribuent à l'insécurité alimentaire, le manque d'engagement des parents dans la protection de l'enfance affecte la sécurité physique des enfants d'une part et leur bien-être mental d'autre part. Ces conditions rendent les enfants du village vulnérables au manque saisonnier de nourriture et d'eau dû à la rareté de la pluie. Par conséquent, le manque d'engagement des parents dans la protection des enfants affecte la sécurité de leur vie, leur éducation et leur croissance.

Mots clés : *Enfant, Culture, sécurité, pauvreté, éducation.*

Mots Clés : *Child, Culture, sécurité, pauvreté, éducation*

Introduction

Child safety thematic has owned great interest worldwide. The constitutional rights brought a dimensional consciousness of socio-educational relationships. However, Bessie Head's When Rain Clouds Gather (1968) and MARU introduce Botswana with cultural beliefs that had considerable impact mostly on the villagers' economic conditions and their children' safety. The author's stories show that many Batswana people look down upon the Bushmen's cultural values, perceived as primitive and unenlightened. Concerning intolerance of these tribal differences, which sometimes leads to poverty, the children, Bushmen, and non-bushmen have become vulnerable to social-

cultural and economic effects of juvenile bullying and adults' disregard for child protection. This article intends to demonstrate how the education of quality can stand as a solution to inter-tribal cultural challenged relationships and poverty that expose many Batswana children to vulnerable conditions of life.

1. Culture and Child Safety.

The poor socio-cultural interaction does not restrain itself to adult relationships between Bushmen and Batswana citizens but extends to the children's circle of experimentation of bias and victimization. Bessie Head's work dives deep into juvenile relationships within school compounds. MARU demonstrates the failure of culture in conforming to acts of children's rights, labeled respectively as providing them with "[...] the care, maintenance, health, education, development, protection, or general welfare of children, and a place of safety, a school of industries[...]" (CHILDREN'S ACT, 2009:5). Having a particular way of life, the Bushmen of Botswana are nomads who primarily survive live and gathering in the Kalahari Desert, where they temporarily live in tents. According to Steyn (1985:35), the central and southern Bushmen's main diet is hunting wild meat and other underground wild roots and fruits. The lack of clean water in this drought-stricken region puts their children's health at risk as desert dwellers. For a similar reason, Dorman explains that "Mortality among children is very high, mainly due to their unsanitary habits, poor diet, and exposure" (Dorman, 2017: 51). To this effect, people assume that the Bushmen tribal lifestyle, including health maintenance with insufficiently washed food and water systems, can endanger children's survival at an early age.

Primarily centered on semi-desert lands, the Bushmen are nomads with remarkable experience dealing with water shortages. However, increasing food difficulties force the Bushmen to rely on nature's provisions and a few juicy melon-

like fruits to combat dehydration and satisfy other health needs. The management of the restricted available water requires careful use for the food preparations. Historically, records portray the Bushmen tribe as uncivilized, despised, and poor, and a tribe is seen as enslaved by their fellow citizens. Furthermore, because the Bushmen have different cultures, their children grow to discover how much they have to fight the tribal prejudice as free Bushmen.

Beyond this contentious relationship, the Bushmen seem to have a unique cultural relationship with animals, with particular respect for Lions, whom they consider a "social superior, which should be addressed with respect" [...](Baynes- 2017: 1). That said, this cultural relationship puts the safety of the children at stake when, for instance, a 'Lion' stands in front of a cave frighteningly roaring and demanding until it receives "one of the children to eat" explained (DORNAN, 83). The myth of intimated parents giving out a child to back up a roaring is a sign of children's precarious life in a community where an animal can have words, over people. By living in the bushes, the Bushmen acquired knowledge of animals and some skillful ways of cohabitation with wild wildlife; according to MARU, the Bushmen's environment also serves as a refuge for animals. For similar reason, Bessie Head reports that in Botswana, "Zebras, lions, buffaloes, and Bushmen live in the Kalahari Desert. (Head 1971:11). For their tribal identity as desert dwellers, the inadequate treatment by other Batswana has put the Masarwa in a precarious position of shame in the country. The Harmless People reports a particular feeling of despair. "The people were ashamed. They realized that in their old life, they had been eating dirty food, living in the wilderness, owning nothing worth owning, knowing nothing worth knowing. They were ashamed of getting drunk and fighting, but they somehow couldn't help it.

So they shamed each other during brawling drunken scenes." (Marshall 1989:272).

For instance, Maru, a young man to be king, in the novel MARU reminds his fellows, in a warning viewpoint, of allowing no improvement of the Masarwa (one of the groups among the Bushmen) living conditions. Maru kept servants and behaved like any enslaver and still owned the Masarwas to take care of his "one hundred thousand and fifty cattle posts" while sleeping bare-bodied by the fire with no blanket nor bed. (Head 1971: 76) MARU displays a clash between the children's Acts of institutional protection and the reality as the British missionary's wife, Margaret Cadmore, a tutor and a hospital worker, accepts being a caretaker of an orphan baby girl from the Masarwa. The orphan baby girl whose compatriots rejected and left beside her mother's dead body grew up to become Margaret Cadmore, the first Masarwa teacher in that milieu. Conscious of the precarity of tribal conflicts' impacts on children, too, the Missionary adoptive mother of Margaret declares her powerlessness to stop the students from abusing the Masarwa child. "You will have to live with your appearance for the rest of your life. There is nothing you can do to change it." (Head 1971: 18). The above remark means that the Masarwa's identity authorizes the peers to continue bullying; for, according to Dorman, "Bechuanas treated the Masarwas with great cruelty" (REV. S. S. DORNAN. 2017: 40). To such a lack of responsibility towards an adopted child, Maru indicates how Bessie Head contextually engages the absence of parental protection of children facing socio-cultural mishandling. Margaret Cadmore, the Masarwa young student, seems to have restricted the right to the previously elaborated law against child unsafety. Her Masarwa tribal range exposed her to many bullies in school, where each student is supposed to have equal treatment despite racial, cultural, or financial affiliations and background. One of the methods many African

elementary, middle, and high schools the promote uniforms is to equalize and protect the student's integrity from being objects of clothing mockeries and indignations. However, Bessie Head demonstrates that the school can also represent to some children a place to meet their young-aged bullies tracking their powerless peers. Margeret, the Masarwa girl, does not understand the awkwardness of her relationship with her environment until she enrolls in school because: "She was the kind of child who was slyly pinched under the seat and next to whom no one wanted to sit. [...] What did it mean when another child walked up to her and, looking so angry, said: 'You are just a Bushman'? In their minds, it meant so much" (Bessie Head MARU 1971: 17, this verbal assault more to the addressee child.

Many define culture as a way of life. Therefore, disregarding one's culture can shut down children's personalities. Margaret also had to face and struggle with peers assimilating her tribe to filth, ignorance, lowness, primitiveness, and even mental disorder. Accused of ignorance and incapability to fend for themselves, the hunters and gatherers show no interest in associating the single way of finding food with growing crops and cattle breeding. In conservativeness to the traditional living styles and culture, they undergo the consequences of not plowing and cattle-breeding. *The Lost World Of The Kalahari* presents circumstances when a Bushman would starve for food but still depend on hunting but attempt a more productive activity. «[...]the Bushman is so unconscious a creature that after gorging himself with food like a python he will go to sleep and, when the pangs of hunger again begin to stir, he will merely draw the band of skin tighter and tighter around his stomach until at last only death from starvation serves to make him conscious enough to go out once more to hunt »(Van Der Post, (2007: 176)

A Question of Power puts forward another dimension of child insecurity with Elizabeth's fake diagnosis of insanity preceding a series of schoolmates' bullying. Through Elizabeth's experience of disregard at school, Bessie Head shows a high level of psychological trauma forced into the child's personality to accept and sink deep into it. As a child, the Apartheid system was mainly believed to be the adults' concern. Elizabeth could not escape the cultural delimitations that blocked their full integration into the school community when she remarks: "The faces of oppressed people are not ugly. They are scarred with suffering. But the torturers become hideous day by day. There are no limits to the excesses of evil they indulge in" (Bessie Head, 1974: 84). The above passage indicates that there is a further awareness that cultural oppression impacts the racial identity with minor attention paid to children's safety as the people transmit both cultural values and faults children's children's

2. Poverty and child protection

The scourge of poverty affects adults as much as children, making Bessie Head compare "poverty to a glue" (Head, 1968: 119). Although most children cannot express how they live in poverty, their economic conditions jeopardize their security. The conditions of poverty in MARU, with Margaret's mother dying of poverty and malnutrition, stand as an indicator of a high level of deprivation. To this observation, the author sets the priorities on food provision. "Once people had enough to eat, other problems such as better housing, water supply, and good education for children could be addressed." (Bessie Head, 1968): 82). The scenario of a mother who met her end on malnourishment leaving a newborn baby exposed to danger indicates a critical state of neediness. When Rain Clouds Gather introduces a different platform with child unsafety that tells of Polina's son discovered dead for many days before the village

have to know. The doctor's postum diagnosed the boy death on lack of food confirming the same cause with Margaret's mother. "I would say the poor little fellow died of malnutrition, [...]The hospitals were full of children who died in the posture of the little boy in the hut, [...]Most of those who survived would be mentally deficient or crippled - whereas this little boy had died of mercy." (Bessie, 1969: 137). In addition to the high rate of death on malnutrition, the children also die of pneumonia due to the failure to accordingly provide convenient clothing against cold. Yet, the parents seem to be culturally blind with strong beliefs in witchcraft as they assume that the witchcraft should be responsible for deaths from malnutrition and other poverty-related illnesses. In the course of this deviation of parental responsibility to seek an external culprit to the deaths, many villagers unscrupulously attribute these frequent deaths to what they see as the magical power of witchcraft. The fear emanates from the malefic actions of the 'Baloi, (Head, 1977 47-48), who are the people with evil hearts, witchcraft, and malefic intention to do evil and kill by simple jealousy. The Collector of Treasures also emphasizes that witchcraft in Botswana was a force of destruction that people experienced on many levels. "Since in the olden times, the supreme power of sorcery or witchcraft was vested in the chiefs or rulers. (Head 1977:47). The distracting fear of magical power distracts parents from taking better care of their children, against which the doctor intends to place the truth and responsibility on the parents. Here, the author points to the lack of means to provide adequate clothing for children during the cold seasons. "Your children are dying of pneumonia; [...]The fault lies entirely with you [...] every household must buy warm clothes for the children so that they will not die of pneumonia again." (Bessie Head, 1969: 44). Many parents think that they are not responsible for the pneumonia deaths of the village children because they have failed to provide for them. (Head, 1969: 44). By finding no faults in having a child die with

hunger many adults disregard multiple opportunities that may help to ear living and soothe a child suffering. Far from seeking revolutionary solution to their children's risk, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas provides a touching example of poverty and lack of sufficient breast milk to feed a newborn with another enfant from the previous birth. Therefore, to prevent a double breastfeeding, the baby is likely to be buried with its placenta before its first cry (Marshall E. Thomas 2006: 175).

In a different stand of exposing children to the consequence of poor care, poverty encourages children to engage in vices such as prostitution without the consent of their parents. Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* introduces a sample of a young girl that the grandmother uses to earn money: "My grandmother won't mind as long as you pay me" (Head, 1969: 12). (Head 1969:12). The belief that "poverty is not a shameful sin" (Head, 1969: 111); or "poor people are blameless" (Aliche, 2013: 152) often sounds comforting on one hand but supportive to the continuity of poverty with idleness, laziness, and lack of ambition jeopardizes the lives of children. Bessie Head shows how persistent shamelessness over lacks has led many Africans to accommodate poverty with dignity. "Poverty has a home in Africa - like a quiet second skin. It is perhaps the only place in the world where it is worn with unconscious dignity." (Head *The Village People*:3) for, it entangled with cultural beliefs and taboos. For instance, millet's adaptability to semi-desert soils an effective initiative of food production plan to feed hungry the children. However, Bessie Head said many Bantu tribe members would refrain from consuming it not to assimilate with millet consuming Bushmen. As a result, children pay the price of tribal conflict associated with a socially structured scale based on a superiority complex. In observation of this situation, of Botswana, Daron states that [...] "the country had economic

elites whom themselves had much to gain from secure property rights." (Acemoglu, 2012: 425).

4. Education for cultural and economic child safety

Education is a powerful means of ensuring children's security, often seen as an inevitable process of learning and training with instruction provided in schools, colleges, and universities. Many people see education as one of the best ways to combat cultural naivety and overcome children's economic crises in many countries. Moreover, Roger Crofts said that. "Education has paved the way for new attitudes." Roger Crofts, 2011: 34). Indeed, Bessie Head demonstrates how those stricken by tribalism yearn for their children to be educated to repress or alleviate their suffering from poverty and dependence on specific cultural rules that threaten their children's lives. For example, Justice William A. Darity, under Race and Education, reaffirms the role of education in a discriminatory relationship. "[...] Because education is the primary means of social mobility, discrimination in this area forces less advantaged racial groups into lower status jobs and less income. [...]" (Darity 2008, Vol.7:18).

Darity's view of the stunting consequences of educational discrimination can also serve as a wake-up call about adequate input to ensure the need for mental, physical, and intellectual growth in children. The missionary woman wants her daughter to be educated and give up the usual low-paying jobs, raise the social status of the Masarwa, command respect, and bring about remarkable change. Pre-colonial Africans also educated their children, traditionally following their own cultural rules and subjects. The contents include cultural values, beliefs, and sensitivity before prohibitions and taboos, no less an education. For example, Things Fall Apart informs the process of electing the men of the Umuofia villagers' clan to elect a leader for the

community. Achebe clearly shows the pre-colonial existence of an artisanal political system in Igbo society (Achebe, 1958:12); and in Botswana, as revealed in *The Collector Of Treasures*. Her vision of educating Margaret, the Masarwa daughter, to take a leadership position in her community deserves much respect before leaving her in Botswana to face new experiences. "[...] would create a dedicated scholar and allow the child to take control of the only part of life that would be hers, her mind and soul. She would have to take them and apply them to the experiences gained in a hostile and cruel society." (Head, 1971: 16)

As money and other material possessions lead to power, people realized the profitability of giving their children an academic education. By giving Margaret a start in education, the missionary woman set an example for marginalized communities. MARU informs that their relationship was never that of a mother-child bond. However, Margaret sees her primarily as her educator, as she plays a role that gives her the right weapons to fight the hostile society. The purpose of schooling for the village children differs from that of the Masarwa's adopted daughter. Although it is an intention in both cases, the white missionary woman trains her daughter academically to stand up for herself, fight injustice, and become economically independent.

Weep Not Child reveals a similar promotion about the need for education, where Njoroge takes a stand for the good of his people. "Your learning is for all of us. Father says the same thing. He wants you to continue to bring light to our home. Education is the light of Kenya. That's what Jomo says." (WA THONG'O, 1964:38). Gaines introduces Professor Antony, the mixed-race teacher who recognizes the benefits of education but warns of its problematic implications. "It would take more than five months to wipe away the blanket of ignorance that has been

plastered over the brains for over three hundred years." (Gaines 1994: 66) intends to raise awareness of how to shape children's prior knowledge with the time it takes to achieve the goals of the new input. The more schooling children receive, the stronger the independent community they comprise, and the less naïve they are; as Bessie argues, the local populations were in colonial times. "[...] At the time of the interior exploration, the black leaders were all illiterate. They depended helplessly on verbal explanations of a document that asked for concession rights for gold and diamond exploration. The verbal explanation never matched the content of the documents" [...] (Head, 1990: 93-94)

While, according to Bessie Head, in Botswana, villages observed starving children and wondered how he could enlighten desperate people in such a situation. "How could we bring people and knowledge together?". (head 1969: 38). Bessie Head discusses the flourishing of education because the victimized people did not have access to emancipatory learning. Moreover, few received an education but were limited to low-income jobs and basic school levels. Therefore in pursuit of knowledge, When Rain Clouds Gathers reports how the "sons of slaves" misspell words, the supposedly superior ethnic party mocks their low standards. Bessie Head demonstrates the importance of standard qualifications to be eligible for leadership. For this reason, Dinorego appears as an older man in When Rain Clouds Gathers who laments the illiteracy of the village and encourages progress through education for the growing youth. Dinorego says, "We too can progress, even if we are uneducated men. The mind of a simple man works like this: he is a listener and a believer. Most of the time, he is a believer. The uneducated man has been condemned for many years by authority." (Head Bessie, 1969: 149). The philosophical concept of Dinorego seems to be unpopular among the Bushmen, pejoratively called 'sons of the slaves' who became convinced

that it was too late to attend any academic school but strongly encouraged their children to get an education. As a result, Margaret Cadmore's position as a child with excellent grades in a school represents an achievement worthy of respect for the Masarwa people. Her success can be seen in her financial preparation to not die of malnutrition like her biological mother, whom villagers treated dishonorably even after her death. Although many people succeeded economically through trade and manual labor, education proved an important potential source for social, socioeconomic, political, and religious integration.

Conclusion

The responsibility for ensuring a child's education is significant. With regard to the influence of culture on child safety, this article has shown that child safety also depends on cultural understanding of some key concepts of beliefs and perception of values. Cultural heritage is sacred, preserved, and passed on to generations. However, its sanctity often contains huge imperfections that followers may not notice as flawed and dangerous to their children. Bessie Head has demonstrated similar neglect of child safety based on intolerance of Bushmen cultural differences, the challenge of inter-tribal cooperation for greater economic development, and Bushmen cultural conservatism. This paper provides references to demonstrate how cultural taboos can lead people to poorer economic conditions caused by limited resolutions to malnutrition and diseases, taking away the lives and dignity of children. When Rain Clouds Gather and MARU highlight the malnutrition and high mortality rate among children due to poverty, disease, lack of education, and abuse by parents and classmates. In order to progress in socio-cultural, economic, and health security of children, quality education has proven to be a practical solution to these problems to restore the security of children because,

education will not eradicate the cultural foundations of tribes but can better address the rights of children.

Bibliography

Acemoglu. (2012). *Why Nations Fail: the origins of power, prosperity, and poverty*. Crown Publishing Group. The United States, a division of Random House, Inc. New York: www.crownpublishing.com <http://citizenshiprightsafrika.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Botswana-Childrens-Act-2009.pdf>

Achebe. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*, New York. Anchor Books. Random House. P. 12

Adiche. (2013). *HAMERICANA* New York, United States by Random House, Inc., New York, P. 152: www.aaknopf.com www.randomhouse.ca.

Baynes. (2017). “*We Are Not Equals: Socio-Cognitive Dimensions of Lion/Human Relationships, Animal Studies*” *Journal*, 6(1), 104-128.: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol6/iss1/7> P.1

Crofts. (2011). *Healing The Land* (The story of land reclamation and soil conservation in Iceland) Soil Conservation Service of Iceland Restructured, substantially revised and extended from an original Icelandic text *Sáðmenn sandanna: Saga landgræðslu á Íslandi* (1907-2007) P.34

Darity. (2008). *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. 2nd edition Vol.7*-MacMillan USA

RABIN, YITZHAK– Sociology Micro. P. 18

Gaines. (1994). *A Lesson Before Dying* Vintage Contemporary, Vintage Books, New York. P. 66

Head. (1974). *A Question of Power* Davis-Poynter Ltd, African Writers Series,

Head. (1971). *MARU* Victor Gollancz, African Writers Series

Head, (1968), *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Heinemann Educational Publisher, Halley Court, Jordan Hill

Head, 1990 *A Woman Alone* Harcourt Heinemann,

Head Bessie, (1977) *The Collector of Treasures*, London Heinemann African Writers Series,

Head Bessie,(1977) *The Collector of Treasures*, London Heinemann African Writers Series, 47-48

Marshall. (2006). *THE OLD WAY :A Story of the First People* PICADOR Sarah Crichton Books FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX New York

Thomas, Elizabeth Marshall (1989) *The harmless people* SECOND VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, SEPTEMBER Library United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, of Congress 2nd Vintage Books ed. p. cm. eISBN: 978-0-30777295-4 1. San (African people) I. Title. DT764.B8T4 1989 968.83'004961—dc20 89-40157

Steyn. (1985). Hendrik Pieter, *The Original People: BUSHMEN OF THE KALAHARI* Hove, East Sussex; Wayland

Taolo. (2018). *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science* JESBS, 24(3): 1-12,; Article no. JESBS.36995(from Child Acts of 2009). P.5

<http://citizenshiprightsafrika.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Botswana-Childrens-Act-2009.pdf>

WA THONG'O. (1964). *Weep Not Child* Heinemann Educational Publishers, Halley Court, Jordan Hill Oxford,

Webography

Dornan S. S. (2017)*The Tati Bushmen (Masarwas) and Their Language*.P. 40_83

<https://pdfslide.net/documents/the-tati-bushmen-masarwas-and-their-language.html>. P. 51,

Head. *The Village People*, Compiled by JO Alkaster:
<https://www.outeniqua.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/TEXT-Village-People-Bessie-Head.pdf>