

Attachment B – the Bessie Head House as related to her life and work

Bessie Amelia Head was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, on 6 July 1937. After training as a primary school teacher and working as a journalist, she and her young son Howard left South Africa and arrived in Serowe in March 1964. Here she taught primary school and wrote short stories about her new home. In 1966 she lived briefly at the Bamangwato Development Association farm near Pilikwe. For several years thereafter she lived in Francistown, where she wrote her first novel. In early 1969 she moved back to Serowe. Late in that year she obtained land and built the little house where she then lived and wrote for 16 years. She was awarded citizenship of Botswana in 1979. On 17 April 1986 she died in Serowe and was buried in the old cemetery behind Botlaote hill.

A literary account of the building of the Bessie Head House may be found in the biography of the author, *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears*, by Gillian Eilersen, on pages 121-122:

“... this important publishing house [Bantam Books] bought the paperback rights to *When Rain Clouds Gather*. For Bessie this meant £1000 from an unexpected source. Her dream of leaving her cramped one-room shed and getting a small house of her own suddenly lay within reach.

“Patrick van Rensburg was once more consulted. Once again he came to the rescue. There was a small plot of land adjoining the land he had been allocated. He began negotiations with the tribal authorities to try and have it transferred to Bessie. He offered the help of the Builders’ Brigade to build a small house for which she could pay cash.

“In October the grant of land was arranged and building could begin. The house was to consist of two bedrooms, a toilet, bathroom and kitchen. It would cost about £700. ‘The house is minute but the pride is overwhelming. It is the first brick thing I shall ever own. The cause of the bedlam is that I keep on getting under the feet of the builders to see how the bricks go up,’ she wrote. She enjoyed watching the calm way the Motswana instructor taught the young students the necessary skills as they worked on the house. ‘Change that to a continuous join,’ he would quietly call out. ‘Very little talk, only work and a murmured correction now and then.’

“November brought the excitement of moving into the house. There were not many possessions: two beds, a table and two chairs for the kitchen [sic], and a writing desk and bookcase for Bessie’s room. There was no electricity. She continued to write by candlelight, but now she had gas rings fed by a portable cylinder installed in the kitchen. This was a luxury, as was the running water. Not for sixteen years was she to own a refrigerator, despite the heat of the country. She never owned a telephone. Emergency calls had to be made from the post office, Swaneng Hill School, or the Farmers’ Brigade. The house was to be called ‘Rain Clouds’, and the name, on a carved nameplate, was displayed on the door.”

When Bessie Head moved in, her first novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* had already been published for a year. It uses her experiences of living at the BDA farm near Pilikwe from February to June, 1966, just a few months before Boipuso. The drought conditions of those years and the influence of the apartheid regime next door feature strongly in this work, which has frequently been a set book both in Botswana and abroad.

Earlier in 1969 her second novel *Maru* had been accepted for publication. Perhaps the most widely read of her novels, it tells the story of racial prejudice and gender power in a small Botswana village. It protested against the discrimination against Basarwa and all other kinds of prejudice. It is a perennial set book in the schools of several countries.

Within a year of moving into her new house, Head began hearing voices and seeing evil forms at night. Soon she was seriously mentally ill. In March 1971 she broke down completely and was hospitalised for three months. As she slowly recovered, she planned and then wrote the internal dramas in her mind that led to the breakdown. This novel, *A Question of Power*, was and is her greatest triumph. It was written almost entirely at night, with the help of a paraffin lamp, at her little desk in the house called 'Rain Clouds'. Its publication in 1973 made her famous, and it helped put Botswana on the map. It is studied at the university level in many departments of English.

After the publication of this novel, Bessie Head turned to the community immediately around her in Serowe. She interviewed many citizens, young and old, and used their stories to tell the history of Serowe. The resulting book, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, forms a permanent part of our heritage. It has been used by historians, sociologists, school students, and cultural workers from the day it appeared in 1981.

She also wrote short fiction stories based on what she saw and heard in Serowe and surrounding small villages. Thirteen of these stories were gathered together in 1977 and published as *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*. Several of these stories are now known throughout Africa, and most of our young people have read at least one of them in school.

Almost from the moment Bessie Head first arrived in Serowe as a schoolteacher in 1964, she was fascinated by the historical figure of Khama, the Great. (That was her unique way of writing his name). For many years she wanted to write a major novel about him. After much research and several false starts, she decided to write her "Khama novel" about the assimilation of the Sebina clan into the Ngwato nation then living in Shoshong and led by Khama III. She called it *A Bewitched Crossroad*, not because of any witchcraft, but rather because King Khama transformed the many people who crossed his path. It is as much a history as it is a novel, and it does full justice to the historical figures whom she loved so much. It was her last book, published in 1984.

In her final years Bessie Head was invited to many international conferences of writers and poets. She always represented Botswana well and gained a great deal of goodwill on behalf of her adopted country. When she died in 1986, accolades poured in from around the world.

We give the above detail in order to emphasise the importance of Bessie Head's life and writings to Botswana's culture and heritage. She took our village life and made it the subject of great and universal literature. Apart from her first two novels, all of this writing was done in a little house in Serowe called 'Rain Clouds' that she surrounded with trees, vegetables, fruits, and flowers. It richly deserves to become a Heritage Site for all Botswana.