

a *REVERENCE* for *ORDINARY* *PEOPLE*

Helen Fallon

“**T**wenty years ago what we are doing would have been a crime.” Noticing my perplexed expression, my colleague continued, “A black man and a white woman sitting drinking Coke together would have been committing a crime under the Immorality Act. Maybe you didn’t know that Namibia was part of South Africa until 1981.” I hadn’t known this or, indeed, much else about Namibia when I took up a short assignment in 1998 at the Library of the Ministry of Agriculture. In that same library I came across a book by the South African writer, Bessie Head. Her life and writing are interesting; and both are closely linked.

Bessie’s mother, Bessie Amelia Emory, was from a wealthy white South African family of racehorse owners. Her father was a Zulu servant on their farm. Horrified and ashamed when Bessie Amelia became pregnant by a black servant, her parents sent her from the family home in Johannesburg to a psychiatric hospital in faraway Pietermaritzburg. There she gave birth to a baby girl, who later observed: “I consider it the only honour South African officials ever did me; naming me after this unknown, lovely and unpredictable woman.”

At birth, Bessie was taken from her mother and initially given to a white family for adoption. “After a week I was returned since they said the baby appeared to be black and they could not accept a baby like this” she recounted. She was subsequently given to coloured (a specific South African term for individuals of mixed race) foster parents.

Her mother remained in the hospital, and died there five years after her baby girl had been taken from her. She had stipulated that some of her family money be used for Bessie’s education. Although Bessie’s maternal grandparents never saw their granddaughter, they ensured that provision was made for her education.



Bessie Head, one of Africa’s most prominent writers, was born in South Africa in 1937. Her writings cover many aspects of her personal experiences.

(photo: George Hallett)

Aged thirteen, Bessie was sent to a British missionary boarding school for coloured girls in Durban. Holiday time came and she wanted to return home to the woman she regarded as her mother. In a fit of anger, a teacher told her that her foster mother was not in fact her mother. Her words were to remain engraved in Bessie’s mind and are recorded in her book *A Woman Alone*. “Your mother was insane. If you are not careful you’ll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up as she was having a child by the stable boy who was a native.”



Bessie became a teacher at Clairwood Coloured School in Durban. Speaking of her education, Bessie said, “I have been on the whole a self-educated person. I was a primary school teacher for two



Having left her native South Africa in 1964 at the age of twenty seven, Bessie settled in the small village of Serowe in neighbouring Botswana.

(photo: Government of Botswana)

years and then worked for an African newspaper for two years.” While working on the newspaper, Bessie wrote about the lives of the people in the townships of Cape Town. She noted that “the immense suffering black people experience in South Africa has created in me a reverence for ordinary people.”

Bessie had a short-lived marriage to Harold Head, a journalist. At the age of twenty seven she left South Africa, on a one-way exit permit, with her two-year-old son Howard. She was never to return; making her home in neighbouring Botswana, where she distilled her suffering and the suffering of her people into novels and short stories. Her first two novels *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru* were loosely autobiographical and dealt with the themes of exile and discrimination. They draw on her own experience of being an outsider, a refugee. An experience which she describes as being, “initially, extremely brutal and harsh.”

RENEWING A SHATTERED LIFE

In 1971 Bessie had a nervous breakdown. Drawing on her own experience she wrote her third and final novel *A Question of Power*, a terrifying, authentic account of a nervous breakdown in which the central character,

Elizabeth, experiences the fragmentation of her personality.

Bessie was never able to trace any of her family and in *A Woman Alone* remembers the isolation of having “not a single known relative on earth, no sense of having inherited a temperament, a certain emotional instability, or the shape of a fingernail from a grandmother or great-grandmother.” Acceptance in her new country was gradual and it was not until she had been in Botswana for eight years that she was granted citizenship. Her lifestyle was relatively simple. She lived with her son in a small house a few miles from a village, and spent much of her time in her vegetable garden and travelling to town on her bicycle to sell her cabbages, peppers and tomatoes. She wrote in the evenings.

Gradually she developed a love of her new home. “In South Africa, all my life I lived in shattered little bits. All those shattered bits began to grow together here. I have a peace against which all the turmoil

is worked out.”

Bessie enjoyed the folk tales which were very much part of village life and began to collect local stories and memories. *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*, her first collection of short stories, was followed by *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, which portrays a Botswana community over a period of one hundred years, through the words of different members of the village. Her stories give an insight into the life of a cattle farming people and the important role women played in that community.

Bessie Head died in Botswana in 1986 from hepatitis. She was forty nine. In an interview in 1978, eight years before her death, she described South Africa as a country where it is impossible for black people to dream. Four years after her death Nelson Mandela was freed from Robben Island prison. In 1994 he was elected President of South Africa.

I bought his book *Long Walk to Freedom* at Johannesburg Airport on my way home from Namibia. ■

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