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Unpopular opinions: Some African Women writers

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Abstract
Women have always been upholders of tradition. This is not because of any inherent difference in intellect or temperament from men, but because of their role in society. Change, whether it be technological or social, has always reached them last because they were less educated, less prominent, less important in male-dominated society. This is true of the Western world, and it is an even more clearly marked feature in modern African society made up as it is of a mixture of traditional African and Western values. Both societies were oppressive towards women, but in different culture-specific ways. Many African societies were polygamous and patriarchal, and women had no influence on decision-making and were subject to physical violence (beatings). The Victorian version of Western civilization which reached Africa in the form of the early missionaries objected to these forms of oppression, but in turn brought their own, namely in the concept of the virtuous woman, a concept which severely limited her possibilities for sexual, emotional and intellectual expression.
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Women have always been upholders of tradition. This is not because of any inherent difference in intellect or temperament from men, but because of their role in society. Change, whether it be technological or social, has always reached them last because they were less educated, less prominent, less important in male-dominated society. This is true of the Western world, and it is an even more clearly marked feature in modern African society made up as it is of a mixture of traditional African and Western values. Both societies were oppressive towards women, but in different culture-specific ways. Many African societies were polygamous and patriarchal, and women had no influence on decision-making and were subject to physical violence (beatings). The Victorian version of Western civilization which reached Africa in the form of the early missionaries objected to these forms of oppression, but in turn brought their own, namely in the concept of the virtuous woman, a concept which severely limited her possibilities for sexual, emotional and intellectual expression.

In both societies women depended on men for status and respectability. This aspect was most clearly marked in the African societies through the institution of bride wealth, but when it came to the economic situation, the African woman was in a better position than her Victorian sister, relatively speaking. Whilst being poorer, she herself made a large contribution to her society, mainly in the form of trade and agriculture, and she had a measure of control over her earnings, whilst the Victorian woman in most cases could neither earn nor possess money. Both groups were, and to some extent still are, beset by feelings of inadequacy which have deep roots in the fabric of society as well as in their minds. In the African societies this is expressed through proverbs, which are supposed to contain the accumulated wisdom of centuries. ‘I am only a woman. What can a woman do?’ Flora Nwapa’s heroines frequently exclaim, and to behave ‘like a woman’ is a frequent term of abuse in Achebe’s novels.
On the Victorian side there are tomes of learned treaties on the subject, but the two following sentiments are central to the Victorian view of women:

Mr Oscar Browning was wont to declare 'that the impression left on his mind, after looking over any set of examination papers, was that, irrespective of the marks he might give, the best woman was intellectually the inferior of the worst man'.

...the Saturday Review; there was Mr Greg — the 'essentials of a woman's being', said Mr Greg emphatically, 'are that they are supported by, and they minister to, men'.

The two traditions are not as conflicting as the missionaries fighting battles against polygamy considered them, they have different emphases and complement each other. Both societies also had, and still have, a female idea, expressed by men in writing or story telling. 'Some of the most famous heroines even of nineteenth century fiction represent what men desire in women, not necessarily what women are in themselves,' says Virginia Woolf in a book review in the Times Literary Supplement in 1920. If we take a look at the ideal woman in modern African fiction written by men, we get a clear picture of what this ideal is. The following description of Ihuoma, the main character of Amadi's novel The Concubine, I take to be representative of the ideal:

That she was beautiful she had no doubt, but that did not make her arrogant. She was sympathetic, gentle, and reserved. It was her husband's boast that in their six years of marriage she had never had any serious quarrel with another woman. She was not good at invectives and other women talked much faster than she did. The fact that she would be outdone in a verbal exchange perhaps partly restrained her from coming into open verbal conflict with her neighbours. Gradually she acquired the capacity to bear a neighbour's stinging remarks without a repartee. In this way her prestige among the womenfolk grew until even the most garrulous amongst them was reluctant to be unpleasant to her. She found herself settling quarrels and offering advice to older women.

One could add numerous other descriptions, like the women in Achebe's novels or Okot p'Bitek's Lawino, but the essence remains the same: the ideal woman is 'The Angel in the House'. This is how Virginia Woolf defines her:

...Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it — in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.
Virginia Woolf unceremoniously sets about killing her. ‘My excuse was that I acted in self defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me.’ According to this ideal, questions about human relationships, morality and sex cannot be dealt with honestly by a woman. She ‘must charm, must conciliate, she must — to put it bluntly — tell lies if she is to succeed’. Killing the Angel in the House is part of the occupation of a woman writer, Woolf asserts.

The African woman writers have inherited this ideal/monster both in its specific African form and in the Western form through education, and their writing can be seen as a battle fought with varying degrees of success against it, both as a literary image and as a personal reality.

The immediate effect on women on the change from oral to written forms of literary expression was that they lost the role they had in traditional literature. In oral literature women were — and still are — tellers of stories. The story telling was an important part of children’s education, hence the women’s role. The women were reluctant to part with this aspect of influence which they had over their children, and there are many examples in the novels and short stories which deal with the time and problems of the early converts in which the woman secretly keeps telling the children the old stories even though she has been forbidden to do so by her husband who has become a zealot follower of the new faith.

The following excerpt is from a short story by the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o. The story is called ‘A Meeting in the Dark’. It is a typical motif in African writing.

His father always carried this bag. John knew what it contained: A Bible, a hymn-book and probably a note book and a pen. His father was a preacher. He wondered if it had been he who had stopped his mother from telling him stories when he became a man of God. His mother had stopped telling him stories long ago. She would say to him ‘Now, don’t ask for any more stories. Your father may come.’ So he feared his father.

The necessary background for the existence of a written literature is, of course, literacy, and the earliest opportunity for acquiring this was through the missionaries. It was mainly boys who were sent to school, and for the girls that did go the missionaries stressed the teaching of housewifely duties rather than academic subjects; so women were, with a few exceptions, barred from giving literary expression to their thoughts and feelings.

One African woman, however, steps out of the mist of forgotten lives and insists on being very visible, even before Virginia Woolf speculated on the difficulties of being a woman writer: She is Adelaide Casely
Hayford (1868-1960). True to the history of our time she is mainly known as the wife of the famous West Coast nationalist, politician and writer J.E. Casely Hayford. She was married to him for eleven years, between 1903 and 1914, and after that she lived on her own and supported herself and her daughter. She was of mixed African and English heritage, grew up in England and felt very estranged when she moved to Freetown in 1897. There she saw the need for a vocational school for girls, the aim of which was to give the girls the means to earn a livelihood and instil in them racial and national pride. She started collecting money and support for it and even went on an extended tour of America where she inspected Mrs Booker T. Washington’s School for Brides at the Tuskegee Institute. Back in Freetown she opened her school in 1923, the first African-owned and African-run school in Freetown. She also continued her public career and became the first woman speaker in Aggrey House in London where she gave an address, ‘The Home, its Educational Value’, in which she denied that women were inferior to men. Different, yes, but inferior, no. She was also chosen to represent African women at the Geneva Conference for the Welfare of the African Child, held in 1941, but due to lack of funds she was not able to attend, and her daughter, Gladys Casely Hayford, who was living in Europe at the time, read her mother’s paper at the conference.

I am enumerating all these public appearances to emphasize the fact that this is a visible woman whose ideas reached a large audience and were put into practice. She is both a barometer of the prevailing thoughts of the very cosmopolitan and not very radical Creole élite on the Coast and a critic of them. She was an embattled woman, with enemies in many camps. What, then, were her ideas?

She had two main areas of interest: feminism — or perhaps we should say an interest in the roles of women — and cultural nationalism. On the feminist side she spoke out against polygamy and supported the education of girls because she thought that ‘a woman must be economically independent to retain her self-respect’. The school curriculum, however, had a heavy emphasis on the virtues of home making: cooking, hygiene, child care, etc. On the nationalist front she aimed at giving an education ‘which would instill into us a love of the country, a pride of race, an enthusiasm for the black man’s capabilities and a genuine admiration for Africa’s wonderful art work’ (Marcus Garvey overtones). She changed her name to Aquah Laluah and wore national costume on public occasions.

If one looks at the themes of Adelaide Casely Hayford’s battle, it becomes apparent that they are, in fact, the basic themes of the black
women writers today. They don’t of course have the same solutions, nor are they necessarily phrased in the same way, but the core of ideas and controversies still remains. They are, to put it schematically:

(1) Feminism. I use this word to denote an interest in women’s status/role in society, not to indicate a specific ideology. Within this theme there are two main branches: (A) The biological and marital aspects of women’s lives. The central themes in the African treatment of these areas are the role of motherhood, bridewealth and polygamy (Flora Nwap'a, Buchi Emecheta). (B) Women’s economic dependence (Bessie Head, Miriam Tlali).

(2) Black Nationalism. This can take the form either of a celebration of the African heritage, like the writings of Efua Sutherland and, to some extent, Ama Ata Aidoo, or a criticism of aspects of it (Buchi Emecheta), or an outright rejection of it as tribalist, superstitious, evil and backwards (Bessie Head).

Adelaide Casely Hayford shares not only the basic themes with the present-day women writers, she also shares with them a certain ambiguity or confusion in relation to her writing. Her best known piece, a short story called ‘Mista Courifer’, exemplifies this. Mr Courifer, ‘a solid citizen of Sierra Leone’, is an undertaker who slavishly admires everything English. A tyrant in the home, he is our nationalist villain. He wears English clothes, brings his son up to admire everything English, and is rude about women. So far so good. Into this picture of general unpleasantness sneaks a tone of ridicule, not for the ideas, they are too important to ridicule, but for the lack of education and sophistication of the man.

His favourite themes were Jonah and Noah and he was forever pointing out the great similarity between the two, generally finishing his discourse after this manner: ‘You see my beloved Brebren, den two man berry much alike. All two lived in a sinful and adulterous generation. One get inside am ark; de odder one get inside a whale. Day bof seek a refuge fom de swelling waves.

‘And so it is today my beloved Brebren. No matter if we get inside a whale or get inside an ark, as long as we get inside some place of safety — as long as we can find some refuge, some hiding place from de wiles ob de debil.’

She is in fact poking fun at him from the point of view of the culture which she is also criticizing him for imitating. Mr Courifer’s son is the new nationalist who objects to the inferior conditions he is offered in the Civil Service, insists on wearing national costume and lives in a mud hut, but who nevertheless prefers the English type of marriage. ‘I shall never look like an Englishman … but there are some English customs that I like
very much indeed. I like the way white men treat their wives. I like their home life. I like to see mother and father and the little family sitting down eating their meal together.' In this connection it would seem that the feminist aspect takes precedence over the national and this leads Adelaide Casely Hayford into advocating certain aspects of the English life style. To complete the confusion, she did not consider African women from the Protectorate of Sierra Leone as suitable teachers of their own native art and craft at her school but thought of them as illiterate and incapable of systematic labour. Despite her nationalism, she was generally considered 'pro British'.

This ambiguity in Adelaide Casely Hayford and in most of the black women writers reflects not weak minds, but a difficult and confused situation, a period of transition during which old values are uprooted, leaving a hole which can only be filled after much agonizing and uncertainty. The women writers all write from within the situation, without hindsight or the overview which distance in time or place or cool objectivity can give. The books are thus themselves an expression of the struggle, and I think that they will go down in literary history as a literature of transition, trying out various value systems without any knowledge of which is going to be the mainstream development, and all the time trying to adjust to or challenge a social situation which is in itself rapidly changing. The actual social reality of present-day African life for women is out of phase with their role expectations, and the women are thus forced or pushed into a confrontation which they might not have looked for in the first place. They write from a sense of dislocation without a clear sense of direction. They do not agree among themselves and there are often contradictions within the individual authorship. A clear case of cultural dislocation is the Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa.

Flora Nwapa is an Ibo writer, educated at Ibadan and Edinburgh with a career as a teacher, woman education officer, elected government official, writer, publisher, and business woman. Her first two books, *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970), are set in a traditional Ibo village and describe traditional life. They belong to the anthropological genre, but with the difference that they restrict themselves to the village women's universe which is considerably smaller than the totality of life in the village. True to the genre, the focus of the story is not on an individual but on the village as such. The life stories of the two main characters are of course of interest, but they serve mainly as a focal point of comment which explains the values of the village. The narrative technique, which is considered 'oral', consists of a series of conversations, mainly between
women in the course of their every-day life. For example, 'Have you heard?' or 'Are you in? I thought I would greet you before I go to the market', or 'Greetings, are you also going to the stream', etc. The total effect is of a small, repetitive, uneventful and suffocating world. The central themes are motherhood — or rather its opposite, childlessness — dowry (in Efuru), and women's economic power.

Both heroines start off as personifications of the ideal village woman. Efuru is not only beautiful, she is also ‘remarkable and distinguished’, and she is ‘such a good woman. She does not make any trouble.’ They are both good traders, clearly more intelligent than their husbands, and they both end up rejected, lonely, and miserable. Idu commits suicide on her husband’s death, and Efuru prepares to live alone and become a worshipper of the woman of the lake, a kind of female priesthood. The cause of their tragedy is childlessness. They do, in fact, both have a child, but as it dies, this does not count. Pregnancy is the central point of focus of the novels. Idu gets married on p. 2 and is ‘not yet pregnant’ on p. 3. Both women scrupulously follow the pattern of meekness, patience and forbearance which their society demands of them. Ifuru, however, is said to have a streak of rebellion in her, and she does exacerbate her situation by marrying her first husband without a dowry, but she is taught a lesson and is abandoned. Her second husband ‘pays cash’. I disagree with Lloyd Brown that Efuru actively seeks to be ‘alone and independent’, and that traditional marriage fails because it ‘is incompatible with her sense of self’.7 The book presents her marriage as a series of defeats which she does everything in her power to prevent but, as one of the village women says, ‘You don’t pluck children from a tree, you know. You don’t fight for them either. Money cannot buy them. Happiness cannot give you children. Children indeed, they have no children.’8

The village women, who constitute the moral universe of the novels, clearly regard childlessness as not just a curse, but a failure, and this elicits moral speculations about the possible crime causing the childlessness. They see the childless women as in some way guilty and exhibit a large degree of cruelty in their judgements. This view is not contradicted, except perhaps in one sentence in Efuru, where it is said about childlessness that ‘her people didn’t just take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature’. The little word ‘just’ might indicate that the writer thinks so, but it is a slight indication. The two women are scrupulously flawless, and yet a moral condemnation of their barrenness seems implicit in the novels. This also helps to explain the strange lack of compassion for their plight. Efuru ends with the words ‘She [the woman of the lake] was
happy. She was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth, but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?’ (p. 281).

Flora Nwapa has perfected the technique of ending not only her novels, but also her short stories, with an open-ended question. Her short stories in *This is Lagos, Never Again* and *Wives at War* move the same problems of childlessness, marriage and economic power into an intensely urban, fast-moving, money-booming or war-torn setting. Women are still the central characters, but the secure moral universe of the village has disappeared, and instead the women are confronted with the problems of individual survival in a city jungle with no guide lines except those provided by success, modern life and wealth, exemplified by cars, drink, wigs, etc. The stories record a moral and spiritual flux, recording different roles for women — a childless woman snatches a baby, a sophisticated girl gets herself a new boyfriend, a married woman has an affair with another man, who dies, etc. In *One is Enough*, however, Flora Nwapa takes a bold leap and (almost) makes a radical new morality for herself and her urban sisters.

Amaka leaves a childless marriage and goes to Lagos to start a new life at thirty and to try to find ‘even happiness in being single’. She states her purpose very clearly: ‘She had not come to Lagos to be a whore. She had come to look for her identity.’ Her identity seems to lie in business, because she is instantly very successful at what is called ‘contract work’. She lands a contract worth half a million naira, and all she has to do is sign on the dotted line. The contract is bogus, the wall she is supposed to find builders for has already been built. Corruption, in other words. She buys a car, a flat, airline tickets, and finally she can join the Cash Mama Club. It consists of women, mainly single or widows from the Biafran War, and the only criteria for membership is fabulous wealth and ostentatious consumption. She did do more than sign on the dotted line of the contract, though; she slept with a catholic priest who knew the Brigadeer etc. Nwapa is very careful to explain that her heroine prostituted herself for the contract. ‘She was going to exploit the situation. She, Amaka was going to tempt. That was the task that must be done.’ This leads to one of the book’s radical stances: a rejection of marriage, but not of men. ‘She neither wanted to be a wife any more, nor be a mistress, nor be a kept woman. She wanted a man, just a man, and she wanted to be independent of this man, pure and simple.’ The reason for this stance is to be found in the repressive nature of marriage as she experiences it. Armed with Adelaide Casely Hayford’s economic independence, she is ready for success. There is one thing lacking, of
course: children. However, in the course of the book, she becomes pregnant and for good measure gives birth to twin boys. The father is of course the priest, but after some humming and harring he decides to stay with the church and not claim the children as he could have done under Nigerian law. This leaves Amaka free to realize what is obviously the lifestyle which the author has decided upon as the physical and moral goal: the life of a rich, independent single mother. This is a radical new view, but unfortunately it is marred by an excessive admiration of ostentatious wealth and by the last sentence of the novel in which Amaka expresses her gratitude to the priest for 'proving to the world that I am a mother as well as a woman'. The fact that she should choose to be 'grateful' rather than, say, 'happy', indicates that her sense of sexual inferiority is deeply ingrained into her; and her independence seems precarious, despite its brashness.

A less precarious and less contradictory rebellion can be found in the Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta. She grew up in Lagos, married young, went to England as a wife, had five children, left her husband, and brought up her children on welfare whilst getting a degree in sociology at the same time. She is now a full-time writer. Her own life has so far been her main source of inspiration, and her autobiographical novels about her experiences of growing up in Lagos and living as an immigrant in London's slums hold the key to most of her ideas. Traditional Ibo culture also forms the moral universe against which Buchi Emecheta pits herself, and it is not surprising that brideprice, motherhood and economic independence figure large, in fact provide the titles for two of her non-autobiographical novels.

Up until now Buchi Emecheta is the closest to a protest writer in the African women writers' tradition. Her protest is against the different and discriminating treatment of girls and women. Whilst praising the communal spirit of Ibo life, Buchi Emecheta quite obviously finds it suffocating, and her breaking out of it affirms an individualistic approach, not dissimilar to Flora Nwapa's economic individualism, but with a much clearer knowledge that this emphasis on individual freedom and achievement constitutes a clear break with traditional life in all spheres. Thus, in *The Bride Price* fifteen-year-old Aku-nna (the name means father's wealth in anticipation of the bride wealth she is going to fetch for her father) meekly hopes to marry well so that her brideprice can help towards paying her brother's school fee. She is intelligent, beautiful, and fragile (the last characteristic is partly explained by the fact that she is an ogbanje, one of those people who live with one foot in the spirit world and are expected to die young). She does go to school — educated girls
fetch a higher price — and she elopes with her teacher who is of a traditional slave cast and therefore unmarriageable. They marry without bride-wealth and without her family’s consent, and she dies in childbirth. The novel concludes:

So it was that Chike and Aku-nna substantiated the traditional superstition they had unknowingly set out to eradicate. Every girl born in Ibuza after Aku-nna’s death was told her story, to reinforce the old taboos of the land. If a girl wished to live long and see her children’s children, she must accept the husband chosen for her by her people, and the bride price must be paid. If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child. It was a psychological hold over every young girl that would continue to exist, even in the face of every modernisation, until the present day. Why this is so is, as the saying goes, anybody’s guess.¹⁰

If we compare this with the conclusion of Flora Nwapa’s novel Efuru, we can see a greater degree of certainty (or a smaller degree of ambiguity). This is a result of a certain distancing from the moral universe of the novel. Buchi Emecheta’s use of psychological or sociological jargon, which on a stylistic level flaws her books, creates this distance, but in this, her first novel with an African setting, there are still traces of an attachment to her cultural background. The heroine upsets all taboos — and dies. The book postulates no causal link between the two events, but neither does it offer any other explanation of why she should die, except, perhaps, that she is an ogbanje. Lloyd Brown explains it by saying that ‘fate is the collective will of the community and the roles are prescribed by the community’.¹¹ So Aku-nna is collectively willed to death by the community! This is of course a nice metaphor, but on a realistic level it strains at least my credulity and, if it is accepted, must act as a warning against rebellion, thus undercutting the protest aspect of the novel. My point here is that Buchi Emecheta’s starting point is not that far removed from Flora Nwapa’s, but in the course of her following books she moves towards an unambiguous, clear, and increasingly more angry voice of protest.

What appears as a different and alien moral universe in Flora Nwapa’s books becomes an anomaly when it is transferred into the setting of a modern city like Lagos. The Joys of Motherhood describes a period in the history of Nigeria (from the thirties to just before Independence) during which enormous changes took place, both of a political and economic nature, but the Ibo immigrant society in Lagos which forms the subject of the book refuses to make any allowances for change; in fact, as the men experience defeat and humiliation in the new society, they cling even more tenaciously to the power they have over the women and children.
within their own group. The final sufferers become the women who, like Nnu Ego, are caught between economic necessity on the one hand and cultural taboos and aspirations on the other. Nnu Ego struggles hard against appalling poverty and a cruel and irresponsible husband to reach her objective, which is to give her sons an education and to marry off her daughters, so that their bride price can help towards the boys’ school fees. She reaches her goal, but dies a lonely and disillusioned woman. The moral is obvious: by clinging to her traditional role as wife, or first wife, after her husband inherits a second wife from his deceased brother, she is destroyed and in turn tries to destroy her daughter’s chances for a happier life.

Her co-wife Adaku’s decision to leave the home and set up as a prostitute/trader on her own resembles Nwapa’s solution and also has Emecheta’s blessing, but for a slightly different reason. It is not just the desire for personal and economic independence which motivates Adaku; she wishes to educate her daughters, who would not be given an education within the traditional family structure.

Education, which is the passport to the middle-class life, a life to which Buchi Emecheta’s characters aspire, plays an increasingly larger role in her authorship, and in Double Yoke she confronts directly the prejudices surrounding the educated woman in Nigeria. Double Yoke is a blast, aimed at Nigerian men. It was occasioned by a year’s stay at the University of Calabar as a writer-in-residence, after which Buchi Emecheta came back to London appalled and exasperated. Double Yoke is a campus novel. Nko sets out with the aim of being ‘an academician and a quiet, nice and obedient wife’. The latter part of her wish is also what her boyfriend wants, but Buchi Emecheta is no believer in ‘the Angel in the House’. After having faced her boyfriend’s scorn because she has allowed him to make love to her, and after having been forced into a choice of prostituting herself to her professor or not getting her degree, some of the obedience has worn off. At the conclusion of the novel, she is pregnant by the professor, but her boyfriend is considering accepting her ‘growing up’, as Buchi Emecheta mercilessly suggests. Independence for women in Nigeria, according to its women novelists has to be a leap, with much burning of bridges, and to both of them the relationship between the sexes resembles a war.

The national cultural aspect in Buchi Emecheta’s writing takes the form of an increasingly vigorous criticism of aspects of her cultural background, but in this aspect of the authorship there is a certain degree of double think. On the one hand, Emecheta firmly supports Western ideas of individual achievement, and she strongly criticises the ascriptive static
roles, given mainly to women in her African society; but, on the other hand, she succumbs to a kind of simplistic Négritude in the allegorical novel *The Rape of Shavi* which praises a kind of pre-lapsarian, peaceful African communalism disturbed by aggressive, warlike western civilization, reminiscent of Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*. She lands, so to speak, mid-culture. The theme of black nationalism which started off as an African affirmation of national values *vis-à-vis* Europe (in Casely Hayford) has moved into an inconclusive discussion of the relative values of the two culture systems.

With the South African writer in exile, Bessie Head, it moves into an outright condemnation of African ‘tribal’ values, as she calls it. This is the very antithesis of cultural nationalism and an outcome of the very special circumstances of Bessie Head.

She is a coloured South African, and the story of her origin is that her white mother conceived her with a black stable boy. She was insane, or rather her society thought that this act was proof of insanity, so she was put into a mental hospital, where she eventually committed suicide. Meanwhile her child, Bessie Head, was brought up in a series of child-care institutions and foster homes, and she eventually left South Africa as a political refugee to end up as a stateless person in Botswana. This life story constitutes the ultimate in alienation. Bessie Head literally does not know who she is, and the only cultural background she has as a point of reference, is the South African apartheid state which in her case is not just a violent and inhumane system, but the very cause of her personal and very painful exile from humanity and retreat into madness or, to put it more mundanely, mental breakdowns.

Bessie Head is a complex writer, even though her message seems simple enough, and to reduce her to a couple of pages or a pattern of themes like the one I have outlined is to do her an injustice. A complicating and also interesting factor in her writing is the way in which her themes are perceived at the same time as being both historical incidents and timeless aspects of the human mind. The national cultural theme is a point in case.

On a historical level it has two points of reference in her writing. One is white South Africa, and the other is tribal Botswana. White South Africa is a politically oppressive system from which the hero of her first novel, *When Rainclouds Gather*, flees, but he climbs the barb wire fence and enters Botswana and ‘whatever illusion of freedom which lay ahead’. South Africa gives rise to a series of prison images. Makhya has been to prison in South Africa. He is intensely lonely and incapable of emotional communication with people. He has internalized the repression. ‘In
order to make life endurable you had to quiet down everything inside
you, and what you had in the end was a prison, and you called it your
life.' In the next novel, Maru, the character of Moleka, who represents a
dark, satanic and power-conscious aspect of the human psyche, is said to
preside over an inner kingdom, ‘shut behind a heavy iron door’, and in A Question of Power which is the record of a mental break down she sees
South Africa as ‘just a vehement, vicious struggle between two sets of
people’, and she calls it ‘a power maniac, who saw only his own power’,
thus linking South Africa to the basic question of the title. As she moves
further into the depth of her break down, she says. ‘The evil over-
whelming her was beginning to sound like the South Africa from which
she had fled’, and a consistent noise in her head is diagnosed as familiar
— ‘it was the nightmare of the slums she had grown up in in South
Africa’, and she identifies it with a mental father figure whose personality
was ‘icy and rigid self control’ and who instilled in her an intense sexual
shame, a ‘cringing deep shame’. She thus adds to the picture of social op-
pression and internalised mental oppression the aspect of patriarchal op-
pression of women, connecting it to the fascist aspects of the political
system.

The tribalist aspect of traditional Botswana society is taken through
similar permutations. It is a straightforward, corrupt and exploitative
system in which chiefs live off what is virtually the slave labour of their
tribesmen. It stands in the way of progress, which in all Head’s novels is
exemplified by an experiment in co-operative farming, it oppresses
women and keeps them docile and dull, and like South Africa it is racist
and gives rise to the hallucinations of sexual perversion, which mark her
mental break down. The national cultural aspect of her writing is thus
inextricably tied up with the feminist or sexual aspect.

This aspect also has both a social and a psychological side. Socially,
she deplores the role of women in Botswana society. She sees Botswana
men as sexually promiscuous and emotionally unfeeling and cruel, and
she concludes that the women are forced into the same way of life,
because if they became serious about a man they would commit suicide
and ‘surely’, she argues, ‘it was far better to have a country of pro-
miscuous women than a country of dead women’. The lightheartedness
ends here, though. The first two novels end with cautious marriages,
fraught with immense difficulties, but representing an opening up of
enclosed or imprisoned personalities and social groups, but in the last
novel the nadir of her mental break down is the destruction of her sexual
identity. The phantom in her imagination, who represents evil and who
is said to be like South Africa, tells her that she has no vagina, and he
taunts her by parading a series of vulgar, obscene and sexually over-
powering women in front of her. This point of self-loathing is tied to her
mixed-race origin, which in South Africa is seen as an act of shameful
lust, and internalizing this accusation of sexual perversion she identifies
with the coloured homosexual men whom she remembers from her child-
hood and whom she finds repulsive. They are ‘men in women’s clothes’,
forced into a traditionally female role of weakness and oppression, like
her own. Like the aspect of cultural nationalism, the aspect of race and
racial pride, which is related to it, is turned upside down in Bessie Head’s
authorship, and both modes are rejected as a basis of identity. The aspect
of ‘feminism’ is not discussed in terms of motherhood and bridewealth,
but in more — if you like — profound terms of power relationships where
the key to a betterment of women’s position, which she desires and adva-
cates, lies in keeping the power-hungry systems, personalities and aspects
of one’s character in check. There is no watertight system of how to
achieve this, as the mental break down indicates, and sanity is sur-
rrounded by uncertainties and dangers in Bessie Head’s fiction.

It is impossible to sum up neatly the ideas and developments of these
woman writers. One of the points I have been trying to make is precisely
that: that their achievements lie not in the solutions they offer — they
often seem confusing — but in the courage and determination they show
in dealing with unpopular subjects and having unpopular opinions.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 53.
11. Lloyd W. Brown, op. cit., p. 49.