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Abstract
In A Bewitched Crossroad, Bessie Head combines the concerns of the historian with those of the novelist and fits a comprehensive account of social and political events in Southern Africa, in the nineteenth century into an artistically devised narrative. Despite her concern with social issues and with the communal destiny, Head displays the novelist's interest both as a historical document and as a literary experiment.
A Novelist at the Crossroad: Bessie Head's *A Bewitched Crossroad*

In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Bessie Head combines the concerns of the historian with those of the novelist and fits a comprehensive account of social and political events in Southern Africa, in the nineteenth century into an artistically devised narrative. Despite her concern with social issues and with the communal destiny, Head displays the novelist's interest both as a historical document and as a literary experiment.

The idea of the crossroad as a meeting-place of divergent pathways is significant in the very structure of the work which looks both towards fiction and history and towards African and Western literary traditions. The antecedents of the form which Head utilizes in *A Bewitched Crossroad* include both the epic and romance of Western literary tradition and the heroic tales of African oral tradition. A major component of her narrative is, however, documented history. In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head has also brought together themes from her three novels, and, in particular, those themes which relate to the conflict between the forces of good and evil in human history and between the agents of local tradition and Western scientific and technological culture in colonial and ex-colonial African societies. When one remembers that *Serowe* (1981), the work which preceded *A Bewitched Crossroad*, is a documentary in which Head chose as her main theme 'social reform and educational progress'¹ in a Botswana village, one recognizes her last book as an attempt to integrate elements from different literary genres and to bring interests pulling her, as a writer, in different directions to a meeting point.

In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head covers the period 1800-1896, a period of major disruption in Southern Africa. She lifts the lid of the 'boiling cauldron'² of history to reveal societies in the process of transformation. Conflicts generated by clashes of material interests and codes of conduct, as well as by chance occurrences, are vividly recalled. The periods of chaos described are punctuated by periods of relative stability, a notable example being that of Khama III's rule over the Bamangwato from 1875 to 1923. Head gives a rapid outline of events among the
Bamangwato and surrounding societies up to the point at which Khama assumes leadership and focuses on the period 1875-1896. She takes the reader only as far as is necessary to suggest the emergence of a nation under Khama’s guidance and to demonstrate Khama’s achievement of the triumph of intellect over passion. Where many African writers have celebrated Shaka, Head projects Khama III, a leader who inclined toward non-violence. In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head thus returns to thematic concerns introduced in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and further explored in *A Question of Power*—what path should the individual caught in a cycle of violence, or the society arrived at a turning-point in history, take.

Like the heroes and heroines of Head’s novels, Khama III is depicted as an individual relying on personal moral choice rather than on custom to guide him. A connection with Makhaya, the hero of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, is indicated by the title *A Bewitched Crossroad*, for, in her first novel, Head repeatedly used the image of the person arrived at a crossroad and wondering which direction to take to represent Makhaya’s situation. Like Makhaya, Khama rejects a narrow ‘tribal’ outlook in order to discover a way of life more relevant to the changed environment in which contact with the Europeans has placed him. Where Makhaya’s concern was largely for himself as an individual, Khama’s involves the fate of a nation.

Another theme to which the events described in *A Bewitched Crossroad* relate is that of political ambition. This theme is central to *Maru*. Clashes between Khama III and his brother Khamane which are recorded in *A Bewitched Crossroad* recall incidents in *Maru* where Head highlights quarrels about custom, precedence and the possession of a desired object. Like Maru, the hero of Head’s second novel, Khama, at one point, renounces political ambition and lives as a private citizen. Later, when he assumes leadership of his people, Head shows him combining astute judgement with strong moral principles and displaying a subtlety in his dealings with others, similar to Maru’s. Like Maru, Khama aims ‘to open up new worlds’, this being, as the narrator in *A Bewitched Crossroad* implies, ‘the greatest, the highest duty of mankind’ (pp. 132-133).

In highlighting the themes of wandering and migration in *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head also focuses on the problems which the individual opting out of one community faces in the process of adjusting to another. This was a major preoccupation in *A Question of Power* where Elizabeth, the heroine, is caught between aggressive personalities dominating her existence and forces pulling her in opposite directions. The analogy between the individual in a state of mental confusion and the society at the crossroads of history and uncertain what road to take is still
apparent in *A Bewitched Crossroad*, but the mood in this work is different. With the emphasis on the communal rather than the individual fate, events are viewed more from the perspective of myth where they appear cyclical and inevitable, rather than from that of the novel, which, despite the variety of its forms, projects the emotional experience and the immediate personal and social consequences of the actions of particular individuals.

Botswana, formerly British Bechuanaland, may be seen as a crossroad both geographically and historically. Encircled as it is by South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, it is a junction between territories which have followed divergent models of development. The Botswana model, which Head perceives as a continuation of that introduced by Khama III among the Bamangwato, also diverges from these. British Bechuanaland resisted a total take-over by European political and economic interests, despite the efforts of Englishmen like Cecil Rhodes who saw it as a useful corridor to Central Africa.

For the adventurers who failed to make the territory serve their purposes as a useful junction between two highly exploitable areas - the gold and diamond bearing fields of South Africa and the rich pasture-lands of then Mashonaland, which was regarded by many as an African eldorado, British Bechuanaland was indeed 'bewitched' or mysteriously protected. Largely semi-desert, with a cattle-breeding industry which was uneconomic in the commercial environment created by the Europeans, and bordering on countries with potential for thriving industries, it seemed 'bewitched' in the opposite sense also, for in comparison with its more richly endowed neighbours it was 'cursed'. This recognition of the paradoxical elements in the situation and the history of the territory is brought out in the final paragraph of the narrative: "The land eluded the colonial era. The forces of the scramble for Africa passed through it like a huge and destructive storm but a storm that passed on to other lands. It remained the black man's country. It was a bewitched crossroad. Each day the sun rose on a hallowed land" (p. 196). The poverty of the land ensured its territorial integrity.

Two Southern African societies are brought to the foreground of the narrative. These represent two different types of social organization, and their leaders two opposite ways of exercising power. At one pole are the Ndebele, warlike and violent, and, at the other, are the Bamangwato, who, under the leadership of Khama III, are learning to modify aggressive forms of behaviour and to channel their energies into the creation of a stable polity. The cruelties of the Ndebele leader Mzilikazi visited upon those who lay in his path on his push northwards after his break with Shaka have been highlighted in the popular tradition and the Ndebele are thus 'widely feared, hated and despised by all sur-
rounding nations’ (p. 156). To many Africans, the advent of the Europeans is welcome, for the recent record of the Ndebele helps to mask the designs of the newcomers who seem to stand between oppressed African communities and ‘the might and terror of Ndebele power’ (p. 183). Many of those who flee from the control of the Ndebele turn to Khama III and are permitted to join his community. Khama’s conduct is contrasted both with that of Mzilikazi and later with that of his son Lobengula who is Khama’s more direct contemporary.

The focus from Chapter 4 of *A Bewitched Crossroad* onwards is on the Bamangwato coming together as a nation, ‘a rising star in the heavens by virtue of the leadership of their famous chief Khama’ (p. 62). In *Serowe* which records the programme of social and educational reform initiated by Khama and his son Tshekedi, Head emphasized the veneration in which both chiefs were held in their time and after. There must have been, however, dissentient voices. Head’s introduction of the character Maruapula, in *A Bewitched Crossroad*, who suggests that some of Khama’s reforms run counter to the secret desires of his people, indicates her recognition of undercurrents beneath an outwardly placid rule. Head shows Khama starting the Bamangwato on a new path, using selectively the ideas brought by the missionaries, and techniques for communication and social organization acquired from the Europeans to change institutions which, in his view, had been especially oppressive for the ordinary people or had contributed to some of the calamities of the past.

As in her novels, Head is not engaged in ideological debate or defending a particular political system or course of action. She searches for meaningful patterns within the rapid and often uncontrollable currents of recent history and their links with patterns in the past. The wider application of her theme is indicated on the very first page of the story when the narrator remarks of the Sebina clan, a splinter branch of the Baralong people who are setting out on a protracted period of wandering and migration which ends with their incorporation into Khama’s community: ‘As they turned their gaze toward those mysterious dreaming mountains and flat open plains, they did not know then that the spirit of Ulysses moved them as a people’ (p. 9).

The reflections and observations of Sebina, the leader of the Sebina clan, reinforce narrative continuity, which Head establishes mainly by following the movements of the clan from one location to another. Sebina’s life spans almost all of the nineteenth century. Head takes up the history of the clan in the year 1800, the year before Europeans first made contact with Tswana people, and completes her account of its fortunes in 1896, the year which marked the defeat of Cecil Rhodes’ attempt to transfer the Bechuanaland Protectorate to the control of the
British South Africa Company. Sebina's people live, at one point, among the Bakalanga, a group which had been absorbed by the Shona. They survive the period of unrest generated by the encroachment of the Europeans further onto the interior of Southern Africa and the conflicts brought about by the displacement of many ethnic groups. Following the advent of the Ndebele in Mashonaland, Sebina and his people move on to live in Khama's capital, Shoshong, 'the wonderland of the Southern Hemisphere' (p. 61). Occupying his own ward in Khama's capital, Sebina becomes a witness both to 'the close of an era' (p. 140) and the birth of a new age.

Sebina witnesses many changes in the material life of the Bamangwato people. Ox-drawn ploughs replace the hoe and iron cooking pots supersede clay ones. The old order of sudden attacks and sudden migration seems to be giving way to an era of diplomacy. Sebina who accepts change as natural and inevitable appreciates the way in which the community is being transformed. He is especially drawn to the new 'book' learning. Terse written communication can replace lengthy deliberation, on occasion, and the opportunity to contemplate the written word gives the intellect greater play. Sebina's own memory is, by the end of the century, beginning to prove unreliable and he recognises the advantages of having written records to reinforce memory.

Having survived almost an entire century of changes, Sebina accepts the new influences as ones which allow what is best in the culture to flower and new 'truths' to emerge for scrutiny. He is thus able to look on at the death of the era which he represents, as calmly as he contemplates his own physical passing. He dies 'into the sunset' (p. 195) confident that his grandson Mazebe, who has acquired some of the new knowledge, will see the sunrise. Sebina's constant marvelling at the power of mind which Khama displays calls attention to the differences between a past overshadowed by 'dark' mysteries of religion and custom and an age in which attempts are being made to create a more even balance between the material and spiritual aspects of existence. Botswana is clearly being treated as a paradigm. Throughout the narrative, it is the power of Mind and the willingness to explore new ideas rather than an actual doctrine or teaching which Head emphasizes. Christianity as a new influence among the Bamangwato provides, Head suggests, a different light by which to examine custom: it is not necessarily something with which to replace custom.

Where Sebina functions as a witness to history, Khama III is a maker of history. His far-reaching social reforms affect even the position of women. Head shows him moved by compassion, but never the victim of sentimentality. While Khama acts on premises opposed to Lobengula's, he is equally uncompromising about maintaining control over his
territory, dispensing his own justice and asserting his sovereignty. He does not reject power, but he seeks to exercise it effectively.

In Khama III and Lobengula, Head is obviously comparing two concepts of leadership, as he did in *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, in the opposition of Maru and Moleka and Sello and Dan, respectively. Ironically, Khama’s way of conducting affairs is mocked at by the British interests, whose encroachment on his territory he attempts to check, even as they declare their contempt for Lobengula and his aggressive policies. For both African leaders, neither arms nor diplomacy prove fully effective against the greed, cunning and treachery of the British, on the one hand, and the greed, self-assertiveness and fury of the Boers, on the other. Lobengula’s kingdom is eventually dismembered. Khama’s territory is saved from the land-grabbing gang instigated by Cecil Rhodes, only by chance, and is considered fortunate to be made a protectorate under the British Crown.

In *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Head’s intentions are, clearly, mixed. The work leans toward the documentary rather than the fictional, but the well-researched and detailed record of events which Head presents is clearly meant to further elucidate themes which she introduced in her earlier works. The development of the Bamangwato under Khama III, which is highlighted in her rehearsal of events, in *A Bewitched Crossroad*, fits into a larger design and is important, for Head, in that it represents a period of enlightenment - a period when a society was open to new ideas and was becoming aware of its identity as a nation. The very name of the people whom she writes about suits her theme, for the word *mongwato*, as she indicates in the narrative (p. 65), means ’nation’. The accidental details of the history of Southern Africa in the nineteenth century are presented in such a way as to lead the reader to reflect on the process of social evolution within a nation, and as it affects relationships between members of different national and racial backgrounds. This concern with the process of social evolution is central to all of Head’s works.

*A Bewitched Crossroad* may thus be seen as the final in a series of explorations of Head’s major concerns. Moving beyond the problems of the displaced individual in a hostile environment, Head goes on to contemplate the struggle between opposed principles, using whole societies, rather than single individuals, as her chief protagonists. The preoccupation here is the same as in the novels - the problem of achieving a balance between intellect and passion and between material and spiritual well-being. *A Bewitched Crossroad* may also be seen as the final in a series of experiments with mixing literary genres. *A Question of Power* and *Maru* are two successful experiments with literary form. *A Bewitched Crossroad* is best appreciated as an attempt to combine elements
from different genres and different literary traditions and to reflect in a text the nature of the synthesis taking place in the writer's mind.

NOTES

4. See, for example, When Rain Clouds Gather (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp. 20 and 30.