SOFTWARE & TECH

Looking For A Rain God By Bessie Head

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Introduction: A Harvest of Desperation and Belief

In the vast and often harsh landscape of African literature, few stories capture the raw intersection of human desperation, cultural tradition, and the unforgiving forces of nature as powerfully as Bessie Head's short story, **"Looking For A Rain God."** This deceptively simple narrative, set in a drought-stricken Botswana village, transcends its specific setting to become a universal meditation on faith, survival, and the tragic consequences when hope curdles into a desperate act. Bessie Head, a writer whose own life was marked by displacement and searching, crafts a tale that is both a poignant cultural critique and a deeply human drama. The story of the Mokgobja family, their seven-year wait for rain, and the terrible act that unfolds under a merciless sun lingers long after the final sentence. In this article, we will explore the layers of meaning within *Looking For A Rain God* , examining its historical context, its powerful symbolism, its complex characters, and its enduring relevance for readers today. By the end, we hope to illuminate why this short story remains a cornerstone of African literary studies and a haunting reflection on the extremes of human faith.

Bessie Head: A Life of Searching

To fully appreciate the depth of "Looking For A Rain God," it is essential to understand the author who brought it to life. Bessie Amelia Emery was born in South Africa in 1937, the child of a white mother and a black father — a union illegal under the apartheid regime. Declared mentally ill, her mother was institutionalized, and Head was raised in foster care and later in a mission school. This traumatic early life instilled in her a profound sense of rootlessness and a lifelong search for belonging. She eventually fled South Africa on an exit permit, never to return, and settled as a refugee in Botswana in 1964. There, in the village of Serowe, she found a new home and a rich source of material for her writing.

Botswana, a landlocked country with an arid climate, became Head's adopted muse. Her works are deeply rooted in the landscapes, cultures, and social structures of the people she lived amongst. "Looking For A Rain God" is not a fantastical tale but a story firmly grounded in the harsh realities of subsistence farming in a drought-prone region. Head's own experiences of poverty, exile, and a yearning for acceptance infuse her writing with a profound empathy for those who struggle against forces beyond their control. Her perspective as both an insider (through her lived experience) and an outsider (as a refugee) gives her a uniquely clear-eyed view of the societies she portrays. This dual vision allows her to critique traditions without dismissing them, to show both the beauty and the potential darkness within deeply held beliefs. The search for a rain god, in this context, is not just a literal act but a metaphor for Head’s own lifelong search for stability, identity, and a spiritual home.

Plot of "Looking For A Rain God": A Descent into Desperation

The story begins by painting a picture of relentless, soul-crushing drought. For seven long years, no rain has

fallen. The Mokgobja family — a husband, wife, two daughters, and a young boy — have watched their cattle die, their crops shrivel, and their hope slowly evaporate under the scorching sun. The description of the landscape is vivid: cracks in the earth, a sky of constant brass, a world bleached of color and life. This environmental catastrophe becomes a crushing psychological weight.

In their extremity, the family turns away from the Christian God their colonizers had introduced and reaches back to older, more primal beliefs. They recall the rain god, a deity who could be summoned through ritual, through sacrifice. The memory is not a living tradition but a faint echo, a last resort born of utter desperation. Led by the father, the family decides to perform a ritual. But what begins as a prayer for rain soon spirals into something horrific. In a final, desperate act to appease the unseen deity, the family collectively decides to sacrifice their two young daughters. The murder is described not with gore, but with a chilling, matter-of-fact horror. They believe that only a life, a pure and innocent life, can break the drought's curse. They kill the girls and bury them in the field.

The story does not end with the rain arriving; in fact, the rain never comes. Instead, the father, overwhelmed by guilt and madness, begins to scrape at the earth, trying to feed the imaginary growing crops. The local authorities eventually discover the bodies, and the family is arrested. The story closes with a simple, devastating statement: the family is tried and sentenced to prison. The profound tragedy is not only the loss of two lives but the complete failure of their desperate, faith-driven act. The rain god did not answer. The belief system that they clung to in the final hour offered no salvation. What remains is the silence of an indifferent sky and the ruins of a once-loving family.

Thematic Analysis: Faith, Tradition, and the Fragility of the Human Psyche

The Brutal Logic of Desperation

One of the story's most powerful achievements is how it makes the family's descent into murder tragically understandable, if not justifiable. Head does not present them as monsters but as ordinary people pushed beyond the limits of human endurance. The seven-year drought is a slow, grinding torture. Watching one's children starve is a fate worse than death. The ritual sacrifice, in this context, becomes a calculated act of hope — a belief that the death of two might save the family. It is a horrifying example of what Freud and others have called the "return of the repressed," where an older, pre-colonial mode of thinking re-emerges in a moment of crisis. The rational mind gives way to a logic of desperation: if the Christian God has failed, then perhaps the old gods demand a harsher price. This theme resonates deeply because it forces readers to ask themselves: what would I do in such a situation? It is a profoundly uncomfortable question, and Head provides no easy answers.

Tradition vs. Modernity

"Looking For A Rain God" also serves as a nuanced exploration of the tension between traditional African belief systems and the imported Christian faith. The family has both belief systems available to them. The Christian God has been silent. The rain god is a memory, a part of their cultural heritage. The tragedy arises not from the rain god tradition itself but from the incomplete, desperate adaptation of it. The proper rituals, the checks and balances that might have prevented such an act, have been forgotten over generations of Christian influence. What remains is the core idea of appeasement through sacrifice, stripped of its customary context. Bessie Head critiques the loss of indigenous knowledge while also condemning the blind, fanatical adherence that emerges from broken traditions. The story suggests that when one culture is violently overlaid by another, the resulting hybrid can be unstable and dangerous. The family is caught between two worlds, belonging fully to neither, and this spiritual dislocation is as much a cause of the tragedy as the drought itself.

Nature and Human Helplessness

The natural environment in this story is not just a backdrop but an active, antagonistic character. The

relentlessness of the heat, the dryness, the cracked earth—these are described in a way that mimics the family's own internal desiccation. Their emotions dry up as the land dries up. Love turns to fear, and fear turns to a terrible resolve. Head masterfully uses the landscape to mirror the human psyche. The rain god, whether literal or metaphorical, represents the human need to find agency in the face of overwhelming natural forces. When science and reason fail, when prayers to a familiar god go unanswered, humans will invent or resurrect any belief that offers a sense of control. The ultimate horror of the story is not the murder itself but the silence that follows. The universe remains indifferent. The rain god does not exist, or does not care. This cosmological emptiness is perhaps the most frightening theme of all. Humanity is alone in a harsh world, and sometimes, in our fear, we turn on the most vulnerable among us.

Characters as Symbols

- The Father (Mokgobja): He is the patriarch, the decision-maker. His descent from a loving father to a murderer is the central arc of the story. He represents the tragic burden of leadership in a time of crisis. When he fails to protect his family, he turns to the only authority he has left: the imagined authority of the rain god. His guilt is immediate and overwhelming, a testimony to the fact that he was not a monster but a man broken by circumstances.
- The Mother: Her role is more peripheral but equally tragic. She participates in the murder, likely out of a sense of duty and despair. Her silence in the story speaks volumes about the position of women in this patriarchal, traditional society. She is at once a victim of the drought and a collaborator in the act. Her internal torment is suggested but not explored, leaving the reader to imagine the depth of her grief and guilt.
- The Daughters (Neo and Bosele): The victims are almost silent, their innocence a stark contrast to the horror around them. They are symbolic sacrifices to a god who does not exist. Their deaths are the ultimate indictment of the family's actions. They represent the purest collateral damage of human folly and desperation.
- The Rain God: A non-corporeal character, yet central to the narrative. The rain god is a symbol of the human need to find a supernatural explanation for natural suffering. The fact that it never appears, that the drought continues, suggests that belief itself can be a dangerous illusion when it is not grounded in a larger, stable cultural system.

Literary Devices and Style

Bessie Head's prose in "Looking For A Rain God" is deceptively simple. She uses a sparse, almost journalistic style that makes the horror of the events feel all the more real. There is no melodrama, no ornate language. The sentences are short, the descriptions stark. This restraint is her greatest skill. By not sensationalizing the murder, she forces the reader to sit with the moral complexity of the act.

One key technique is **foreshadowing**. The early descriptions of the drought, the dying cattle, and the starving children all build an atmosphere of inevitability. The reader senses that something terrible must happen, yet the final act still shocks. Another device is **symbolism**. The rain itself is the ultimate symbol — of life, of hope, of divine favor. Its absence symbolizes spiritual desolation. The act of digging, both for the burial and later by the maddened father, symbolizes a futile search for meaning in a barren world.

Head also employs a form of **psychological realism**. She does not explicitly describe the family's thoughts in great detail, but their actions speak to a state of dissociative shock. The clinical, almost detached way in which the murder is carried out reflects a mind that has snapped under pressure. This narrative distance mirrors the psychological distance the family must have felt from their own humanity in order to commit such an act. The story is a masterclass in showing, not telling.

Historical and Social Context

Written during the 1970s, a period of widespread drought in southern Africa, "Looking For A Rain God" is deeply rooted in the real struggles of rural communities in Botswana. The country had gained independence from Britain in 1966, and was grappling with nation-building, modernization, and the preservation of cultural identity. Bessie Head, as a refugee, was particularly attuned to these issues. The story can be read as a

cautionary tale about the dangers of cultural erasure. When traditional knowledge systems are suppressed or forgotten, people are left with fragments that can be misused. The rain god ritual, in its original form, may have involved symbolic offerings, not human sacrifice. The family's act is a corrupted version, a desperate improvisation born of a broken cultural memory.

Furthermore, the story comments on the psychological impact of poverty and climate vulnerability. Even today, subsistence farmers in drought-prone regions face similar dilemmas. Climate change has only intensified these pressures, making "Looking For A Rain God" a shockingly relevant text for our time. The story forces us to consider the ethical and psychological toll of environmental disaster. It is not just a tale from the past, but a mirror held up to our own increasingly unstable world.

Critical Reception and Enduring Legacy

Since its publication in the collection "The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales" (1977), "Looking For A Rain God" has become one of the most anthologized short stories in African literature. Critics have praised it for its unflinching gaze into the human soul. The story is frequently taught in postcolonial literature courses and is recognized as a prime example of the "village tale" genre that Bessie Head perfected. Unlike many Western narratives that offer easy resolutions or moral clarity, Head's story refuses to judge. It presents the tragedy with a stoic acceptance that is both beautiful and terrifying.

The story's legacy also lies in its nuanced portrayal of African traditions. At a time when African literature was often expected to be either didactic or celebratory, Head offered a

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