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Abstract

Imagine a woman, placed where she has no sense of her real identity – perhaps orphaned at birth without surviving relatives, or removed from her parents. Place such a woman where the individual is defined, first by her race – 'Bantu' – European – Indian – then, remove from her a sense of racial belonging: i.e. make her the child of one White and one African parent. Then imagine this woman writing creatively, always fearful of the knowledge that the White mother she had never known had died in a mental asylum.

Bessie Head: A Tribute

Imagine a woman, placed where she has no sense of her real identity — perhaps orphaned at birth without surviving relatives, or removed from her parents. Place such a woman where the individual is defined, first by her race — ‘Bantu’ — European — Indian — then, remove from her a sense of racial belonging: i.e. make her the child of one White and one African parent. Then imagine this woman writing creatively, always fearful of the knowledge that the White mother she had never known had died in a mental asylum.

One such woman was Bessie Head, who died in April 1986 in Serowe, a village in Botswana. Her name will be unfamiliar to women who have heard of her White South African counterparts — Olive Schreiner, Sarah Gertrude Millin, Pauline Smith, Nadine Gordimer. For while White South African writing is constantly placed before the British reading public, the work of this writer seems to pose a problem for librarians, booksellers, and teachers of literature. York University, which boasts a Centre for *Southern* African Studies and a Department of Woman’s Studies, has in its library a single copy of *A Question of Power* flanked by Gordimer and Lessing’s entire repertoire. Yet Bessie Head wrote in English: three novels, a collection of short stories, and a social history of the Bamangwato people.

Bessie Head was born in South Africa in 1937. (Her surname is the English translation of an African word meaning ‘head’.) Like many Black writers, she served her apprenticeship writing for the magazine *Drum* although she was a qualified teacher. With the failure of her marriage she went into self-imposed exile with her son, choosing the semi-desert country, Botswana, neighbouring South Africa.

Had she remained in South Africa, she would have had to write within the confines of its censorship and banning laws. Yet having left that country, her writing remains free of political bias. In *A Question of Power* she makes a brief reference to South Africa:

It was like living with permanent nervous tension because you did not know why White people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you.... There wasn't any kind of social evolution beyond this, there wasn't any lift to the heart, just this vehement, vicious struggle between two sorts of people with different looks.

She then purposely turned her back on the highly urbanized society she had left, to focus on the poverty of the common people and their struggle with the land.

Coming unprepared to Bessie Head's fiction, the western reader may experience uncertainty and dissatisfaction with her female characters and the resolution of her themes. However, if her work is approached through the non-fictional book: *Serowe Village of the Rain Wind*, the reader will proceed to the fiction with an immense respect for this writer. For in this work Bessie Head has done what few writers of fiction have even desired to do. Through interviews, translations and research, she has recorded the unwritten social history of the Bamangwato people from the oral testimony of old women and men. There is both a freshness and simplicity in each short narrative that captures the distinct voice of each narrator. In this book she traces the themes of migration, self-help and traditional crafts, and also the social and educational reforms implemented by Khama the Great. In *For Serowe a Village in Africa* she says: 'Historians do not write about people and how strange and beautiful they are — just living.' She has left us with a woman's perspective of history.

Serowe Village of the Rain Wind is witness to South Africa's loss — for much of South Africa's oral history which needed to be recorded from the memories of the old, was out of her reach when she went into exile.

Of Bessie Head's fiction there are many views currently in vogue. Her writing is said to fit into the category of 'Exile'; she is dismissed for having rejected the political aims of other writers from Africa; she is further criticized for being out of touch with South African politics and Pan-Africanism; her work is described as autobiographical; and her women characters are said to be 'struggling to free themselves from male domination'.

But this writer in exile was unique. She refused to live the isolated life of the modern artist labouring instead with ordinary women and men on an experimental farm. Instead of writing as the isolated exile with a longing for home, her subjects have invariably been the Batswana, her scene, a Botswana village. Her political perspective seems more visionary than that of the realists — she abhorred the white racism that contributed so much to her own suffering; but she also had a fear of 'exclusive brotherhoods for Black people only'.

Throughout her fiction Bessie Head deals with the situation of women in traditional African society. She takes for her subjects ritual murder, witchcraft, the clash between Christianity and Setswana custom, and in *The Collector of Treasures* gives an analysis of men in traditional, colonial and post-independent Africa as it affects women and the family. Bessie Head recognized the impermanence of women's creativity and labour: 'Women's hands build and smooth mud huts and porches. Then the fierce November, December thunderstorms sweep away all the beautiful patterns. After some time these same patient hands, hard and rough, will build up these mud necessities again' (*For Serowe a Village in Africa*).

Her prose is at times daringly explicit, moving through the philosophic to the poetic: '...it was a harsh and terrible country to live in. The great stretches of arid land completely stunned the mind, and every little green shoot that you put down into the barren earth just stood there, single, frail, shuddering...' (*Where Rain Clouds Gather*). Her themes consistently those of exile, sexuality, good, evil, tradition and change. Like D.H. Lawrence, she focussed on the common people, not the rich, the powerful, or the heroic. Like Thomas Hardy, she perceived Nature as evil, and her prose often captures the diminution of Man by Nature: '...and people mentally fled before this desert ocean. This fleeing away from the overwhelming expressed itself in all sorts of ways, particularly in the narrow, cramped huts into which people crept at the end of each day, and the two bags of corn which were painstakingly reaped off a small plot' (*Where Rain Clouds Gather*).

Bessie Head is South Africa's first Black woman writer. Although she wished especially not to be perceived in terms of colour or sex, these two factors, together with her South Africanness, were elements she had to contend with and which shaped her life. That she emerged from all her experiences to write is testimony to her creative spirit.

WORKS BY BESSIE HEAD (1937-1986)

Where Rain Clouds Gather (1968). Set in a village community, it explores the conflict between tradition and change when an aspect of tradition becomes the embodiment of evil.

Maru (1971). A novel about two men, neither of whom is evil, who love the same woman. It illustrates the powerlessness of women in traditional society.

A Question of Power (1974). Presents the clearest opposition between good and evil, the drama for control of the female character taking place in her mind.

The Collector of Treasures (1977). A collection of short stories about women's experiences.

Serowe Village of the Rain Wind (1981). A social history of the Bamangwato people.

JOYCE JOHNSON

Structures of Meaning in the Novels of Bessie Head

Recent discussions of Bessie Head's work have centred on *A Question of Power* and the general tendency has been to view this novel in terms of its reference to Head's experiences as a coloured South African and an exile in Botswana.¹ While Head's novels do reveal a deep concern with the social realities of Southern Africa, they also show a studied attempt to relate the local experiences of the characters depicted to mankind's social evolution. In linking these experimental and existential concerns, Head exploits the analogies between the conflict of forces within individuals and within a community and between the behaviour of human agencies and the operation of cosmic forces. Through the use of this analogical method she extends the reference of her novels and, at the same time, mirrors the thought-patterns of the society in which the novels are set. Moreover, she employs the conventions of traditional African narrative and praise poetry in which impressions of characters and events are frequently conveyed by indirect allusion rather than by explicit narration or description.²

The paradigm of the conflict between characters in Head's novels is the behaviour of the natural elements in the semi-desert area of Botswana where, in the drought months, the sun is an adversary antagonistic to life and survival and the people often long for 'soft steady rain'³ without lightning or thunder. Bright cloudless skies hold no promise and dark lowering clouds foster hope which is often disappointed. The expectation of the land and the longing of the people are identical and the one may be spoken of in terms of the other. In Head's novels, sun and rain and solar