The Burden of Possessions

A Postcolonial Reading of Letters from Bessie Head, Dora Taylor, and Lilian Ngoyi

M.J. Daymond

Each of the letters written by the South Africans Bessie Head, Dora Taylor, and Lilian Ngoyi that is presented here is part of a sustained correspondence which these women conducted from within their homes. Bessie was writing to a friend, Paddy Kitchen, in England; Dora to her daughter Sheila in Zambia; Lilian to Belinda Allan, a friend who lived first in Beirut and later in Switzerland. While the writers were all deeply opposed to apartheid, their letters are not always overtly political, especially when their attention is on their ordinary daily lives. Even here, however, the impact of public power on their private world is immanent. This means that in the act of writing from and about ‘home’ they opened up the concept and the place into a creative and powerful site of utterance, eschewing the idea of an inside–outside boundary between private and public life. Rather than perpetuating barriers of privacy, these women’s letter-writing reveals their will to establish daily family life as a base from which they could reach out to interact with the world around them.

That Bessie Head and Lilian Ngoyi wrote about their domestic lives at all is something of a triumph, in that private, family life was severely jeopardized for most black people under apartheid, particularly by the separation of families and the inadequate living conditions that went with migratory labour. Comparably, Dora Taylor’s letters indicate that, as for all active white opponents of the regime, her privacy and family life were under the constant threat that came

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from surveillance by the secret police. Being marginalized and denied the customary rights of citizenship in a nation is, as Caren Kaplan puts it, to be chosen by “deterritorialisation”: “to be cast out of home or language without forethought or permission.” So, for these women to counter-assert or desire their homes to be their own productive territory was in itself a defiant and courageous response to the state’s denying them a settled domestic life. The state’s actions meant that they had diminished access to the social privilege and power that arise from having a secure home, and to the sense of identity and belonging that comes from knowing the community and the nation as home.

In the face of this loss, possessions become, in various ways, a burden or a refrain in the letters that will be presented here. Possessions represent not the materialism of bourgeois life but the cherished objects which affirm individual identity in a life of modest counter-assertion. As Bessie Head recounts her delight in the building of the first home she had ever called her own, her larger theme is its capacity to provide a locus in which she can bring her personal history to bear on her present self and world. Within that theme she observes that her newly built house gives her a place to store her favourite books, which are among her most treasured possessions. The loss of a valued home that once functioned as an actively productive centre is the subject of the letter from Dora Taylor that is examined here, and this loss is crystallized in her mourning the little household objects that were gifts from people she has loved. Although Lilian Ngoyi’s circumstances had never afforded her a fulfilled sense of home, her letter demonstrates that, for her, ‘home’ and ‘self’ are nevertheless isomorphic. When the material condition of her home is, as it seems to her, miraculously restored, she rejoices by saying that she is now a new woman, and she celebrates her four-day-old stove because it generates a warmth which enables her to overlook the fact that the interior of her tiny house is bare, cold concrete.

In most scholarly work, letters are used as a source of information – as in studies of domestic life under empire, or, in the case of literary letters, perhaps as the location of a writer’s declaration of intent that illuminates what we once called the primary text. What is implicit in this article is that letters themselves

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