

BESSIE HEAD – THE EYES WITH WHICH SHE SAW
REMARKS BY
JUSTICE UNITY DOW
AT
BESSIEFEST 2007 – THE COMMEMORATION
OF
BESSIE HEAD’S 70TH BIRTH DAY
SEROWE – 15 – JULY – 2007

1. Bessie Head is, no doubt, Botswana’s most important writer. She is important because of the time that she wrote, the topics she wrote about, the historical importance of what she wrote about and the breath and width of her writings. Above all, it is the artistry with which she wrote that we celebrate today. She has honoured us, all of us, by leaving us such a rich legacy and we have gathered here today to publicly recognize that fact.
2. I am truly honoured to be giving this address. Who would ever have thought that a girl from Mochudi could ever have the privilege and honour to stand before a gathering as this one and to offer remarks about a writer of the stature of Bessie Head? How things change!

3. No one would have thought it in 1937, when Bessie Head was born in Pietermaritzburg, in then apartheid South Africa; Not just because it would be at least twenty years before I was born, but also because Bessie, the little and suspiciously brownish baby girl, was not supposed to amount to anything. I mean she was not supposed to come out brownish, to start with! Her mother was white and she had no business being brown! She was so politically incorrect that she had to be put away to so as not to offend the 'civilised' sensibilities of the time. So how could she possibly be honoured for anything at all in future? Well despite the odds against her, she did amount to something; in fact, she ended up amounting to a lot! That is why we are here today.

4. But it is the eyes with which she must have seen the world; the personal space from which she wrote that intrigues me. It is on that that I wish to focus my remarks today.

5. Let us not forget that the Botswana of 1964, the year in which Bessie moved to Botswana, was a poor one. When rain clouds refused to gather, which was often, and when the wind, as opposed to rain was the only thing that swept the landscape, life could be hard. Of course, at the time, no one suspected that under the hooves of the often listless cattle were buried treasures; diamonds; that would one day change the economic luck of the whole country. So Bessie's Botswana in the mid-sixties was little more than a poor patch of dust.

6. Let us also not forget, that this Botswana was a country two years shy of independence; it was in many ways, like the rest of Africa, a country of people shackled by the rules of others, but it was also a country that was beginning to question that rule. It was a Botswana made up of nations that were beginning to re-claim their pride. A Botswana about to emerge out of colonialism. A country in the process of self-definition. Where was Bessie Head herself on this issue of self-definition? Did she know who she was? Who was she?

7. The Serowe of 1964 was not the Serowe of tiled roofs and tar roads that we see today. It was characterized by rondavels and huts; foot-paths and ox-wagon sandy roads. It was a Serowe of people still steeped in old customs and traditions, in which women knew, or at least were expected to know, their place. Did Bessie Head know her place?

8. Let us also not forget too, that the sixties was an interesting time – In the West, young people were undergoing political awakening; they were brimming with ideologies (not all of them good and not all of them bad either) and they were eager to test their ideologies – poor countries like Africa were obvious destination choices – the Serowe of 1964 was one of such destinations. We have for example, Patrick van Rensburg who seemed to hold the view that there ought to be more to education than $1 + 1 = 2$! Did Bessie Head see herself as one such person? An outsider offering a view informed by some ideology? What was that ideology?

9. So it is 1964,

- a. the cold war, which was often rather hot in Africa, is raging (if ice can rage!), superpowers are posturing and eying Africa to expand their respective influences,
- b. socialists, communists and capitalists are brandishing solutions at Africa,
- c. Africa for its part, even as it extends a hand to accept the preferred supposed solutions, is beginning to question the political power exerted by others over it,
- d. racist South Africa is alive and well but it can feel its grip slipping and
- e. a 27-year-old woman must leave her home, in search of a new one.

10. The woman heads north (by rail? by rail and truck? by truck? I have no idea, but keep in mind that there is no tar road anywhere. I imagine old landrovers and old chevlots.) She reaches Serowe, she settles and over the next twenty-two years she writes books and raises a son! But this not just any twenty-seven-year old; but:

11. She is a Mixed-Race Woman:

- a. At Swaneng Hill School white expatriates are gathering, exchanging ideas, building a school – does she belong to this group?

b. In the village women of her age are getting married, raising children, collecting water, cooking meals, curtsying as they offer male relatives their food. Does she belong to this group?

c. Amongst the community of exiles; she would have been lighter than most – did she feel that she belonged to this group?

d. Did any or all of these groups consider her one of them? Or was she always the other? Lurking in the margins? Flitting and darting, trying to find a home? Trying to be embraced? Or did she boldly stand on the margins, accepting her ‘otherness’?

12. **She is A Woman in Exile:**

a. I do not think any one who has never experienced statelessness can ever appreciate what the loss of home, the severing from the past, really feels like. I do not pretend to fully understand. But I can only imagine the apprehension, the fear, the sense of disconnection that this young woman must have felt.

b. Perhaps for some exiles a word from a father, a mother, a sister... trickled through, perhaps disjointed and perhaps months late, but at least there was that

connection. But for Bessie Head, there was no family to speak about. There were some friends, some of whom have been instrumental in keeping her name alive.

c. On the whole though, it seems fair to say that she was a woman who had left very little human warmth behind her. She had been rejected by the smallest and most intimate of social groups; the family and threatened by the most powerful of political groups, the state.

d. How did that affect her? Did that make her yearn for love? Is *Maru* the result of this yearning? Or did she see that kind of love impossible? Is that the message behind *Maru*? You see this yearning or rejection, depending on your interpretation, in an even earlier piece of work; *The Cardinals*? Or was she simply a woman alone; no yearning, no regrets?

13. **She is a Woman With No Physical Home:** We say she made her home in Botswana? When did she do this exactly? In 1964 when she arrived? In 1986 when she was granted Botswana citizenship? Sometime during those two sets of dates when she had tired of trying to get a western country to take? She was rejected by apartheid South Africa, did we embrace her? Did she embrace us? Is a mutual embrace necessary to make a place one's home? Was it necessary that she be embraced? Or was it sufficient that she should claim her place?

14. **A Single Mother:** It was not enough that she was homeless and poor, she also had to raise a son by herself. I imagine her in this house, the small boy playing in the sand just where she can watch him and she typing and typing. I imagine a physically solid figure with a furiously broiling soul. I imagine her striding to the local post-office to send off yet another letter. I imagine her determined and set face, as she posts it – in it she is arguing to keep to the title of her book '*Maru*'. The publishers do not like the title; it has no meaning for their intended audience. The boy is scuttling behind – other children his age have brothers and sisters for playmates. He has no blood relative except his own mother. How did single-motherhood tint the lens with which she saw the world? This leads me to my next point;

15. **She is A Woman with an Apartheid Education:** I see Bessie Head's works as an example of how apartheid education failed. She was not supposed to be able to write! She was not supposed to be able to analyse and critique! She was not supposed to be honoured today! How strangely things turn out, sometimes.

16. But we are honouring her today, celebrating her 70th birthday, claiming her, hugging her, assuring her that this is her home. We are able to do that because she, despite the challenges in her life, led us to this moment.

17. It seems to me that in the final analysis, Bessie Head, this woman who could not be classified, found her own way of making Botswana her home; by leaving a mark nothing

could ever dislodge. This is not her home because we offered to her, very little was offered to her during her life; this is her home because she staked a claim in its history in a powerful, everlasting way.

18. She was often desperate, confused, confusing and very difficult. Very often she, in letters, attacked her own supporters. On occasion she collapsed under the weight of the mental and emotional turmoil that swirled around her, but she wrote. And wrote. And wrote!

19. From the vantage point of the margins, she observed and she wrote.

20. While others lived their lives in neat little clusters, she watched them and she wrote.

21. When she emerged from crippling depression she was sometimes able to see herself in that hole and she wrote, she allowed us into her life and she wrote letters and autobiographical pieces.

22. Now we say she is Botswana's most important writer. How did she get there? I say she came to this point by looking truth in the eye and writing about it. She was no

one's praise poet and sometimes she could be rather annoying! But what ever else she might have been, she was a true artist who pursued her art with a single-mindedness that has to have been, on occasion, frustrating to those who knew and loved her.

23. It is that artist that we remember and celebrate today. That fearless artist had, in her book *Maru*, the eyes to see and the courage to write and offer us this wisdom: –

“When people of Dilepe village heard about the marriage of Maru, they began to talk about him as if he had died. A Dilepe diseased prostitute explained their attitude: ‘Fancy’, she said ‘He has married a Mosarwa. They have no standards.’

“By standards, she meant that Maru would have been better off married to her. She knew how to serve rich clients their tea, on snow-white tablecloth and she knew how to dress in the height of fashion. A lot of people were like her. They knew nothing about the standards of the soul, and since Maru only lived by those standards they had never been able to make a place for him in their society. They thought he was dead and would trouble them no more. How were they to know that many people shared Maru's overall ideals, that this was not the end of him, but a beginning?

“When people of the Basarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom, which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. As they breathed in the fresh air their humanity

was awakened. They examined their condition. There was the fetid air, excreta and horror of being an oddity of the human race, with half the head of a man and half the body of a donkey. They laughed in an embarrassed way, scratching their heads. How had they fallen into this condition when, indeed, they were as human as everyone else? They started to run out into the sunlight, they turned and looked at the dark, small room. They said ‘We are not going back there.’

“People like the Batswana, who did not know that the wind of freedom had also reached people of the Masarwa tribe, were in for an unpleasant surprise because it would be no longer possible to treat Masarwa people in an inhuman way without getting killed yourself”.

24. As a concluding comment – I offer a reason why Bessie Head wrote and why she wrote about pain, racial prejudice, gender prejudice, abuse of power and why she wrote with such feeling and power that often rattles the reader’s soul – the answer is simple – she had to or she would have died. Perhaps not a physical death but a crumbling within herself that would have been worse than the depression that took her over at times.

- a. She wrote because if she did not, she might have screamed.
- b. She wrote because some people just must shove a mirror at the world, to force it to see itself as it truly is.
- c. She wrote because watching silently was too painful for her.
- d. But she also wrote because she understood the magic of language and imagery. She wrote because she wanted to cast a spell around us, for didn’t she say she wanted to write a novel “so beautiful and magical that I, as the writer, would long to read and re-read it”?

May the magic of her words live on and on!

On this note, ladies and gentlemen, I conclude my remarks and wish you a wonderful and joyous two days of festivities.

I thank you for listening.