

Final
Text

Bessie Head

(6 July 1937 - 17 April 1986)

Greta D. Little

University of South Carolina

BOOKS

When Rain Clouds Gather (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968; London: Victor Gollancz, 1968; London: Heinemann, [New Windmill Series], 1981) 1972);
9 (Educational Books)

Maru (London: Victor Gollancz, 1971; New York: McCall Publishing, 1971; London: ~~Heinemann~~,
Nairobi: Heinemann, [African Writers Series, 101], 1972);
9 (Educational Books)

A Question of Power (New York: Pantheon, 1973; London: Davis-Poynted, 1974; London:
Nairobi, ~~Heinemann~~: Heinemann, [African Writers Series, 149], 1974);
9 (Educational Books)

The Collector of Treasures (London: ~~Nairobi, Heinemann~~: Heinemann [African Writers Series, 180],
1977; Capetown: David Philip, 1979);
#12 (Educational Books) 2

Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind (London: ~~Heinemann, Nairobi~~: Heinemann [African Writers
Series, 220], 1981);
1 (Educational Books)

A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga (Craighall) Ad, Donker, 1984; New York: Paragon
House, 1986);
1 (South Africa:)

A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings, selected and edited by Craig MacKenzie (London:
~~Heinemann, Nairobi~~: Heinemann, [African Writers Series, 278], 1990);
9 (Educational Books)

South Africa:

Tales of Tenderness and Power (Craighall) Ad. Donker, 1989; London; ~~Harvard~~, Nairobi: Heinemann, [African Writers Series ~~32~~], 1990

(Educational Books)

PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS

"Witchcraft," Ms Magazine 4 (November 1975): 72-73;

"Some Notes on Novel Writing," New Classic, 5 (November 1979): 30-32;

"Social and Political Pressures that Shape Literature in Southern Africa," World Literature Written in English, 18 (November, 1979): 20-26.

OTHER

"A Search for Historical Continuity and Roots," in Momentum: On Recent South African Writing edited by M. J. Daymond, J. V. Jacobs and Margaret Lenta (Natal: University of Natal Press, 1984), pp. 278-80;

"Foreword," to Call Me Woman by Ellen Kuzwayo (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985; London: Women's Press, 1985), xiii-xv.

"Foreword," to Native Life in South Africa by Sol Plaatje (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1982), ix-xiii.

"Some Happy Memories of Iowa," in The World Comes to Iowa: Iowa International Anthology edited by P. Engle, R. Torrevillas, H.E. Engle (Iowa: Iowa State UP, 1987), pp. 86-88.

When Bessie Head died in 1986 at the age of 49, she left a legacy of diverse writings including three novels, a volume of short stories, an oral history, a sort of reconstructed history of 19th-century southern Africa, and two volumes of collected writings published after her death. Her first works acknowledged the influence of her own experience in South Africa, focusing upon themes of refugeeism and racialism. Despite the parallels between her personal life and her storylines, Head transcended the specific setting of southern Africa to address patterns of evil that can be found in the minds of people everywhere. In her later works, she shifted the focus from an individual's struggle for dignity to helping to preserve the cultural and historical heritage a people must have to achieve dignity.

Bessie Head was born in 1937 in a mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg where her white mother had been committed because the father of her child was a black stable hand. She was given her mother's name, Bessie Emilia Emery, and handed over to coloured foster parents, who cared for her until she was thirteen. Because her natural mother had provided money for Bessie's education, she was placed in a mission orphanage where she earned a high school diploma and was trained to be a teacher. She taught elementary school and then wrote for the African magazine Drum. In 1961 she married Harold Head by whom she later had a son. The

marriage was not successful, and in 1964 she accepted a teaching position in Botswana, then the British Bechuanaland Protectorate. When she left South Africa she was given an exit visa depriving her of citizenship and making her a refugee. Fifteen years later in 1979 she was granted citizenship by the government of Botswana. There she found an African past with depth and dignity she could be proud to claim as her own. She died in Serowe where she made her home of hepatitis at the age of 49.

When Rain Clouds Gather (1968), Head's first novel, is the story of Makhaya Maseko, a political refugee from South Africa who escapes to Botswana after serving a prison term for sabotage. He is taken to Golema Mmidi by Dinorego, a village elder who introduces him to people like himself who are seeking to make new and better lives for themselves in the harsh, drought-stricken land. Gilbert Balfour is a British expatriate setting up a cattle cooperative. He sees in Makhaya an ally for helping the villagers to greater self-sufficiency and recruits him to teach the women how to grow tobacco as a cash crop. Dinorego, his daughter Maria, Mma Millipede, and the young widow Paulina Sebeso share Gilbert's hopes for the future of Golema Mmidi and they too accept Makhaya into their community. The local chief Matenge and his African nationalist friend Joas Tsepe seek to have him barred from the village, but British

district police official allows Makhaya to stay. Although welcomed to the village, he retains an aloofness, a separateness from the villagers and their problems. Events, however, pull him into the center of village life as the drought worsens, killing Paulina's young son and all her cattle. When the power-hungry Matenge tries to implicate Paulina in the boy's death, the whole village responds, challenging Matenge and his tyranny over them for the first time. Through these experiences and because of his growing involvement with Paulina, Makhaya's alienation is overcome. He discovers the love and goodwill found in Golema Mmidi and accepts the new and hopeful life that the village offers, marrying Paulina and settling down to quiet, apolitical revolution.

When Rain Clouds Gather was widely acclaimed as a surprisingly mature first novel.

British audiences especially responded to it, perhaps because it is a traditional romance with factual details about the society neatly interwoven into a fast-moving plot. The potential personal conflict between a public and private self for Makhaya is not fully developed and has often been cited as a shortcoming of the novel. However, Head demonstrates her ability to capture the African landscape and its impact, teaching her readers about the regional customs of her characters while she creates finely drawn individual personalities.

The theme of Head's second novel Maru (1971) is racialism, not the racialism of whites against blacks as might be expected, but the prejudice of the Batswana against the Masarwas, the bushmen. Found as an infant beside her dead Masarwa mother, Margaret Cadmore is taken in by a British missionary who gives the child her own name. As a lone ~~bushman~~ ^{Masarwa} in the mission school Margaret quickly comes to understand and accept her separateness when the other students torment her because of her background.

After she completes her teacher training course, Margaret takes a teaching post in a small rural village, Dilepe. There she meets Dikeledi, Moleka and Maru. Dikeledi teaches at the same school and intercedes for her when the children discover Margaret is a Masarwa and disrupt her class. Moleka, the local playboy, falls in love with Margaret when they first meet, but his love is never fulfilled because of Maru. Maru, brother of Dikeledi and best friend of Moleka, also loves Margaret. Believed destined to be the next paramount chief, he is admired for his wisdom and sensitivity. The entire village looks to him for leadership, but it is a burden Maru refuses to take up, always finding excuses to delay accepting his role as chief. In Margaret Maru sees the ideal partner and a way out of his dilemma since the people would never accept his marrying a Masarwa. However, Margaret loves Moleka. Using his three henchmen

Maru prevents Moleka from approaching Margaret and engineers Moleka's seduction of Dikeledi, who has always loved him. What makes such scheming acceptable in a character of Maru's nobility and integrity is Margaret's mystical ability to share Maru's dreams and record them in her paintings. It is because of this supernatural closeness between the two that their union seems right and that readers can believe with Maru that Moleka would make Margaret miserable because of his inability to overcome the prejudice against the Masarwas.

Critical reaction to Maru has been diverse, ranging from "as nearly perfect a piece of writing as one is ever likely to find in contemporary African literature" to "a rather weak vapoury study on the theme of racial prejudice." Maru is Head's attempt to universalize racial hatred, pointing out that victims seek other victims even lower in power and prestige than themselves. Here as in When Rain Clouds Gather she examines how one feels alienation and how he or she copes with it. She once again raises the question of an individual's political responsibility to a larger society. Maru unlike Makhaya leaves his village for an isolated existence with Margaret, allowing his act of abdication "to pull down the old structures" and leaving Dikeledi and Moleka to change society. In Maru Head's strength lies in giving her characters a subtle depth which takes them beyond the limitations of a fairly simple plot and

obvious didactic message.

A Question of Power (1973), Head's most important work, is a dramatic departure from her earlier writing. It is an autobiographical account of mental disintegration, encompassing a classic battle between good and evil. The primary character is Elizabeth, a teacher who has come to Botswana from South Africa and settled in Motabeng at an agricultural cooperative. Like Head herself, she is coloured, the daughter of a white woman and a black stable hand. Warned that she may be insane like her mother and unprepared for the isolation she feels in her new home, Elizabeth finds herself losing control as she is nightly visited by a terrifying world of hallucinations that ultimately lead her to a complete mental breakdown when she cannot distinguish reality from her phantom world.

Her nightmares are dominated by two men whose real counterparts in the village Elizabeth has never met -- Sello and Dan. The first section of the book is devoted to Sello's invasion of her mind. Although Sello represents goodness and compassion, he introduces Elizabeth to the power of absolute evil and to his own weakness. After surviving the hell of Sello's world, Elizabeth still lacks complete understanding. Thus she can be seduced and then coerced by Dan to experience his satanic power. She is subjected to a constant parade of sexual

depravity and filthy stories about people in the village. As Elizabeth loses touch with reality she is sent to a mental hospital where she is finally able to recognize the existence of evil without being overcome by it. Dan has shown her the full power of evil and in her quiet passive way Elizabeth has resisted, hanging onto to the simple realities of her son and her work in the coop garden. In the end she responds to Sello's reminder "love is two people mutually feeding each other," embracing the brotherhood of man, and at last finding a place to belong.

The symbolic richness in A Question of Power offers a wide range of critical interpretation. The extensive sexual content and dominant concern about insanity have prompted readings drawing heavily on psychology, arguing that the sexual negativism expressed in the book is the result of the negative self-image projected upon Africans by South Africa. The resolution of the conflict in Elizabeth's work on the cooperative and the implicit political overtones have appealed to Marxist critics even though Head's approach to social problems is meager and frustratingly slow. Readers who seek in her work metaphorical statements about the future of Africa find a picture of enduring hope touched by cynical mistrust for politics. Feminists have been attracted by the female protagonist and the nature of the battle she wages. The threatening male images of power in Elizabeth's inner world contrast with the positive

nurturing personalities of men like her friend Tom and the coop leader Eugene. Yet it is by defeating these male forces that she gains her place in the world. Religious interpretations are also common, fed by the Christian symbolism of Elizabeth as a messianic figure who redeems herself and the world through her suffering. These readings are not incompatible with Head's overriding humanistic message that God and goodness are to be found in man: "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet." Such affirmation is present, although less obvious in her earlier books, just as the predominant themes of those books are present in A Question of Power. The alienation of the refugee is opened for intense psychological exploration where she before examined it superficially from a distance. The racial prejudice under attack here is her own, born of the self-hatred engendered particularly among coloureds by the separatist policies of South Africa. However, she does not allow readers to focus solely on South Africa; part of Bessie Head's achievement is her ability to transcend her South African context and speak of all people.

The Collector of Treasures (1979) is a collection of thirteen finely constructed short stories in which Head continues to explore good and evil, paying special attention to tribal witchcraft and the mistreatment of women in village life. These are dramatic, poignant stories

where the distinction between right and wrong is never clear. One, "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration," displays a new historical orientation which characterizes Head's later works. "Deep River" explains how the Botlaote tribe came to be separated from their parent tribe because a man refused to deny the woman he loved and their son. The account is fictionalized, but in its telling Head captures the tone and scope of mythic folklore. She maintains a traditional style in all the tales and imbues them with a strong sense of cultural integrity.

Short stories are not likely to draw significant critical attention and Head's are no exception. Most of them bear a definite feminist bias, exploring the place of women within traditional society and questioning the significance of religion, whether tribal witchcraft or western Christianity. However, more important, the stories represent Head's deepening commitment to her new home in Botswana and to its cultural heritage.

In Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind (1981) Head shares the roots she has discovered in an oral history of the people of Serowe and their efforts for progress. The book is not a coherent, plotted narrative. Head has structured her history around three prominent men whose lives and achievements are intimately interwoven with the life of the village: Khama the Great,

his son Tshekedi Khama, and Patrick van Rensburg. She presents interviews with people who knew and worked with these men allowing them to tell the story in their own way. Thus she traces the village's notion of self-help through its evolution in the individual vision of each leader. The result is an unusual, innovative book--historical, yet immediate.

A Bewitched Crossroad (1984) is a loosely organized novel tracing the migrations of the Sebina clan during the nineteenth century. As in Serowe, her focus is more on discovering and publicizing the history of blacks in Southern Africa than on writing a novel in the traditional sense. Consequently, the book can be confusing, appearing to lack coherence. Individual characters do not come to life as they did in her early novels. However, it could be argued that no character is as important as the land. Head's purpose is not to tell the story of individual characters, but to portray a time in history when decisive steps were taken by the British and Afrikaaners which determined the future of the southern part of the continent. She celebrates the African role in that history and juxtaposes its humanity against Boer exploitation in South Africa. For Head, the historical direction of her last two works is a natural development of her life as a South African exile. In Crossroad she has undertaken the task of reviving a history for the people of southern Africa "that is not sick with the need to exploit and abuse people."

Two volumes of Head's writings have been published posthumously: Tales of Tenderness and Power (1989) and A Woman Alone (1990). Each collection begins with a substantial biographical introduction and ends with Head's observations about the role of storytellers in South Africa. In fact, seven stories are reprinted in both collections despite the difference in focus for the two books. Tales includes 21 stories, all but one grounded in real events. Three of the stories are previously unpublished. Although Head claims no interest in politics, her fears about the misuse of power and her implicit humanistic teachings are very much in evidence. A Woman Alone contains 29 reprinted essays and stories which combine fictional narrative, journalistic reporting, cultural comment, and personal introspection. The selections represent three periods--Beginnings, 1937-1964; In Exile, 1964-1979; and Retrospect, 1979-1986. Both collections reflect Head's evolution as a writer and citizen of Africa and the world.

Although she left South Africa, unlike her fellow exiles, Bessie Head remained in Africa, and in Botswana she found roots. What began in her early novels as a search for freedom and dignity ended as an affirmation of ^{her} African heritage and an attempt to make that heritage available for others.

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Bessie Head
(6 July 1937 – 17 April 1986)

D. D. Newman

Greta D. Little
University of South Carolina

After leaving South Africa in 1964 Bessie Head wrote four novels, a collection of short stories, and a history of Serowe, the village in Botswana where she made her home. Because the main characters of her early novels are refugees like Head herself, she has often been viewed as a writer in exile whose works reflect her own experiences. Head acknowledged the influence of her South African experience in the themes which pervade her writing: refugeeism, racialism, and patterns of evil. However, her approach to these themes was a generalized one, recognizing their validity for all people, not just South Africans. Her preoccupation with South African history, particularly the history of Botswana, in her later writing was a sign that Bessie Head did not consider herself a stateless person, a writer in exile. She was a citizen of Botswana, proud of her African heritage.

Bessie Head was born in 1937 in a mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg where her white mother had been committed because the father of her child was a black stable hand. She was given her mother's

name, Bessie Emilia Emery, and handed over to a white family for adoption. The family rejected the baby, and Bessie was then sent to coloured foster parents, who cared for her until she was thirteen. Because her natural mother had provided money for Bessie's education, she was placed in a mission orphanage where she earned a high school diploma and was trained to be a teacher. She taught elementary school and then wrote for the African magazine Drum. In 1961 she married Harold Head by whom she later had a son. The marriage was not successful, and in 1964 she accepted a teaching position in Botswana, then the British Bechuanaland Protectorate. When she left South Africa, she was given an exit visa depriving her of citizenship and making her a refugee. Fifteen years later in 1979 she was granted citizenship by the government of Botswana. She died in 1986 of hepatitis at the age of 48.

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A Question of Power (1973), Head's most important work, is a

dramatic departure from her earlier work. It is an autobiographical account of mental disintegration, encompassing a classic battle between good and evil. The primary character is Elizabeth, a teacher who has come to Botswana from South Africa and settled in Motabeng at an agricultural coop. Like Bessie Head herself, she is coloured, the daughter of a white woman and a black stable hand. Warned that she may be insane like her mother and unprepared for the isolation she feels in her new home, Elizabeth finds herself losing control as she is nightly visited by a terrifying world of hallucinations that ultimately lead her to a complete mental breakdown when she cannot distinguish reality from her phantom world.

Her nightmares are dominated by two men whose real counterparts in the village Elizabeth has never met -- Sello and Dan. The first section of the book is devoted to Sello's invasion of her mind. Although Sello represents goodness and compassion, he introduces Elizabeth to the power of absolute evil and to his own weakness. After surviving the hell of Sello's world, Elizabeth still lacks complete understanding. Thus she can be seduced and then coerced by Dan to experience his satanic power.

She is subjected to a constant parade of sexual depravity and filthy stories about people in the village. As Elizabeth loses touch with reality she is sent to a mental hospital where she is finally able to recognize the existence of evil without being overcome by it. Dan has shown her the full power of evil and in her quiet passive way Elizabeth has resisted, hanging onto to the simple realities of her son and her work in the coop garden. In the end she responds to Sello's reminder "love is two people mutually feeding each other," embracing the brotherhood of man, and at last finding a place to belong.

The symbolic richness in A Question of Power offers a wide range of critical interpretation. The extensive sexual content and dominant concern about insanity have prompted readings drawing heavily on psychologists, arguing that the sexual negativism expressed in the book is the result of the negative self-image projected upon Africans by South Africa. The resolution of the conflict in Elizabeth's work on the cooperative and the implicit political overtones have appealed to Marxist critics even though Head's approach to social problems is meager and frustratingly slow. Readers who seek in her work metaphorical statements about the future of Africa find a picture of enduring hope

touched by cynical mistrust for politics. Feminists have been attracted by the female protagonist and the nature of the battle she wages. The threatening male images of power in Elizabeth's inner world contrast with the positive nurturing personalities of men like her friend Tom and the coop leader Eugene. Yet it is by defeating these male forces that she gains her place in the world. Religious interpretations are also common, fed by the Christian symbolism of Elizabeth as a messianic figure who redeems herself and the world through her suffering. These readings are not incompatible with Head's overriding humanistic message that God and goodness are to be found in man: "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet." Such affirmation is present, although less obvious in her earlier books, just as the predominant themes of those books are present in A Question of Power. The alienation of the refugee is opened for intense psychological exploration where she before examined it superficially from a distance. The racial prejudice under attack here is her own, born of the self-hatred engendered particularly among coloureds by the separatist policies of South Africa. However, she does not allow readers to focus

solely on South Africa; part of Bessie Head's achievement is her ability to transcend her South African context and speak of all people.

The Collector of Treasures (1979) is a collection of thirteen finely constructed short stories in which Head continues to explore good and evil, paying special attention to tribal witchcraft and the mistreatment of women in village life. Only "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration" has a historical setting. It explains the history of the Botlalaote tribe and how they came to be separated from their parent tribe because a man refused to deny the woman he loved and their son. The account is romanticized fiction, but in its telling Head captures the tone and scope of mythic folklore. She maintains a traditional style in all the tales and imbues them with a strong sense of cultural integrity. "Looking for a Rain God" is a sad story about a family in despair over the lack of rain. Desperate for relief from the drought and facing starvation, they sacrifice their youngest children and scatter their bodies across the land to appease a dimly remembered rain god. The deaths are discovered by authorities and the men sentenced to death. Head's wisdom recognizes that "the people who lived

off crops knew in their hearts that only a hair's breadth had saved them from sharing [the family's] fate."

The title story tells of Dikeledi, left by her husband with three children. She is befriended by her neighbors; a man who accepts his responsibilities as husband and father, and his generous sensitive wife. Believing that Dikeledi is the concubine of her neighbor, her husband decides to return home and claim his rights. Determined not to subject herself to his abuse again, she kills him by cutting off his genitals. For her crime Dikeledi is sent to prison where she is treated kindly by other women whose stories are like her own. A collector of treasures, Dikeledi gathers about her the goodness and generosity of people like her neighbors and cellmates. These are dramatic, poignant stories about good and evil where the distinction between them is never clear.

Short stories written in the style of traditional folklore are not likely to draw significant critical attention and Head's are no exception. They represent Head's deepening commitment to her new home in Botswana and to its cultural heritage. At the same time, however, the stories all bear a definite feminist bias, exploring the place of women within traditional society especially in a modern age. They also

question the significance of religion, whether tribal witchcraft or Western Christianity.

In Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind (1981) Head shows us her roots in an oral history of the people of Serowe and their efforts for progress. This is not a coherent, plotted narrative. Head has structured her history around three prominent men whose lives and achievements are intimately interwoven with the life of the village: Khama the Great, Tshekedi Khama, and Patrick van Rensburg. She presents interviews with people who knew and worked with these men allowing them to tell the story in their own way. In the book she traces the village's notion of self-help through its evolution in the individual vision of each leader. The result is an unusual, innovative book -- historical, yet brought to life in the telling.

A Bewitched Crossroad (1984), Head's last book, is a loosely organized novel tracing the migrations of the Sebina clan during the nineteenth century. As in Serowe, her focus is more on discovering and publicizing the history of blacks in Southern Africa than on writing a novel in the traditional sense. Consequently, the book can be

confusing, appearing to lack coherence. The characters do not come to life as they did in her early novels. However, it must be said that her purpose is not to tell the story of individual characters, but to portray a time in history when decisive steps were taken by the British and Afrikaaners which determined the future of the southern part of the continent.

Bessie Head found an African past with depth and dignity she could be proud to claim as her own. Although she left South Africa, unlike her fellow exiles, she remained in Africa and there she found roots. What began in her early novels as a search for freedom and respect ended as an affirmation of African heritage.

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