

Afterword to *Preface to Witchcraft*

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Bessie Head wrote this short autobiographical piece as a preface to her story about witchcraft in Serowe, Botswana, the town that she made her home after leaving South Africa for political reasons on a one-way exit permit in 1964. The story and its preface appeared in the American magazine *Ms.* in 1975, two years before “Witchcraft” was gathered into Head’s collection of Botswana village tales, *The Collector of Treasures*.

“I am most unhappy in unholy places,” she notes, before observing that “Southern Africa may be the unholyest place on earth.” Much of the piece is devoted to her bitter remarks about racist practices in South Africa: the white man, she says, “took even the air away from us.” What she values about Botswana, in contrast, is its strong sense of historical continuity –of African values, roots, and beliefs.

It is significant, however, that she implicitly includes Botswana in her judgement that “Southern Africa may be the unholyest place on earth”, because her stay in that country was not an easy one. Her observation that the government of the newly independent Botswana had “an extremely hostile policy toward South African refugees” is a halftruth, at best. In 1966 the fledgling state had to find a way of living alongside its more powerful and increasingly coercive and belligerent neighbour. *Pace* Head, Botswana provided a haven for South African political refugees for over two decades, and, by a process of diplomacy and tact, managed to keep its aggressive neighbour at bay before emerging in the post-apartheid era as one of Africa’s most stable and prosperous nations. The people of Botswana owe the relative tranquillity of their lives to the wisdom and foresight of Seretse Khama and his successor, Ketumile Masire.

The truth is that Head made herself unwelcome by her erratic behaviour and wild outbursts. The teaching job that she came to Botswana to take up did not work out. She claimed that the headmaster made unwelcome sexual advances on her. The school board, however, deemed her mentally unstable and therefore unsuitable as a teacher. Whatever the real reason –or combination of reasons– she left her job and was thereafter considered a stateless refugee.

This turn of events had one unforeseen and immensely beneficial outcome. Desperate for some sort of income, Head returned to writing. The appearance of her autobiographical sketch “The Woman from America” in the *New Statesman* in August 1966 (her first major story in an international magazine) attracted the attention of an editor at the publishing house Simon and

Schuster, who encouraged her to write a novel about Botswana. *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) was the result, and this laid the foundation for Head's career as a professional writer.

Her remark that her "work was always tentative because it was always so completely new" is entirely accurate. Head established a reputation for herself as a pioneering individualist with *When Rain Clouds Gather*, which reversed the established "Jim-comes-to-Jo'burg" tradition of the time by tracing the passage of the protagonist not from country to city, but from urban ghetto to rural retreat. The novel also boldly proposed a paradigm of inter-racial harmony and collaboration at a time when the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa was persuading black South African writers to question the value of ties between the races. *Maru* (1971), her second novel, was similarly audacious in its suggestion that deep traditions of racial hierarchy in Botswana could be broken by a marriage between a man at the pinnacle of a class- and race-stratified society and a woman at the bottom of this society. And, in her major work *A Question of Power* (1973), just when most African writers were subordinating individualism to the group and national interest, Head chose to locate the action of her novel inside the consciousness of her central character, thereby implicitly questioning the arrogation of moral and epistemological value to the collective rather than to the individual.

Eschewing the overt 'protest' mode that came to dominate South African writing of the 1970s and 80s, she preferred to locate her moral and creative centre in individual people, in "how strange and beautiful people can be – just living," as she put it in her social history, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981). And now that the wheel has turned, so much of what was written in such a strident and urgent way in the 1970s and 80s in South Africa seems dated. The work of Bessie Head has not suffered the same fate.

Despite the hardships she experienced in Botswana, she did make it her "own hallowed ground." In the end it is the writing that endures, and it was in this arena that Head experienced some measure of control over a life that was always captive to the turbulent history of her time and place. It was in Botswana, in the quiet rhythm of its daily life and, most important, in its continuity with the past that Head was able to carve out a spiritual as well as physical home and work out in creative terms political alternatives for a more hopeful African future.