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INVENTION OR REFLECTION? - TRADITION AND ORALITY IN THE WORKS OF BESSIE HEAD

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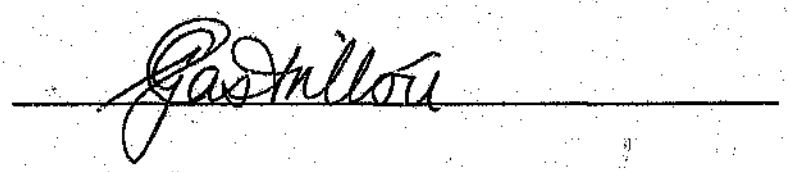
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the work of Bessie Head with a view to sophisticating prevailing understandings of her texts which tend to concentrate on Head's place in a tradition of African women writers. Current critical works emphasise selected aspects of Head's biography and assume her presentation of the 'tradition' and 'orality' of Serowe to be accurate. We argue in this dissertation that Head has constructed and manipulated concepts of 'tradition' and 'orality' in her texts to suit both her intellectual concerns and her fictional intentions. Broadly these are to present her works as the recorded history of an 'oral African' society. Head's six novels as well as aspects of her letters and interviews are examined in order to demonstrate this assertion.

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, nor has it been prepared under the aegis of or with the assistance of any other body or organisation or person outside the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.



2 day of June 1993

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INTRODUCTION

BLACK WOMEN WRITERS AND THEIR 'FOREMOTHERS': A CRITICAL BACKGROUND

In discussing the works of Bessie Head, Lloyd Brown makes the following rather breathtaking claim: "more explicitly than most she is speaking on behalf of and about the African woman, while compelling our attention as a voice for all women" (Brown 1975:34). The idea that any woman writer speaks for or reflects the experience of millions may today appear rather dated, particularly when so much contemporary scholarship urges us to historicise, contextualise and de-essentialise literary texts.[1] However, Brown is not alone in making such claims for the works of women writers, and much contemporary literary criticism on African women writers continues to operate from this assumption.

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[1] See, for example, Andrade (1990), Carby (1987) and Mohanty (1984).

When one turns to South Africa, approaches like those of Brown can also be found, particularly in relation to the works of Bessie Head. The major object of this thesis is therefore on the one hand, to trace these essentialist ideas in the criticism of Head's texts and, on the other hand, to offer an alternative approach to her work.

This introduction attempts to lay the framework for such a project by looking at some of the debates relating to black women writers - first in the United States of America, and then in Africa. By drawing on recent developments in black American feminist literary criticism and applying these to African literary criticism on women writers, the introduction seeks to evoke a more fruitful approach to the works of Head than has thus far been the case.

The central concern of the debates surrounding the work of black women writers,[2] in keeping with debates in the

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[2] Developments in wider feminist scholarship influenced literary critics to question the exact nature of their task. This questioning ranged from a broad attempt to establish for black women writers a 'place' in literature as a whole to an attempt to "refuse the cultural framework of patriarchy" (Humm 1986:104). A number of critical landmarks in this response to the writings of black women are worth noting: Alice Walker (1983); Barbara Smith (1985) and Deborah McDowell (1985) all attempted to redefine the criticism of writings by black American women. Critics such as Chandra Mohanty (1984) and Hazel V. Carby (1987) have questioned the notions and assumptions underlying these works. In one way

larger body of feminist thought, is whether there is a recognisable black female, or even female, aesthetic. Questions as to the nature of women's writing and the extent to which the critic would have to acknowledge the race and gender of the writer have become paramount. This approach has not been without its own set of problems, as the terms available to these critics required definition and debate themselves. As Gemma Tang Nain (1991:13) has argued, there is "some ambiguity ... associated with the adjective 'black'" in 'black feminism'. Critics have used this word so differently that, as Nain (1991:13-14) points out, some feminist writers have argued that 'black' does not refer to skin colour. They have, instead, argued that 'black' people are those who have suffered "colonial and imperial domination" (1991:13).[3]

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or another, these latter critics have attempted to establish whether women's writing can be understood as expressing an 'essential' black female identity.

[3] The problem with this conception, as Nain (1991:14) indicates, is that within this definition of 'black' one would have also to include, for example, the Irish, who have suffered the colonialism of the British. The key problem is thus whether we can identify an *essential* black female aesthetic, and it is this question that is being debated at the moment. An answer to this question seems an almost impossible endeavour if, as Carby (1987), Nain (1991) and Mohanty (1984) have argued, we cannot really seem to come to any agreement as to what defines 'black' or, as Linda Alcoff (1988) demonstrates, 'female'.

Nevertheless, these attempts to establish a 'new' aesthetic for the literary works of black women have been extremely valuable in unearthing and legitimating the works of these writers. However, many critics (for example, Carby 1987; Mohanty 1984 and Andrade 1990) have argued that there are a number of assumptions underlying much of this critical work that require urgent examination. The most significant of these is the assumption that all women writers have, by virtue of their gender, a common style or 'language'. Furthermore, as Carby (1987) points out, many of these analyses suggest that critics cannot assess the works of black women writers without following a number of 'rules'. One example of these rules would be the critical prescription, recommended by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith, that all analyses in "[b]lack women's studies be feminist, radical, and analytical" (Carby 1987:10). As a consequence of this kind of prescription, much of the critical work has itself become ambiguous and obscuring, and has tended either to ignore works which do not fit the prescribed 'black feminist' mould or, conversely, has resulted in the manipulation of a work until it does fit the prescribed mould.

The positing of these 'rules' which should be adhered to in examinations of the works of women writers has led to

the development of another misguided assumption concerning the work of black women writers. One such 'rule' which has become problematic was put forward by Barbara Smith (1985:8) who argued that a (preferably) black critic who assesses the works of black women writers should, firstly be feminist and, secondly, "work from the assumption that Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition". As Carby (1987:9) points out, this conception of the role of the critic is highly problematic because it asserts the "existence of an essential black female experience and an exclusive black female language in which this experience is embodied". It also, and more problematically, posits the existence of a long and unbroken chain of women writers, with scant regard paid to their differing experiences and locations.

As Carby (1987:10) maintains, "a black feminist criticism cannot afford to be essentialist and ahistorical, reducing the experience of all black women to a common denominator and limiting black feminist critics to [the] exposition of an equivalent black 'female imagination'". If the critical endeavour were to restrict itself to such an activity, a detailed examination of how women writers have responded to their different environments and the ways in which they have made use of the resources

available to them will not only be impossible but perhaps also undesirable.

Yet another scholar, Deborah McDowell (1985), has argued for a greater awareness of these implicit assumptions concerning a women's 'tradition' when examining the works of black women writers. McDowell has argued that we have to envision the parameters of a tradition as something to be debated and established. She warns that we should not simply assume these parameters, lest we rely too easily on generalities, especially in relation to the existence of a black female 'consciousness' or 'vision'.[4]

The issues raised by these scholars concerning the works of black American women writers remain central to current debates surrounding the work of women writers in general. Our concern, however, is with their similarity to issues currently requiring attention in the existing critical assessments of many black African women writers.

There are many similarities between the history of black women writers in America and that of black women writers in Africa. In South Africa, as Cherry Clayton (1989:1) has pointed out, black women "have been the last group within the country to find a literary platform. Of the

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[4] For a more detailed discussion of McDowell's position see Carby (1987:12-14) and Wall (1989:5).

more than 140 black South Africans writing in English since about 1920, only seven have been women". Despite these figures, however, and in much the same way as black American women writers have achieved prominence, African women writers have recently started coming to the fore in academic literary circles. As Clayton notes in her "Introduction" to Women and Writing in South Africa, recent publications by black women in this country have begun to make "the lives of black women less invisible" (1989:2).

Although not a concern of this thesis, the question of whether or not there are similarities in the actual texts of African and American women writers has yet to be explored fully, an enterprise which may also raise some interesting challenges to the current debate. There are, however, some interesting similarities between the critical works surrounding the texts of black American women writers and black African women writers, and it is with these critical similarities that we will engage in more detail.

The writings of African women authors have given rise to a body of scholarship that has sought to analyse and codify African women's texts, (for example, Brown 1975; Davies and Graves 1986; Frank 1984 & 1987 and a special issue of Research in African Literatures 1987). In a

noticeably male-dominated discipline, this scholarship has performed a valuable function in making African women writers more visible and their texts more accessible to the academic world.

However, like all pioneering ventures, and, in particular, like the critical works surrounding the writings of black American women writers, it also has many shortcomings. Much of this scholarship, for example LaPin (1984), Little (1980) and Ojo-Ade (1983), tends to be general and, at times, acontextual. An example of this tendency to remove the writer and the text from their context is evident in the following extract, where it is assumed that the experience of the 'traditional African woman' is and was always and everywhere the same:

> Because in traditional Africa woman reigned supreme as the giver and sustainer of life, she met the most urgent requirements of the family unit and underscored her concern in creations of verbal art. She soothed her newborn with rocking tunes, composed verses to praise a son, sang bride's laments at her daughter's marriage, instructed children through traditional tales. By recreating images on behalf of her loved ones, she moved them to a sense of well-being and

> promoted harmony in her domestic domain. (LaPin 1984:102)

Scholarly evaluations of writing by African women are, furthermore, inclined to operate from a set of largely unchallenged and unexamined assumptions. These problems are similar to those pointed out in relation to the scholarship on black American women writers and concern questions regarding the 'female tradition' and the '(black) female aesthetic'. The underlying problem with critical perceptions of black African women writers appears to be with the simplistic conception of a written 'female tradition' as growing out of an existing, 'organic' oral tradition of storytelling. For some critics at least, this assumption of an implicit similarity in the ways women 'tell stories', also leads them to assume that all African women writers have the same set of 'female' concerns: by and large, motherhood, marriage and men; and, more importantly, the same techniques and styles by means of which they vocalise these concerns. Lloyd Brown, for example, says

> Having established that there is a tradition of female needs and roles, the woman writer in Africa is beginning to establish a parallel tradition - one in which the writer is conscious

> of belonging to a tradition of literature by African women. (1975:184)

Bruner (1977:29), too, makes this assumption: "Even the genre [of women's fiction] as [oral] tale, short story or legend is an old form, containing, perhaps, a new message. The dilemma stories are among the popular forms of African folk art." Bruner assumes not only that women use forms that are 'naturally' female, but that they do so better to present the concerns that are equally 'naturally' female.

Assuming the existence of a 'black women writers' tradition' is not restricted to the critics. Ellen Kuzwayo, a South African woman writer, makes the same assumption about the continuity of the oral and written storytelling tradition in her work Sit Down and Listen (1990). As indicated by the title and the introduction to this book, Kuzwayo expresses the desire to write down the oral stories of her childhood which, she says, "provided opportunities of great learning for the youth of that era".[5] It is these stories that Kuzwayo wishes to "trap" on paper before "they vanished forever". The

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[5] The "Introduction" to Sit Down and Listen has no page numbers, thus references to this section will not be numbered.

storyteller in Kuzwayo's introduction is a "she", and it is her stories that Kuzwayo hopes:

> will serve as a reminder to those of us who share the story-telling traditions as well as a window through which those who have been brought up to look inwards only can peep and learn a little about their neighbours.

There are three assumptions at play in Kuzwayo's conceptualisation of 'orality' - one, that the 'oral tradition' is continuous and can be 'trapped' on paper in the written form in a simple and uncomplicated way; two, that storytellers are implicitly women and that they are heirs to this tradition; and three, that the only community in South Africa with an oral tradition to access is black. The consequence of these assumptions is that they deny that orality may be present in different societies in a number of different forms and may originate from a number of different sources. This point is especially pertinent in the case of Bessie Head, as critics have to date simply assumed her to be accessing a consistent oral tradition that can only, by definition almost, be black.

African women writers are thus often presented as simply slotting into a pre-existing tradition. It is

furthermore assumed that these women perceive themselves as part of this tradition and, as has been shown with the example of Ellen Kuzwayo, many women writers do make this assumption themselves. Thus for writers and critics alike, there is an implicit continuity between a female oral tradition and the written texts that have begun to emerge from African women writers. There are, of course, a number of problems with this assumption. As Isabel Hofmeyr (1991:131) points out, "this model is rather one dimensional and does not allow us conceptual insight into the diverse ways in which women writers in particular appropriate, or more properly, 'gender' tradition, to meet their particular needs". If we, even in the broadest sense, acknowledge that women have a diverse range of experiences, then we have also to acknowledge that their responses to these experiences will be as diverse, and it is this multiplicity of women's experiences and literary responses to which much of the more recent critical work (such as that of Carby (1987), for instance) is calling our attention.

As scholarship in other areas has shown, 'traditions' are seldom continuous and organic. Instead, traditions are invariably much more recent, synthetic and invented than their proponents suggest (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). As Hortense Spillers (Andrade 1990:91) asserts, "traditions are not born. They are made. We would add that they are

not, like objects of nature, here to stay, but survive as created social events only to the extent that an audience cares to intersect them." She states further "the work of black women's writing not only redefines tradition, but also disarms it by suggesting that the term itself is a critical fable intended to encode and circumscribe an inner circle of empowered texts" (Andrade 1990:95). We have to be able to examine and, more importantly, question all texts written by women at the level of how they interact with the specific concerns of the societies from which they originate.

Along with Deborah McDowell, Barbara Christian points out that, if there is a 'tradition' of black women writers, it is still developing. She questions whether one can theorize effectively about an evolving process and points out the need to examine the philosophical questions underlying the task of the critic when assessing the works of black women writers (Carby 1987:14).

In much the same way as critics have packaged the works of black American women authors, critics of African women writers have frequently resorted to positing "an experiential relationship that exists between ... critics and black women as writers who represent black women's reality" (Carby 1987:16). In keeping with the arguments of critics such as Mohanty (1984), Carby (1987) and

Andrade (1990), we need to move away from efforts to define the essential qualities of black women's writings towards more context-specific understandings of their works. As Clayton (1989:4) has noted, "the fictional curve [of women's novels in South Africa] is partly determined by the author's position within the social formation". We need, therefore, to re-examine the novels of black women with this context-specificity in mind. Carby (1987:16) also argues that we have to be "historically specific and aware of the differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community. In these terms, black and feminist cannot be absolute, transhistorical forms ... of identity".[6] If they are taken as absolute, one consequence may be that we end up ignoring or, more dangerously, obscuring crucial issues relating to the deliberate craft involved in the literary enterprise.

Related to this, Mohanty (1984:334) and Daymond (1990:ii-iii) assert that we need to differentiate between "woman" and "women" in order to better understand the relationship between the two. "Woman", Mohanty argues,

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[6] Cecily Lockett (1990) has taken this argument one step further by arguing that not only are the experiences of women context-specific, but so too is the feminist theory which has thus far been used in analyses of South African writing. See Katherine Frank (1984) for a discussion of the extent to which feminist criticism has been used in the criticism of the African novel.

is a "cultural and ideological composite" whereas "women" are "real, material subjects". Mohanty further contends that it is the conflation of these two categories that has led to the production of a "composite, singular 'Third World Woman' - an image which appears arbitrarily constructed" (Mohanty 1984:334).

The conflation of "woman" and "women" is particularly significant when we examine the works of black African women writers, as it often results in a particular inability to distinguish the writer from her subjects. Such assumptions lead critics to ignore the critical or analytical insights brought to the text by an African woman writer. Instead, we are left with the view that African woman writers all speak for and about the 'Third World Woman' - a concept which, according to Mohanty (1984:335), is the result of:

> An analysis of 'sexual difference' in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy of male dominance [which] leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of ... the 'Third World Difference' - that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries.

Mohanty further points out that the assumption that all women, "across classes and cultures are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group" leads to women being "characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression" (1984:337). This assumed homogeneity tends to obscure the different experiences even women in one country will have had.

An example of a critique based on the assumption that 'female experience' is homogeneous, is evident in Nadine Gordimer's preface to Ellen Kuzwayo's Call me Woman. Gordimer asserts that Kuzwayo's autobiography speaks of

> the life of that generation of women anywhere - in different epochs in different countries - who have moved from the traditional place in home and family system to an industrialised world in which they had to fight to make a place for themselves. (1985:xi)

By stressing Kuzwayo's similarities to other women, Gordimer obscures the fact that Kuzwayo cannot simply be assumed to be representative of women "anywhere", she cannot even be assumed to be representative of all black South African women as - and Gordimer (1985:xi) herself points this out - she is "one of the last old African upper-class-Christianized, at home in European culture

but not yet robbed of land and pre-conquest African culture", a specific description of a particular South African experience.

The experiences of Kuzwayo will differ vastly from the experiences even of other black women who may, for example, be uneducated or non-literate women, have little or no experience of urban life, or have only ever lived in the urban areas. Even the fact that Kuzwayo was able to record, in writing, and publish her experiences places her in a very different context from many women in South Africa. Thus to generalise in simple, 'essentialist' terms from the experiences of one of the "women" in South Africa to the life of "woman" in South Africa is to simplify the issue. The assumptions underlying much of the critical works on black women writers have to be considered and a more thorough investigation of the questions raised in connection with these presuppositions has to be carried out.

It is to one of these assumptions that we turn our attention in this thesis. We will examine critically those suppositions relating specifically to a 'women's literary tradition' which in relation to African women writers - as we have shown - posits a smooth transition from the oral to the written 'tradition'. This task will be undertaken in relation to that 'tradition' broadly

labelled as 'oral'. It is our contention that, rather than characterising women writers as passive recipients ('oral' or 'literate') of an existing 'female oral tradition', we should construe them as active agents, deliberately and systematically transforming both the 'oral traditions' and the 'literate traditions' available to them to make their writing embody their particular concerns. Women writers, we would thus argue, actively manipulate the idea of tradition and use it to ventriloquise their specific gender concerns in as much as they foreground women's issues in their texts. They can thus be said to 'gender' tradition. However, as has been discussed above, the existing scholarship pays little attention to these issues, and instead assumes that women writers, and particularly black women writers, make 'natural' use of the 'oral tradition', a 'tradition' frequently often also characterised as their own. These assumptions are misleading and tend to obscure rather than reveal what we need to know. For instance, how is this 'oral tradition' handed on from woman to woman? What apprenticeship, if any, do literate writers undergo in the 'oral tradition', and, if there is no apprenticeship as such, what informs and shapes their own perceptions of the oral tradition in which they are apparently working or, as we contend, which they deliberately and consciously decide to make use of?

If the literary criticism on the works of African women writers is to advance, then it is crucial that these questions be addressed. In this thesis we examine these questions in relation to Bessie Head, a writer noted for her intentional use of oral storytelling styles and techniques and her depiction of Tswana women generally and their storytelling patterns particularly. In addition, much of the critical work on Bessie Head has focused on issues of her use of 'traditional oral storytelling' as well as her place in the 'women's tradition' and we thus have a source of critical work on which to base our examination.

Having established the critical framework in this introduction, Chapter I seeks to illustrate the extent to which scholarship on Head assumes that her work reflects a 'true' African world and tradition. Our attempt to establish an alternative approach to her works begins with the recognition that Head did not simply 'reflect' the worlds in which she lived, but that her fiction was prompted by a set of aesthetic and intellectual choices. In Chapter II we speculate on what may have guided her choices by outlining an intellectual biography through which we attempt to identify th strands of influence on Head's conceptual framework.

Using Head's intellectual biography as a springboard, we then re-examine three dominant areas that we consider crucial to any assessment of Head's work. These are her views on 'African tradition', her use of orality, and her depictions of women. Much of the scholarship on Head has stressed her negative view of African tradition, and it is this area of her work to which we turn our attention in Chapter III where we examine Head's often ambiguous presentation of African 'tradition'. Intertwined with 'tradition' is her use of orality and the supposedly oral nature of her texts. We question the extent to which Head's texts are 'oral' and in Chapter IV examine the nature of the 'orality' she depicts. Lastly, in Chapter V, we explore how Head's presentation of women complicates many of the critical assessments of her work. In the final chapter we turn to a reading of A Bewitched Crossroad, Head's least examined text, and attempt to demonstrate how the alternative approach established in this thesis opens up new insights into this work in particular and her writing more generally.

CHAPTER I

TAKING HER AT HER WORD:
CRITICAL APPROACHES TO BESSIE HEAD

There is a large body of literary scholarship, local and international, concerning the works of Bessie Head[7] which concentrates on a number of central issues including her personal life, her autobiography (whether true or untrue), her insanity, and her use of an 'oral storytelling tradition'. The latest development in approaches to the works of Bessie Head comes from a group of American women who examine her work by comparing it to the fiction of other African and American women writers.

An indication of the variety of approaches applied to Head's fiction is evidenced by the number of critics who use the same biographical data to arrive at vastly differing conclusions about Head's writing, or, as is more often the case, about her personal likes, dislikes

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[7] An extensive bibliography of these critical texts has been published by NELM: Susan Gardner and Patricia E. Scott (1989).

and convictions. Sarvan (1987:85), for instance, argues that in A Question of Power, Head is "obsessed" with sex. The reason he offers is that she grew up in a beer-house. Head, he argues, has a "distaste for sex" arising directly from her early experiences. Johnson (1985:204) on the other hand, sees the imagery of sexual excess in the novel as a "metaphor for other types of excess". Nkosi (1981:102) maintains that Head "has the profoundest conviction" about the "insignificance of sex".

However, this diversity notwithstanding, Head scholarship can for our purposes be divided into a number of groupings that usefully illustrate the critical shortcomings referred to in the Introduction. These groupings are, broadly, the autobiographical and biographical approaches, assessments of her depiction of women, and discussions regarding her depiction of 'orality'.

As regards autobiographical approaches, Head herself has encouraged critics to examine her works from this perspective, saying, for instance, that A Question of Power "is totally autobiographical" (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:25). Much of the work done on Bessie Head from this perspective is extremely insightful.[8] However,

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[8] Cherry Clayton (Wilhelm), Craig Mackenzie and Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan, among others, have used the autobiographical approach to illuminate many

one major drawback with this approach is that it has almost obsessively limited the reading of her work to a narrow range of concerns linked, in turn, to aspects of her own life. A significant danger inherent in positing such a one-to-one relationship between life and text is that it minimises the degree of craft and skill evident in Head's work. Another danger is that it encourages a reading of her texts in the light of a circumscribed range of concerns.

Two such predominant concerns have been Head's 'colouredness' and her 'insanity'. As regards the first, critics have almost always assumed that her status as 'coloured' has resulted in a singular lack of identity. Her refugee status and experiences in Botswana provide yet more material for such critics of her works. Head herself identifies one of her major themes as refugeeism and history (Mackenzie 1990:67-68).[9] Bruner (1981:261) says much of Head's writing constitutes a "recall of

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interesting aspects of Head's work. Critics such as Susan Gardner, Elizabeth Evasdaughter and Femi Ojo-Ade have, on the other hand, tended to use it rather simplistically, an approach which will be discussed in more detail in the body of this chapter.

9 Examples of critics who concentrate on this aspect of Head's works are Cecil Abrahams (1978); Lloyd W. Brown (1981); Charlotte Bruner (1981); Susan Gardner (1985); Jean Marquard (1978); Lewis Nkosi (1981); Kolawole Ogungbesan 1979); Arthur Ravenscroft (1976); Charles P. Sarvan (1987); and Cherry Wilhelm (1983).

personal and ethnic past". Her novels, Bruner argues, "all deal with the reorientation of the exile to a new, somewhat hostile society" and mirror "her own unrewarded struggle for acceptance in her new community" (Bruner 1981:263). Ogungbesan's (1979) perception of Head's alienation is somewhat different. He argues that although Head suffered alienation in Botswana, there is a discernible movement in her novels and stories towards an acceptance of Botswana and, he argues as evidenced by the example of the Cape Gooseberry, a s of her having finally found a home.[10]

Susan Gardner (1985; 1989) seems unable to make up her mind on the issue Head's identity. Gardner believes that Head cannot be viewed as Botswanan, as she neither speaks nor writes the language o' Botswana, nor, she believes can Head be regarded as a 'coloured' writer since she does not speak Afrikaans, and, lastly, Head cannot be regarded as an African writer because "she has described embarrassing and annoying incidents when

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10 In When Rain Clouds Gather, the Cape Gooseberry, a South African plant, acclimatised so successfully to Botswana that the jam made from its fruit came to provide a source of income for a number of the agricultural co-operatives in Botswana.

students at African universities have disowned her writing" (1985:45).[11]

Lloyd Brown identifies the source of Head's alienation not only in her exile but also in her skin colour: "The circumstances of her birth cut her off from contact with her black African sources, but having inherited the civilization of the Christian West she has had to remain the West's historically unwanted offspring" (1981:159-160).[12] Although he points out what he perceives to be the ambiguities inherent in Head's 'race', he nonetheless unproblematically slots her into what he identifies as a specific African women's literary tradition, and does not question her choice of the African 'tradition' which dominates her texts.

Related to the discussions of Head's alienation and status as an exile are those discussions that centre on

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[11] Gardner's discussion of this is confusing. Although she dismisses all of the three categories as unlikely descriptions of Head, she fails to offer an alternative. Writers like Chinua Achebe, for example, write in English and are still considered 'African writers'. In addition, not all those who write in Afrikaans are 'coloured', and vice-versa. Furthermore, "embarrassing incidents" seem an unlikely reason for a writer not to be perceived, even if not by herself, as an African writer. All in all, the reasons for this section of Gardner's article remain a bit obscure.

[12] Sarvan (1987) too discusses this aspect of Head's 'alienation' in relation to the character Elizabeth in A Question of Power.

her insanity. These often conflate the characters in her novels with Bessie Head the person and, even more confusingly, with Head the writer. An example of this tendency is evident in Sarvan's (1987:84) discussion of Elizabeth's behaviour at a mental institution in A Question of Power.[13]

> Committed to an asylum, Elizabeth is asked to join the other inmates in keeping the place clean, but she refuses, demanding different treatment because 'I'm not an African' (p.181). However, Elizabeth's real desire is for acceptance by Africans as an African:
>
> > 'I dearly loved Robert Sobukwe and the politics he expounded in the years 1958-60 ... Sobukwe's view was Pan African and generally included all things African, with an edge of harshness in it that forced one to make an identification with being African and a sense of belonging to Africa ...'

Whereas the discussion in the first paragraph of the quote above concerns Elizabeth the *character*, the second

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[13] Ursula Barnett (1983:120-202) is another, though less contentious, example of this conflation of character and novelist.

paragraph, which appears simply to continue the point about Elizabeth the character is, in fact, not a quote from the novel, but a quote, in the first person, from a personal letter written to Sarvan by Bessie Head.

A second critic to concentrate on Head's madness by examining both the novelist and the character is Evasdaughter (1989). Although she states at the beginning of her article: "While an author cannot be diagnosed from a literary text, a character can be" (1989:72), she continually draws comparisons and conflates the categories of 'writer' and 'character' - that she herself distinguishes between at the outset. Evasdaughter also makes use of the DSM-III[14] to catalogue and 'understand' Elizabeth's character. While the validity of this manual has been questioned elsewhere, its use in this context is particularly questionable. Evasdaughter seems intent on showing that the novel follows both the DSM-III's chart of breakdown as well as the process of recovery. It is difficult to understand why this is significant as we are offered no

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[14] Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition (DSM-III, 1982). Practitioners of psychology and psychiatry, have, since the inception of this manual, debated its legitimacy as a diagnostic tool. It is in the light of these debates that we should question its use in a work of literary criticism in such an unquestioning and uncritical fashion (see for example, Weiten (1992)).

insights into how this would affect the ways in which Head presents her experiences in and opinions of Serowe and the issues on which she so determinedly focuses.

A further adjunct to the autobiographical approach is criticism that is anecdotal and deeply personal. The most well-known example of this tendency to reminisce comes from Susan Gardner (1986):

> Bessie had sometimes been a burden to me; her letters were increasingly intrusive about my personal life (and her queries about it, I think, may now be interpreted as warning signals - why did she want a photograph of me, besides all those from Serowe for instance? Why the queries as to whether I was married?); but I had always cared for her. (Gardner 1986:126)[15]

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[15] In a review article on Head, Stephen Gray (1991:100) makes similar remarks:
"I drove her there; even being driven was a treat. But once at reception with her meagre luggage, I was in for two astonishments. The first was Bessie with a Lion Lager tin in her hand interviewing the throng of prostitutes ... And then Bessie entering the ... casino. ... The commotion she created- 'You see, you only have eyes for the money in your plastic cup; no eyes for me' - was near to having us escorted out. ... Then I realised she was lost in there, drew her hand out of her garment and led her meekly to the more familiar bar-area."

Dovey (1989:30) contends that the intention of Gardner's article is a vindication of Gardner by herself, because "Head had accused [her] of 'professional misconduct'". The second issue raised by Gardner's article, Dovey argues, is whether biography is more privileged than autobiography and thus, whether Gardner's presentation of Head's biography (which she claims is 'true') is more acceptable or believable than Head's own autobiography (which Gardner claims is 'untrue'). As Dovey (1989:37) points out, the 'truth' contained in any autobiography is relative and whether or not Head's autobiography is true should not concern us as critics as much as "the writer's identity [which can be sought] in her writing".

These individual, highly personalised memories of Head provide no insights into her works and the 'traditions' or 'skills' she so deliberately utilises in their construction. As Dovey says, "The 'truth' which each successive reader finds in a book like A Question of Power is not likely to be affected by the 'true story' offered by Gardner's article" (1989:37). If anything, articles which concentrate on the author's personal knowledge and reminiscences of Bessie Head succeed in creating the impression that at least some of the Head scholarship has become a contest in which the winner knows Head the most profoundly.

Another broad area of investigation into Head's works is an examination of her female characters. Critics who have concentrated on Head's presentation of women have generally done so only in so far as this topic relates to the biographical and insanity themes outlined above. Thus any examination of Head's presentation of women in her novels and short stories is subordinated to the analysis of one of these broader themes, particularly those of her sanity and identity (examples of this include Sarvan 1987 and Johnson 1985).

Ojo-Ade's reading of A Question of Power concludes with the words: "Bessie Head's writing proves that womanhood and femininity are not a stigma, but elements of dynamism making for the full participation of the woman in the socio-political order" (1977:20), and, he argues, it is "symbolic" that the vision of a new world "comes from the mind of a woman labelled insane by society" (1977:21). There is here no real attempt to understand how Head's depictions of women function in her texts.

Some critics have attempted to understand Head's characterisation of women in terms of their roles as mother, in fact often in terms of Head's role as mother. Although not concentrating on this aspect of Head's texts, Wilhelm (1983:11) for example, has argued that it

is partly the needs of Elizabeth's small son (A Question of Power) that pull her back to sanity and reality.

Charlotte Bruner takes this one step further, by constantly stressing that the facts of Head's single parenthood are as distressing as her alienation and exile in Botswana: "Her insights as a woman, an intellectual, a mo ., a single parent, an outsider who has borne a history of disorientation even as a birth label ['coloured'] all enhance this portrayal [of exile]" (Bruner 1981:266). "Hence," Bruner continues, "the woman, with limited employment status, as sole provider undergoes additional strain and psychic stress if she is an exile without support of husband, friends, or a known community" (1981:268). Again, the tensions present in Head's fictional depictions of women remain unexplored.

Where critics have not subsumed Head's presentation of women into issues of identity, exile or insanity, they have subsumed her into a larger tradition of African women writers where, in the words of Lloyd Brown "[m]ore explicitly than most she is speaking o alf of and about the African woman, while compelling our attention as a voice for all women" (1975:34).[16]

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[16] Other examples of this generalization from the case of women to themes like insanity, race and belonging are: Lewis Nkosi (1981:101-3) and Lloyd Brown (1981:165-7). Although Brown discusses what he calls Head's "new woman" in some detail, he does not

Visel argues that, like Olive Schreiner, Bessie Head

> connects the personal with the political, the individual with her history ... she links patriarchal and racial domination, freedom for women and national liberation. Head's critique of African society is deeply feminist; her utopian plots enable the public emergence of women's power. (1990:123)

It is the women in Head's novels who, in Visel's words, "uncover her buried self - [and] lead her people out from under" (1990:123). The assumption operating here is that one woman character represents all women, if not all oppressed people. Bessie Head herself often makes these claims for her characters in her capacity as a writer of fiction. In a critical work, however, assuming that one woman speaks for all women does not allow us insight into the fine ways in which each individual writer, in this case Bessie Head, will use stories of women to explore what she perceives as their particular oppressions.

Gardner (1985:45) states that Head, "clearly delineates the oppressiveness of tribal life for women, compounded by urbanisation". It is, however, in the same article

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relate this concept of the 'new' woman back to the actual experiences of Serowe women.

that she argues - as we have already noted - that "[Head] cannot be viewed as Botswanan as she neither speaks nor writes the indigenous language". Why then, are Head's perceptions of Botswana women and society simply assumed to be reliable? The argument reverts to an 'organic' women's 'tradition' or 'experience' in terms of which Head, as a woman, can speak for most, if not all, other women. Head's perceptions of these women, and their relative accuracy or inaccuracy, are neither questioned nor examined. Her depiction of the position of women in Serowe society in particular is taken for granted despite the fact that, as Gardner (1985:45) herself acknowledges, Head had no access to the language spoken by these women and was often, in her own words, an outsider looking in: "After all, I'm such an isolated goddam outsider trying to be an African of Africa" (Vigne 1991:24) and "There's a whole world I know nothing about, especially the Setswana conversations" (Vigne 1991:116).

A seminal area of Head scholarship is represented by an examination of her use of the 'oral storytelling tradition'. It is with this area of criticism that this thesis will engage most fully. A number of critics have examined Head's use of the 'oral storytelling tradition', but the most extensive critical work in this area has been done by Craig Mackenzie (1989(1); 1989(2) and (1985)) who has focused almost exclusively on Head's use

of the 'oral tradition'. Mackenzie's work will be examined more extensively later on in this chapter.

Two assumptions concerning orality appear to form the basis of the notion of an 'oral tradition' in the critical works that deal with this aspect of Head's fiction. The first is that this tradition is continuous and 'organically' passed down from generation to generation developing eventually into the female written 'tradition' now evident. La Pin (1984:102), for example, says that "... the women's voice has not lain dormant to be suddenly unleashed by the world of print. It has spoken for centuries in an unbroken chain of verbal creations, some of which were gradually transmuted into the written word." This conceptualisation of the oral and the written is a consequence of very valuable critical attempts to make the works of women wri ers more visible, and one of the ways in which this has been achieved has been to argue that a 'hidden' or 'concealed' 'women's tradition' has been in existence for many years and needs only to be revealed.

The second assumption is that an 'oral tradition' is very often an intrinsic part of the make-up of a woman. The characterisation of women as storytellers has become "one of the most enduring stereotypes in southern African oral literary studies" (Hofmeyr 1992:39) and much of what is

written about women as authors of written texts draws on this "stereotype" of women as 'natural storytellers'. Lloyd Brown (1975:4) stresses the 'continuity' of the 'women's tradition': "Women have always played a considerable role, as storytellers and performers, in the oral tradition". The same assumption runs through the following extract taken from an introduction to a recently published collection of women's writing.

> The process of transference within and between communities has stretched over many centuries to the extent that these narratives are still told today and have influenced the style, structure, themes and tone of a writer such as Bessie Head. It therefore remains a vital factor within the formation of South African narratives of the past century and needs to be placed in relation to the literature that follows it. (Van Niekerk 1990:17)

At no stage is the question of how this oral 'tradition' is transferred "within and between" the communities examined. Secondly, it is assumed that Head is unwittingly influenced by a distinguishable orality present in modern day Serowe rather than viewing her use of oral forms as a conscious decision on her part to achieve a particular fictional goal. Rather than simply stating that Head "achieves an unique and harmonious

combination of indigenous storytelling tradition and Western literary conventions" (Van Niekerk 1990:22), we need to investigate how and why she achieves this.

Head is consequently assumed to be a part of an organic, female oral storytelling tradition. Thus two traditions are harnessed into one: the oral tradition and the still-developing women's written tradition, as is evident in a statement like: "with Head as an important forerunner, the eighties was a vital period for the emergence of black women's voices" (Van Niekerk 1990:23). Head herself has questioned the validity of attempting to place her in any kind of identifiable 'tradition': "I wouldn't say I was aware of a special writing tradition. I was aware that I had to communicate certain things, perhaps that I had set very high standards for myself... So it's later that reviewers and critics give you these categories, slots, and so on" (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:7).

Ursula Barnett (1983:198;200) has a more complex view of Head's use of oral forms. She acknowledges that Head's sources are 'traditional' and 'oral' in the sense that they are often based on legend and myth, but she also points out that Head used the recorded written history of Botswana as a basis for her fiction. Barnett also examines very briefly some of the techniques employed by Head to recreate the feel of an oral tale in her fiction,

acknowledging that Head is a "craftsman" (1983:203), building a tale up carefully from a chosen setting or scene. Barnett has gone part of the way in her analysis of Head's use of the oral tradition, but she has neglected one very important element of Head's presentation of this 'oral tradition' - how did Head, with no Setswana, gain access to this tradition? What informs Head's perceptions of orality? These are questions that have yet to be answered.

Lewis Nkosi approaches the problem of African writers' use of 'tradition' by providing us with a practical concept, one that may prove fruitful in attempting to understand Head's use of 'orality'. Nkosi posits the existence of a "usable tradition" (1981:97). This 'usable tradition', Nkosi argues, entails those aspects of a perceived traditional past that may prove useful for writers writing about contemporary issues. This thesis will attempt to argue that Head has not only found but also gone some way towards constructing a 'usable tradition' which she employs consciously and deliberately in her fiction. We will return to a more detailed discussion of this point later in this thesis.

Let us now turn to Mackenzie, who has examined Head's use of 'orality' in most detail. Head does not, Mackenzie argues, make use of a "novel idea" in choosing the

"storyteller framework" (1989:39). Mackenzie does, however, acknowledge that Head chooses to use this form: "... it is clear that the author wants to present all the familiar components of an African storytelling ethos; the camp-fire setting, the old and wise narrator, a known and intimate audience, an ending which provokes re-evaluation and comment" (1989:39). Mackenzie appreciates the fact that Head relies on "oral sources supplemented by extraneous literary ones" (1989(1):37). Furthermore, he states:

> The narrative tale, the primary method - according to Walter J. Ong - by which oral cultures deal with the flow of life, is therefore the genre adopted by Bessie Head. The stories are the kind of stories that the villagers tell each other.

While Mackenzie's research has done much to open up a useful area of inquiry into Head's work, it is not without its problems. The major weakness of this research is the fact that he has explicitly relied on Ong's (1982) characterisation of orality and literacy, which is noted for a monolithic and undifferentiated conceptualization of 'orality' and the 'oral tradition'.

Street (1988:3-5)[17] criticizes Ong for his use of "present-day 'oral' cultures ... as evidence of the nature of past societies" and, above all, for the bipolar depiction of orality and literacy which leads to erroneous assumptions regarding "western" versus "non-western" thought processes and cultural characteristics. Western, literate thought is said to be rational, detached and objective as, by extension, are its members (Street 1988:5). Oral, non-western, thought is mnemonic, rhythmic, additive and redundant (Ong 1982:38-40).

Mackenzie's reliance on the work of Ong leads him to assume that the 'oral tradition' on which Bessie Head draws is still in existence and that it can be easily separated from the rest of village life which, as we will demonstrate later, has for at least a century, been infiltrated by literacy. Secondly, he assumes that this 'oral tradition' is readily accessible to someone who has no command of the indigenous language of Serowe. Furthermore, he does not question the extent to which Head not only utilises this 'tradition', but in many instances invents it.

A further, related issue is the question of whose 'oral tradition' Head is supposedly making use of. None of the

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[17] Leroy Vail and Landeg White (1991) criticize Ong on the same grounds.

critics who discuss Head's use of orality question that its original, single source is Serowe. This unquestioning approach to orality may have something to do with the same assumption made by Ellen Kuzwayo - that only black people can have an oral tradition that is still easily accessible.[18] As Shuman (1986:185) points out, it is erroneous to presume that only predominantly oral cultures have oral artistic forms. In other words, it may not be the case that Head simply transported oral features into her writing, but that many of those features perceived by the reader to be part of the 'oral tradition of Serowe' may, in fact, be residual oral features of Head's own upbringing. And, to continue Shuman's point (1986:185), there is a constant interplay between "oral" and "literate forms". The Botswana Head wrote of is modern Botswana and, although there may well be an identifiable 'oral tradition', there is no doubt that aspects of literacy would have influenced Tswana life and thus also possibly whatever 'traditional oral culture' that may have existed. To assume that Head makes use of a clearly identifiable and virtually static orality in her books is thus really to examine the issue rather superficially.

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[18] See the Introduction to this thesis.

In addition, Mackenzie fails to take a number of other crucial issues into account. He neglects to examine the position of women in Tswana society, an issue with which Head concerns herself in great detail. He does not attempt to establish the nature of Tswana storytelling Head draws on, nor does he attempt to come to terms with Head's perceptions of Tswana society. He too takes Head at her word. Above all, though he claims Head utilises the 'oral' resources present in the society she lives in, he makes no attempt to understand the complexity of Head's encounter with that society or the exact nature of the oral sources to which she would have been privy.

Very recently, there has been another departure in Head scholarship, namely an attempt to place her within a broadly feminist African, American and Asian women's tradition.[19] One recent example of this trend is a collection of essays entitled Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia. The essays containing criticism of Head's writings are all comparative: she is compared to Aidoo (Rooney 1991:99-126); Nwapa and Njau (Bryce-Okunlola 1991:200-218); Macgoye (Kibera 1991:310-329) and, finally, to Emecheta and Rhys (Fido 1991:330-347).

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[19] Alice Walker has also dedicated her 1988 collection of essays to "the great African writer Bessie Head" (Walker 1988:xi).

While this criticism does serve to extend the perspectives from which Head is viewed, it tends also to reproduce many of the problems noted above. For example, one critic, Rooney, while offering a complex analysis of Head's work, tends to view her in terms of a dispossessed exile - a foreigner to Botswana attempting to make sense of what she sees around her: Bessie Head is at "a crossroads of dispossession or ... unbelonging" (1991:119). Even more conventional is Rooney's summing up: "Elizabeth recovers herself, her mental peace and social being, through her participation in the collective project of the vegetable garden in which people of different races and different places are involved" (1991:119). The understanding Rooney offers of Head's work is, therefore, not at all new - it does not reconsider the context in which the work is written other than within a somewhat broadened 'female' or 'feminist' 'exile' parameter and, as such, once more simplifies Head's presentation of Botswana into a one-to-one relation between experience and text.

Bryce-Okunlola, in the same collection, almost immediately falls into the trap of assuming that Head is simply one in a long line of oral storytellers now in print: "the source of their creativity [is] in the communal storytelling tradition of their foremothers" (1991:201). The corollary to Bryce-Okunlola's

conceptualisation of a long line of 'oral' "foremothers" is an insistence on motherhood as the crucial entry point to an understanding of Head's texts.

Kibera also inserts Head into a 'women's tradition' - this time written - by comparing Head and Macgoye: "Macgoye and Head's fictive worlds share as much in common **as the writers themselves do as women** and as transplanted individuals" (1991:318 emphasis added). Bessie Head and Marjorie Macgoye are, she argues, still more alike because they "share their ... gender, their vocation as writers and their commitment to their adopted motherlands" (1991:310). The implicit assumption is, once again that, as women writers, the essential female experience allows for Head and Macgoye to share the same 'female' style and the same set of concerns, as a necessary consequence of their gender. This 'essentialist' reduction of female experience is reinforced when one considers that Macgoye, a white woman, was born and raised in England. Thus once again, Head is subsumed into a genealogy of women writers who

have little in common other than the fact that they are women and writers.[20]

Kibera has, though, unlike many other critics, picked up on the fact that Head's presentation of women is not unambiguous - "Head held that traditional African societies, with their rigidly defined, stereotyped sex roles, encouraged the sexes to objectify and manipulate each other", often resulting in "warped cultural attitudes" (1991:316). She realises that Head is attempting to work out the "loosening grip of tradition on women's lives and on the resulting ambivalence in female attitudes to men, marriage and children" (1991:322), and perceives that this might be perplexing as Head has a "unique but double-edged perspective: [her] vantage point allows [her], simultaneously, an outsider's clear-sightedness, an insider's intimacy and the very real risk of mis-interpreting what [she] see[s]" (1991:325).

In conclusion, it is evident that many critics have taken Head's works too easily at face value, assuming a direct

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[20] Elaine Savory Fido begins her article as follows: "Mother, from whom we leave and to whom we return, the one who is the starting point of all journeys and the point of reference for all destinations..." (1991:330), further evidence of the intention of establishing a tradition of women writers who write only in relation to other women.

relationship, in varying degrees, between the events in Head's life and her fiction. In order to sidestep the problems inherent in this approach, we need to question the assumptions concerning Head's reliability as a witness of Serowe life and orality. We begin this questioning in the hope that it will reveal to us the extent to which Head crafted her works so precisely that they could easily subsequently be taken at face value by her critics.

CHAPTER II

FOUNDATIONS:
AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY

In the previous chapter we examined a number of critical approaches to the works of Bessie Head in order to demonstrate that the critics have assumed a critical stance which has, to varying degrees, resulted in the positing of a more or less one-to-one relationship between Head's life and fiction. In this chapter, we establish the basis for our contention that her narratives are far more intricate and 'crafted' than literary critics have previously tended to assume. To demonstrate this contention, we turn to Head's intellectual biography as a means of establishing the ideas and intellectual currents that shape her fictional worlds. The use of Head's biography as a means of understanding her fiction is not new and has been applied by many critics as the previous chapter has shown. This chapter employs this broad critical emphasis, but aims to extend the examination of Head's biography to focus on those aspects that may, broadly, be called

'intellectual'. Rather than emphasising those aspects of Head's life that many critics have argued appear as 'autobiography' in her fictional texts, we need to establish the intellectual premises that inform broadly what she selects for use in her texts and, furthermore, the extent to which she shapes and transforms the issues and episodes of Botswana life that she perceives around her. The emphasis will, therefore, be on those of Head's beliefs, interests and ideologies that could have motivated the style and form of many of her texts and that may have contributed to the choice of content in their writing. It will ultimately be argued that Head's fiction is not as much a 'real' reflection of what Botswana was or is, as an intellectually inspired manipulation and invention of what Head felt it ought to be.

The task of establishing an intellectual biography for Bessie Head has been made easier by the recent publication of a collection of letters written by Head from Serowe to Randolph Vigne (1991). The publication of these letters raises an important issue: there appears to be an enormous disjuncture between the content of the letters and the fictional texts published by Bessie Head, many of which were written at the same time as the letters selected for publication by Vigne. The disjunction between the letters and Head's texts would

appear to confirm the contention of this thesis that Head's works are more deliberately crafted than has previously been assumed. Moreover, these letters have provided new perspectives on Head's fiction which challenge many of the critical assessments of her works to date, especially when one observes the disparity between Head's fictional representations of African women - which often tend towards the sentimental and idealised - and the very negative attitude towards these same women that she expresses in her letters. A discussion of Head's presentation of women is contained in Chapter V.

Letters, interviews and occasional articles written by Head will be used to provide insights into the intellectual framework with which she approached Serowe, and the extent to which these influenced her writing. Establishing a clear framework of Head's beliefs is a difficult task as her views are frequently contradictory and her fiction reflects the paradoxical nature of her thought. She embraces an extensive, diverse and often conflicting set of political ideologies, religious beliefs and viewpoints. In the light of these new perspectives provided by the letters and interviews, her fictional texts could be re-assessed as the arenas in which she struggles to control and fuse a number of ideological tendencies. This chapter will not attempt to draw out all the contradictions and incongruities in

Head's intellectual 'map', but will instead concentrate on the major strands of thought clearly evident in the sources referred to above. We will thus attempt to gain some sense of the effect Head's beliefs would have had on her views of Serowe life, and how these views, combined with her new experiences of an African country that is not South Africa, are fused in her fictional representations of Serowe. A stylistic, literary analysis using these insights will be carried out in later chapters of this thesis.

A number of strands in Head's thinking become clear through a reading of her letters, interviews and non-fiction writings.[21] The first discernible strand of influence is Africanism - in particular, the effect that Robert Sobukwe had on her. (She herself has listed him as one of the most important influences on her beliefs.) A second, important influence is the significance she attached to history and the possible link between her conceptions of history and her Africanist views. Related to Head's views on history is the fact that Botswana achieved its independence in 1966 with relative ease, whilst Head was staying in Botswana. Botswana's independence is significant in that it appears to have

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[21] The sources referred to are: Randolph Vigne (1991); Craig Mackenzie (1990) and Craig Mackenzie and Cherry Clayton (1989).

deeply influenced her perspectives on Africa as a whole and to have sharpened her perceptions of South Africa and Botswana specifically. Third, Head's impressions of 'traditional' African structures, past and present, need to be examined. We will also explore the relationship between women and orality in Head's work. Fourth, the fact that Bessie Head was employed as a journalist whilst in South Africa cannot be ignored as this in itself leads to a particular narrative style as well as a particular conception (when combined with the drive to write fiction), of the need to 'tell a story' in the broadest sense. Her journalistic background may well also have influenced her perceptions of orality.

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Little is known of Head's early life as very few details are available.[22] She was born on 6 July 1937 in Pietermaritzburg and placed into foster care. In 1950 she was removed from her foster parents and placed in an Anglican mission orphanage where, in her own words, she "harboured a terrible and blind hatred for missionaries and the Christianity which they represented" and, once she left the mission, she "never set foot in a Christian

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[22] The information contained in this description of Head's early life is taken from the chronology of Head's life by Craig Mackenzie (1989(1)).

church again" (Mackenzie 1990:4). While at the mission school she attended high school and trained as a primary school teacher, a job she then did from 1956 to 1958.[23] From 1958 to 1960 she worked as a columnist for the Golden City Post in Johannesburg.

In 1960 Bessie Head moved to Cape Town where she met and, in 1962, married Harold Head. She lived in Cape Town for just over three years and in March 1964 left South Africa for Botswana, where she remained until her death on 17 July 1986.

One of the most significant and easily discernible strands of influence on Head is Africanism,[24] particularly that of Robert Sobukwe. Her first contact with Robert Sobukwe and the Africanist movement within the African National Congress at the time may very well have been through her position on the Golden City Post in Johannesburg in which Africanist appeals were published. On 29 March 1959, while Head was working for the

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[23] No mention of where Head worked as a teacher appears in any of the texts either about or by Head.

[24] Tom Lodge (1990:21) defines Africanism as "an appeal that would overcome the psychological inhibitions produced by racial oppression" which would consist of "a racially assertive nationalism which would serve to foster sentiments which were part of the 'natural' psychological make-up of all Africans". Such an appeal would also, therefore, emphasise "indigenous leadership" and "national self-determination".

newspaper, the following Africanist assertion by Sobukwe was published: "The masses do not hate an abstraction like 'oppression' or 'capitalism' ... They make these things concrete and hate the oppressor - in South Africa the White man" (Lodge 1990:83).

Bessie Head would also still have been in Johannesburg during the Pan-African Congress's (PAC) Positive Action Campaign, culminating in the shootings at Sharpeville. This campaign was led by Robert Sobukwe, Head's "hero" (Vigne 1991:1). In 1960, the year Head moved to Cape Town, the PAC (following its national campaign) was banned under a State of Emergency. This Positive Action Campaign "had had its greatest success in Cape Town, where the entire African community went on strike" (Vigne 1991:1). These events led to what Vigne has called the "electric" political atmosphere of the 1960s, the era during which Bessie Head was known as a "fire-eating African nationalist and a supporter of the Pan-Africanist Congress" (Vigne 1991:1).

In 1985, although by this time having undergone a radical change in her attitude to the PAC, Bessie Head retained her respect and admiration for Robert Sobukwe, a deeply symbolic, yet distant, leader.[25] It must be remembered

[25] Tom Lodge (1991:80) argues that Sobukwe's leadership was distant and symbolic for the PAC as a whole: whilst in prison "he continued to fulfil important

that Robert Sobukwe led the organisation for a very short period of time before he was imprisoned and, as such, much of his leadership of the movement was from the distanced location of Robben Island. Sobukwe's Africanism, Head says, managed to give her, a person with a "very broken sense of history", "a sense of balance ... he gave me a comfortable black skin in which to live and work". "Sobukwe's view," she explains, "was Pan African and he personally included all things African, but with an edge of harshness that forced one to make an identification with Africa and a sense of belonging to Africa" (Mackenzie 1990:97). Although Head claimed in 1985 that she "carefully avoided politics" (Mackenzie 1990:97), this sense of belonging to Africa never left her, despite her disillusionment with the PAC as a political group. As early as 1969 she became distressed with what she termed "the black power people" who have "no heart" and whose "apparently complicated intellectual reasoning is derived from the inferiority complex which wants to impress perhaps 'whitey' that the black man has got brains. It is all sham and pose and ego and something I can't stomach" (Vigne 1991:92-3).

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symbolic and charismatic functions, partially compensating for the serious shortcomings of those people who were at liberty to actually lead the organisation", "in reality, though, Sobukwe's achievements as a political leader were very uneven".

In a very uncanny way, much of what Head writes mirrors what Sobukwe believed or is recorded as having said. For example, in a speech delivered to his fellow students in his final year at Fort Hare University, Sobukwe explained what it means to be an African nationalist:

> We have made our choice. And we have chosen African Nationalism because of its deep human significance; because of its inevitability and necessity to world progress. World civilizations will not be complete until the African has made his full contribution. ... I wish to make it clear again that we are anti-nobody. We are pro-Africa. We breathe, we dream, we live Africa; because Africa and humanity are inseparable ... On the liberation of Africa depends the liberation of the whole world. (Pogrund 1990:37)

This principal belief of Sobukwe's reverberates through Head's words, "Africa is going to rise to a great height of civilization and this is going to be done, in the last resort, with African brains ..." (Mackenzie 1990:46).

Like Head, Sobukwe had a deep-seated mistrust of the destructive effects of hatred. In Sobukwe's words:

> ... a doctrine of hate can never take people anywhere. It is too exacting. It warps the mind. That is why we preach the doctrine of love, love for Africa. We can never do enough for Africa, nor can we love her enough. The more we do for her, the more we wish to do. (Pogrund 1990:36)

Elsewhere he said:

> ... there is only one race to which we all belong and that is the Human Race. In our vocabulary, therefore, the word race, as applied to man, has no plural form. (Pogrund 1990:92)

A fusion of the above two statements is fundamental to an understanding of Head's texts, as is evidenced by both A Question of Power and When Rain Clouds Gather, and is expressed by Head in 1962, two years after her arrival in Cape Town in "Let me tell a story now ...":

> If I had to write one day I would just like to say people is people and not damn white, damn black. Perhaps if I was a good enough writer I could still write damn white, damn black and still make people live. Make you love them, not because of the colour of their skin but because

> they are important as human beings. (Mackenzie 1990:6)

This dislike for racial categories may be as much due to the influence of Sobukwe as to the influence of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) and the South African Liberal Party (SALP). The NEUM was established in 1943, and was "largely a product of resistance against segregationist consultative and administrative bodies constituted by the state ... especially the Coloured Advisory Council and the Coloured Affairs Council (CAD)" (Nasson 1990:191). Both Nasson (1990:91) and Lodge (1990:39) have pointed out that the NEUM drew much of its following from teachers and was led by a "radical middle-class intelligentsia", a group to which Head would have had access in Cape Town on her arrival. Her social circle in the early 1960s included Lewis Nkosi and Dennis Brutus (both of whom went into exile and whose loss she mourned (Mackenzie 1990:13)), Randolph Vigne (of the SALP) and Patrick Duncan (also of the SALP and the editor of Contact, for whom Harold Head worked), among others. Head's husband was, in addition, a member of the NEUM.

The juxtaposition of the PAC and the SALP in Head's social circle is not as strange as it would at first appear, and much of what is contained in Head's fiction

is a fusion of the two ideologies.[26] In fact Sobukwe himself, Lodge argues, was a "liberal of another colour" (Lodge 1991; Pogrund 1990:244) who drew not only from the ideologies of the PAC but also frequently from a liberal "ethos of individual martyrdom" (Lodge 1991:82-3).

The NEUM, which was to become the "major political force among coloured intellectuals" (Lodge 1990:39), had two guiding principles, one of which was "an abiding commitment to non-racialism" and the other a "line of non-collaboration with the regime" (Nasson 1990:192). This belief in non-racialism is especially pertinent to Bessie Head as it was, according to Nasson (1990:192), not so much a belief that race was irrelevant, but that races did not exist, a sentiment expressed by Richard Rive in the following statement:

> I don't believe in this whole concept of race ... I am as anti-white as I am anti-black or anti-pink or anti-blue. I do believe entirely in non-racialism as a tenet where colour is no criterion at all. (Quoted in Nasson 1990:192)

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[26] This assertion will be examined in more detail in later chapters of this thesis dealing with Head's fiction.

Richard Rive and Bessie Head were, at the very least, acquaintances, both living in Cape Town at the same time, and, very likely, moving in similar political circles.[27]

A further similarity between Robert Sobukwe and Bessie Head is their idiosyncratic dislike of labelling ideas and beliefs, as though this would 'close' the ideas off from proper use. They both felt that no one belief was in itself the perfect solution to any problem. At the launching conference of the PAC held on 4-6 April 1959, delegates from all over South Africa heard Sobukwe's opening address on the first day, in which he explained the principles on which the PAC was grounded. On the second day of the conference, Sobukwe, by now the acknowledged leader of the Africanists, answered questions put to him by the delegates present at the meeting.

> One [delegate] said: 'I am not sure whether he [Sobukwe] is more inclined to socialism or to communism', and was told by Sobukwe that it was not necessary 'to give names to things. We do not have to follow particular ideologies if we do

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27 Professor Peter N. Thuynsma remembers Richard Rive saying that he knew Bessie Head while she was living in Cape Town. It is possible that through Rive and the activities of her husband, Harold Head, Bessie Head would have been well-acquainted with this form of non-racialism.

not accept them completely ... we borrow from East and West ...'. (Pogrund 1990:93)

Head, in a comparable tone, wrote in 1978:

> I have avoided political camps and ideologies because I feel they falsify truth. It was necessary for me to concentrate directly on people because I believe it is only people who make people suffer and not some hidden, unknown God or devil. (Mackenzie 1990:63)

Vernon Gibberd[28] has this to say of Bessie Head: "She saw <u>through</u> people so easily that I doubt she had much time for any of the Botswana politicians."[29] By the time Head wrote of her avoidance of political parties and camps, she had clearly been of this opinion for a number of years for, as early as 1967 she had written in a letter to Randolph Vigne (1991:54):

> There are really wicked people on this earth. BUT THEY ARE NOT IN CAMPS. Therefore you can't say all communists and supporters of communism are good. The most evil people are there.

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[28] Vernon Gibberd, a friend of Bessie Head's, was a volunteer worker in Botswana for many years.

[29] Letter from Vernon Gibberd, 7 December 1992

> Therefore you can't say all white men are evil. The most good people found there side by side with terrible brutes. You can't say African people, because they walk around in rags and tatters, are good.

It is also clear, however, that Head cannot uncomplicatedly be called an African nationalist. She is, she says, "surprised" at the extent to which "creative writing is often regarded ... as a nationalistic activity" (Mackenzie 1990:101). If it is at all nationalistic, she argues, then perhaps it is rather at the level of a "rather subdued communication a writer [has] ... with his own society" (Mackenzie 1990:101). Despite this avowed lack of 'nationalist' intention, glimmers of Sobukwe's Pan-Africanist brand of nationalism nonetheless filter through her writings.

The profundity of Sobukwe's influence on Head[30] is

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[30] Another influence that Sobukwe may have had on Head - and this must remain speculative for the moment - is her interest in oratory. Sobukwe was renowned for his considerable rhetorical prowess. Pogrund (1990) demonstrates how Sobukwe's oratorical skills had begun while he was still a student leader at Fort Hare University. Sobukwe's speech at the launch of the PAC (referred to above) was, Pogrund says, "scholarly as always, but now there was a fluency and passion which put it among the finest oratory I had heard" (1990:91). It is thus possible to speculate that Head was able, particularly during her stay in Johannesburg while Sobukwe lived in Soweto, to hear Sobukwe speak and that this may have

expressed in these words written in 1978, after she had heard about Sobukwe's death. Her response to Sobukwe's death seems also to demonstrate the extent to which he may have been symbolic of the idealistic feelings about Africa Head so often verbalised in her own works:

> Robert Sobukwe died. I loved the man deeply and I have since his death been looking over some things he wrote. ... I knew he was a rich and creative man, but looking over his papers it never struck me before that he was also so idealistic. The light went out for me with his death. For days and days I cried simply because he was the only man I ever loved and trusted. (Vigne 1991:219-220)

Related to Head's Africanist beliefs is her interest in history - it was, after all Sobukwe, she said, who had given her a sense of her own history. She was "fascinated by history, by the migrations of people, by the meeting of many strange cultures and by trade and the exchange of goods" (Mackenzie 1990:83). It is not surprising that Head's imagination was taken with history since there were, at this time (1960s and 70s) a number of significant developments occurring on this front.

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played a part in her later interest in the oratory of, for instance, the kgotla.

These changes in approach to historical method have often been referred to as 'radical historiography' although this category comprised a number of different tendencies in approaches to history. Two overall historical philosophies are evident in Head's works: the first, prevalent in the 1950s and 60s, was the classically nationalist interpretation of history as the story of the unfolding of a nation. A movement that arose largely in response to colonial views of African history, it tended - like the history it sought to unseat - to focus on the chiefs, leaders and rulers of nations or societies heading for independent nationhood. A second, later development in Head's approach to history is analogous to developments in historiography that had a more populist focus. Generally known as 'history from below', this school of thought which became very influential in South Africa, focused on the struggles of ordinary people. Bessie Head is clearly interested in the histories of both the 'big men' (such as Khama the Great) and the ordinary people (for example, those with whom she lived in Serowe).

It would appear that Head's engagement with history at the level of research was developed during her stay in Botswana. Her early novels, she says, contain only "peaceful rural scenes ... hastily snatched to form the backdrop to torturous novels". It was only "later, much

later [that she] became acquainted with the history of Botswana and it was like becoming acquainted with a way of life that was applicable to all the tribes of Africa" (Mackenzie 1990:87). It becomes clear that it is her interest in the history of Botswana that leads her to understand history in new ways:

> The high clamour and violence of South African history dominates all the southern lands so they are written of in history books as mere appendages of South African history. Botswana is no mere extension of South African history and the great arid waste and the history books would have us believe. (Mackenzie 1990:1987)

The work of Mary Benson in particular seems to have had an enormous effect on Bessie Head - ("she is famous for her beautiful biography on Tshekedi Khama" (Vigne 1991:198)) - and their interpretations of the history of the Tswana people under Khama concur (Wylie 1990:222 ff). Mary Benson's book also appears in the bibliography to Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind.

In this text Head concentrates on the lives of three individuals whom she identifies as the "great" men of Serowe: Khama the Great, Tshekedi Khama and Patrick van Rensburg (Head 1981:xiv), drawing the information on

their lives from themselves, from books written about them and from interviews conducted with people living in Serowe at the time. An examination of the bibliography Head consulted in writing the introduction - bearing in mind that the text was only published in 1981 - draws exclusively on material published prior to 1975, and concentrates on publications in the 1960s. Revisions of African history, broadly categorised as 'radical', occurred in the late 70s, and it appears that Head has to some extent anticipated this historiographical tradition, especially in her choice of the themes she considered worthy of historical attention: self-help, migration, people's names, treatment of marriage and death and a detailed description of village life. Her choice of methodology - that of the oral interview - is a further indication of the similarities between her work and the work of radical historiographers at the time, who often relied on broadly oral sources. One of the main tenets of radical historiography in general, according to Bozzoli and Delius (1990:17) was that it "disputed colonial denial of a meaningful precolonial African history and stressed the centrality of African initiative in shaping the past and present of the African continent". Without doubt it is this understanding of history that informs Head's approach to the lives of the three "great" men outlined above.

The need to 'rewrite' an acceptable history of Africa for her readers at most, and herself at least, is clarified in her response to the story of Nongqawuse. Intrigued by the events surrounding the Xhosa cattle killings, she wrote: "I used to hate, deeply, the smirking white historian view of our school history text books, like that is just what the natives would do" (Vigne 1991:124).[31]

In addition, as Bozzoli and Delius point out (1990:16), many black intellectuals, particularly in the 1950s and 60s, were denied access to the institutions which would enable them to practise history. The stultifying context of black education in South Africa disabled them as pupils and later, as academics, while many were denied access to libraries, archives and universities. As a consequence of these restrictions, it was through the genres of journalism and "historical fiction" that the "black intelligentsia ... found its voice". It is not surprising, therefore that it is through these genres that Bessie Head, stimulated by the need to re-tell history, says she is "a pioneer blazing a new trail into the future" (Mackenzie 1990:64), and clarifies her role in this future in the following way:

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[31] This is easier to understand punctuated as: "I used to hate, deeply, the smirking white historian view of our school history text books, like, 'That is just what the natives would do.'"

> It would seem as though Africa rises at a point in history when world trends are more hopefully against exploitation, slavery and oppression - all of which has been synonymous with the name, Africa. I have recorded whatever hopeful trend was presented to me in an attempt to shape the future, which I hope will be one of dignity and compassion. (Mackenzie 1990:64)

The role of a writer who in some way shapes the future might also have been informed by Head's early journalistic experiences - the need to 'record' for posterity what she witnesses around her.

Head also often expresses a need to make history more 'alive' - this is one of the driving forces behind much of her work. She expresses her admiration for Sol Plaatje's ability to do just that in her foreword to Native Life in South Africa.[32] Of her own work about Serowe, she remarks that "there isn't anything in this village that an historian might care to write about. Dr. Livingstone passed this way, they might say. Historians do not write about people and how strange and beautiful they are - just living" (Mackenzie 1990:30). Head's aim above is in keeping with the radical historians' concern

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[32] Reprinted in Craig Mackenzie (1990).

to tell of the "everyday life of the people" (Bozzoli and Delius 1990:15). It is also, however, at this point that the distinction between 'fiction' and 'history' in Head's texts begins to blur and this blurring will be examined in detail later in this thesis.

Many critics have categorised Head's interest in history as the interest that an exile, an orphan and a person of 'mixed race' must of necessity demonstrate.[33] There is an obvious element of truth in this - Head herself lists exile and refugeeism as one of her themes (1979:20-26). We would, however, like to extend this argument one step further. For Head, an examination of the history of Botswana, a country which she believed had never truly been colonised, became also an attempt to understand what she had experienced in South Africa. In 1979, she mentions her first novel, When Rain Clouds Gather, in the following way:

> The central character in the novel, a black South African refugee is almost insipid, a guileless, simple-hearted simpleton. But that is a true reflection of the black South African personality. We are an oppressed people who have been stripped bare of every human right. We do

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[33] See Chapter I for a list of such critical works.

not know what it is like to have our ambitions aroused, nor do we really see liberation on an immediate horizon. Botswana was a traumatic experience to me and I found people, initially, extremely brutal and harsh, only in the sense that I had never encountered human ambition and greed before in a black form. (Mackenzie 1990:68)

Having identified in herself a need to write a history of African people, Head moves from her personal themes to themes relevant to the continent in which she lives:

A sense of history was totally lacking in me and it was as if, far back in history, thieves had stolen the land and were so anxious to cover up all traces of the theft that correspondingly, all traces of the true history have been obliterated. We, as black people, could make no appraisal of our own worth; we did not know who or what we were, apart from objects of abuse and exploitation. Each nation offers the world a little of its light; each nation boasts of the great men who shaped its destiny ... In a creative sense I found myself left with only questions. How do we and our future generations resolve our destiny? How do we write about a

> world long since lost, a world that never seemed meant for humans in the first place, a world that reflected only misery and hate? It was my attempt to answer some of these questions that created many strange divergences in my own work. (Mackenzie 1990:66)

Head's need to write the history of the African people is also related to her concept of non-racialism. According to Head, her interest in history did not only imply a desire to record the particular history of a specific period, but the desire to write about "themes that are linked to the eternal stream of mankind's history" (Mackenzie 1990:78), and it is here that Bessie Head's conceptions of religion become important. As has already been mentioned, Head professed a very strong dislike for the Christianity that she came to associate with the missionaries of her childhood, and yet she never lost interest in religion per se. Her interests ranged from African religion - most germane to the discussion at hand - through to Buddhism, Hinduism and the varied forms of Christianity she encountered both in the history of and amongst the people working in Serowe.

It is, however, through an examination of her understanding of African religion that her conception of history becomes clearer. For Head, African religion was

intriguing for its capacity to incorporate the minutiae of everyday life:

> ... the appeal his [Prof. Mbiti's] ideas have for me is that they are wide and generous enough to take in all the humble who shall, one day, unexpectedly, inherit the earth. It is hard to imagine a heaven where the Pope officiates, because so many people would have to be excluded, but it is easy to imagine a universe and a people instantly immersed in a religious way of life. There are trees in this universe and they might tell a man in his own secret heart that they like to dwell near his hut. Also chickens and birds and rivers and sunsets and everything that flows and lives. (Mackenzie 1990:51)

The tension in Head's view is immediately apparent: whilst wishing on the one hand to do justice to the 'great men' of history and focus on 'kingdoms', she wishes also to capture the minute detail around which the lives of ordinary people are constructed. She attempts to portray simultaneously both the general and the specific and make each as important as the other. This tendency to romanticise the great rulers of Africa and yet at the same time fulfil her more 'radical' historical

tendencies has led to many of the unresolved divergences in her works.

It is also this concept of religion that provides us with a link to Head's vision of African tradition. In much the same way as she expresses her understanding of African religion as a wide and generous inclusion of all aspects of life, she depicts tribal existence in many of her fictional texts as a "deep river ... unruffled by conflict or a movement forward, [in which] the people lived without faces, except for their chief whose face was the face of all the people" (Head 1977:1). Her response to African tradition is, however, often ambiguous and contradictory. In "The Collector of Treasures" she offers the following explanation of why men in Botswana are "evil":

> he was a man who lived by the traditions and taboos outlined for all the people by the forefathers of the tribe. He had little individual freedom to assess whether these traditions were compassionate or not - they demanded that he comply and obey the rules, without thought. ... The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded,

> in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life. (Head 1977:92)

The two conceptions of tribal life outlined above are clearly at odds with each other and, perhaps, may only be explained by reference once again to the fact that Head deliberately manipulates tradition, along with many other aspects of life, to suit her fictional purpose - in this case a representation of the lives of women in Africa. This contention forms the basis of the discussion in Chapter IV and V.

Her overall response to 'tradition' in African society is ambiguous. She reacts angrily and sympathetically to the position of African women in Botswana and yet in her letters despises them; she is intrigued by the *kgotla* and the oral and other resources she sees there and yet one gets the sense that her perceptions of this institution are based more on what she has read about Khama the Great than anything she herself has witnessed; and she promotes the idealistic vision of an unruffled tribal existence and yet is fascinated with people who have departed from what is perceived as 'traditionally' acceptable. Overall, she is simultaneously harshly critical and sentimentally complimentary of the African people and the situations she encounters in Botswana. Consequently much of what she writes about Botswana, or Africa, is

contradictory and confusing. These contradictions are often apparent in her texts and will thus be examined in detail in Chapters III and IV.

Head's response to those traditions pertaining to the position of women in African society is often, loosely, 'feminist', and many of these perceptions seem to have arisen from her own experiences after her arrival in Botswana: "It's pretty terrible I tell you for a woman alone in Africa. Men treat women as the cheapest commodity" (Vigne 1991:11). In a 1983 interview, Head says that the oppression of women in Africa arises from two sources:

> Black women have a certain history of oppression within African culture. Women have always had a second position to men. In a society like Botswana, some of women's problems are rooted in custom and tradition. What is certainly very dominant here is that the male had a superior position to the female. ... [and] there's another oppression the white man brought in. (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:15)

However, while Head clearly has an interest in women and their position, it is not straightforwardly feminist and we need consequently to complicate the understanding of

Head as feminist spokesperson for all African women. She has too easily been adopted into the 'feminist tradition', leaving the exact nature of her complicated response to the position of women in Botswana largely unexamined.

Her initial response, in 1965, to the African women around her in Serowe was very different to her later fictional depictions of women: "the women here kind of treat men like property. Same with the men. Then there's all this feverish hopping about looking for 'SOMETHING'. It's a fever and hell here - everybody's sex organs" (Vigne 1991:10). By 1970, her opinions do not seem to have changed that dramatically: "She is a typical African woman, whom I dislike intensely. She jumps at the band wagon of any sensational story and makes it ridiculous" (Vigne 1991:10). Both of the latter comments were made in letters to Randolph Vigne, whereas the first comment comes from an interview with academics interested in her work. This disjunction between her 'personal' and 'private' views suggests that her presentation of women in her fiction is part of her deliberate attempt to rewrite and 'gender' both African history and African traditions, by foregrounding aspects of African life pertinent to women. Head's presentation of women is, in other words, an intellectual construct not, as has been previously assumed, the natural

consequence of being a woman writer writing about African women in order to champion their cause.

Head's presentation of the 'oral tradition' requires re-examination for much the same reason as does her presentation of women. She did not speak Setswana and thus could not have had first-hand knowledge of the orality present around her in Botswana. Her interest in orality seems to stem directly from her interest in the *kgotla*, and her admiration for Khama cannot be underestimated in this regard:

> One thing that interests me about Khama is the question of natural genius or intelligence, *without book learning*. I have seen how it works out in village life as I have worked with completely illiterate people who are brilliant at picking up facts and details and he had that knack. Wherever there is that kind of spark, you get records of it and the missionaries wrote reams about Khama. (Vigne 1991:180)

Many of Head's impressions of orality and the *kgotla* are taken from these "reams" of missionaries' records. It is also possible that her interest in orality derived from the radical historian's use of 'oral tradition' and

'personal testimony' and this method is most clearly illustrated in Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind.

Whatever oral testimony Bessie Head may have been privy to would have filtered through her own 'consciousness', and, whilst all the points outlined above remain relevant, one must remember also that Head was a writer of fiction with a journalistic background. Head's motivation for writing was, she explained in an interview in 1985, to become "mankind's storyteller" (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:12). In the same year, she also wrote

> I view my own activity as a writer as a kind of participation in the thought of the whole world. No other occupation provides for such an international outlook as writing. I have my national, my African side, but I am also very much an international kind of person. (Mackenzie 1990:95)

Her choice of what to write about, what to record, and how to present it, would be no different to that of any other person in her position as participant observer. She herself admits to using her "imagination" (Head 1977:6ff) in addition to other sources to construct the

'story' of an incident.[34] Furthermore, her journalistic background, as she pointed out in a 1985 interview, "benefitted me later for my particular kind of style. I am not loose and baggy. I'm very concise and taut, and I intend saying as much as possible in the most economical way" (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:8). It is this "economical way" of writing, of using symbolic occurrences, characters and 'traditions' in her texts, that requires our close attention.

In the course of the next three chapters we demonstrate how Head's interests in the differing ideologies and aspects of African life outlined here are expressed in her texts.

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[34] The most obvious case of this is evident in her descriptions of Khama in the "Introduction" to Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind where there is a mixture of historical fact and imaginative speculation.

CHAPTER III

THE LITERATE SOUL I:
VISIONS OF TRADITION [35]

Given Head's interest in issues of Africanism and history it is hardly surprising that she is also concerned with the questi of 'tradition'. Many critics have pointed to themes of tradition and modernity as major preoccupations in her writing. However, while critics have noted this tendency in Head's work, few have actually probed her portrayal of 'tradition' in any detail. Where the issue has been broached, critics have simply assumed that Head reflects or accesses a 'traditional' reality. Mackenzie (1989(1)) sees in much of Head's work "the confrontation between old and new, or more precisely, between traditional African and Western thinking" (1989(1):37) and assumes her presentation of the 'old' to be accurate. Cherry Clayton sees Sebina in

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[35] We use the term 'the literate soul' to refer to those of Head's characters who make 'proper' use of the confluence of 'tradition' and 'orality'. This aspect of Head's depiction of such characters has been noted by Cherry Clayton (1988:61) who has termed Khama Head's "literate heart".

A Bewitched Crossroad as standing for "a core of tribal memory amidst change and upheaval, and for one confluence of tradition and Western innovation" (1988:60). Despite the value of work by, for example Craig Mackenzie (1989) and Cherry Clayton (1988), Head's treatment of 'tradition' remains unquestioned.

The very concept of 'tradition' is, of course, difficult to deal with - it is 'ancient' but also forever changing - and must remain, therefore, a slippery abstraction.[36] However, since the concept of 'tradition' is so central to Bessie Head's work, it is crucial to investigate. What this chapter will attempt to show is how Head's depiction of Serowe 'tradition' is far from a reflection and is, instead, an invention. Furthermore, we will attempt to establish that Head's invention of 'tradition' is undertaken on the basis of a particular understanding of tradition derived on the one hand from Africanist assumptions, and on the other from a particular view of orality and literacy. Largely because of the ideological

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[36] Concepts of 'tradition' are difficult to grasp because they are frequently simultaneously broad and narrow. 'Tradition' can be used to delineate a vast range of practices, beliefs and actions. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Deborah McDowell (1975), among others, have pointed to the difficulties which inhere in attempts to delineate 'tradition'. For the purposes of this chapter, therefore, 'tradition' will be understood as those customary practices and beliefs that are perceived to inhere in a given community.

imperatives from which her concepts of tradition and orality are derived, they are often conflicting and perplexing. In conclusion, we trace through a number of Head's texts the often complex and contradictory elements of her view of tradition.

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As demonstrated in Chapter II, Head is caught up in a number of often contradictory intellectual cross-currents. One of her stated intellectual aims is the desire to write an anti-colonial historical narrative (Mackenzie 1990:66). The resultant history depicts a portrait of African life not that distinct from colonial portraits of the same period. As Landeg White (1980:540) points out, many writers who stress the 'traditional' in their work end up with an Africa that consists solely of

> village culture, timeless, pastoral and virtually self-contained, operating within strict geographical limits, fighting wars on a tiny scale, never engaging in long-distance trade and never subject to any substantial change until the coming of the White invaders ... [it is] the image of a culture with customs but no history!

As is the case with much nationalist, anti-colonial writing which often simply inverts the received colonial categories, Head, in certain respects, unwittingly adopts the categories of a static (if pleasant) 'traditional' past and a rapidly changing (if often unpleasant) colonial period. Another terrain in which one can broadly detect this unwitting adoption of colonial categories is in her understanding of orality, which she in many ways sees as synonymous with 'tradition'. As Vail and White (1991) have recently demonstrated, much of the popular thinking in the area of orality is dominated by the notion of the 'oral man' (1991:18). First systematised by scholars like McCluhan in his 1962 text The Gutenburg Galaxy, the concept of the 'literate man' and its counterpart 'oral man' were concepts that came to stand for a crude 'us' and 'them' or 'first world' and 'third world' paradigm (Vail and White 1991:18;24).

Whereas 'we' were literate, individualistic and developed, 'they' were oral, communal and underdeveloped. As Vail and White (1991) show, these notions were subsequently propagated in a more sophisticated guise by Walter Ong, McCluhan's student. In Ong's scheme, the oral and the literate represented a 'great divide' which reflected not only two differing technologies of communication, but, furthermore, two distinct technologies with cognitive and cultural consequences.

In terms of this scheme, any community that relies on oral media of communication is seen to be governed by custom and tradition alone. Moreover, such oral communities supposedly allow for no dissension in this traditionally governed rigid insistence on collectivity. By contrast, literate societies are seen to be flexible, individualistic and modern. In addition, Ong's view of oral societies was often accompanied by a romanticization of small-scale, face-to-face societies. Whereas for McCluhan 'we' were 'advanced' and forward-looking, for Ong 'we', with our development, had lost the spirituality and morality that supposedly accompanied the small-scale oral community.

Scholars like Brian Street (1988) and Amy Shuman (1986) have criticised these ideas extensively and have shown that a technology of communication does not automatically have particular cognitive consequences. Street has also demonstrated that a technology of communication such as writing cannot in and of itself bring the changes, such as a massive shift to individualism or a move to development, that literacy is sometimes said to precipitate. Put another way, literacy will make little difference to the lives of those who are extremely poor. The effects of literacy are always curtailed by the context in which it occurs and its consequences will differ from place to place. Furthermore, these scholars

have criticised any views that would attach moral implications to forms of communication, and so would either glorify literacy or romanticise orality.

However, despite such critiques, Ong and McCluhan's views remain widespread and Head's thinking in many ways falls into their model. For example, her insistence that oral communities are by definition 'traditional' and communal is typical of the 'oral man' approach. Secondly, her belief that only literacy will enable these illiterate communities to advance into contemporary ways of thinking is again symptomatic of ideas that invest literacy with great power and potential for social upliftment.

Head's view is, however, complicated by her desire to valorise the 'oral', and her dependence on 'literacy' as the path to the future is not as straightforward as McLuhan's. She does not wish to denigrate oral communities and, accordingly, seems to make a deep level distinction between 'illiterate' and 'oral' - the former undesirable, the latter honourable. The veneration of the 'oral' is possible in these terms because, as Vail and White contend, the literate/oral distinction has come to stand for previously held distinctions of 'us and them', 'civilised and uncivilised', 'modern and traditional'. The stamp of 'oral' comes to symbolise 'traditional'. This new vocabulary of 'oral' allows, furthermore, for

utopian depictions of entire 'oral communities', enabling a writer to thread through this definition of an 'oral community' any number of additional romantic and sentimental ideas. The most common of these 'sentimental' ideas running through the work of writers who stress this concept of the 'oral man' is a concentration on the hegemonic functions of orality in nonliterate or preliterate societies which, they argue, were 'communal' rather than personal and individual. Thus 'oral' and 'traditional' and 'communal' became, in many ways, synonymous. It is clear also that in many instances Head yokes together conceptions of 'orality', 'society' and 'tradition' and it is these underly' conceptions that require more attention than they have as yet received.[37] A more detailed examination of Head's use of orality is carried out in Chapter IV.

In her fiction, Head achieves an ingeniously authentic presentation of 'tradition',[38] evidenced in the

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[37] This contention that Head has constructed a tradition for presentation in her texts will form the basis of the 'model' which will be used for the broad examination of Head's texts carried out in this and the next two chapters.

[38] The intention of this thesis is simply to present a broad overview of the ethnography of aspects of Tswana life relevant to a discussion of the works of Bessie Head. As a consequence, the ethnography offered in this chapter will not be an attempt to delineate issues in Tswana ethnography as a broad field of enquiry in itself, but rather to ascertain the disparities between Head's presentation of 'tradition' and those 'traditional' aspects of

critical responses to her work. However, Head treats tradition in much the same way as she characterises the differences between 'orality' and 'illiteracy'. Her inability to view traditional African society dispassionately leads her either to abhor what she perceives as 'traditional' African society, or to romanticise it to the extent that it becomes the idyllic pastoral setting described by Landeg White above (1980:540). Traditional structures are either 'good' or 'bad'. The former are to be restored and maintained, the latter, destroyed. In many ways what Head appears to be arguing - particularly in her later works - is that the way forward for Africa is back into the 'old oral, good traditional' ways of life.

Head's presentation of the 'traditional' history of Serowe as an historically unchanging constant is, furthermore, inaccurate. Only by ultimately glossing over social and political divisions in Serowe society can Head describe Serowe as a world that "moves so slowly that it seems to be asleep within itself. It is like a broad, deep, unruffled river and as accommodating. Anything that falls into its depth is absorbed"

Tswana life that would remain most easily accessible to Bessie Head as a resident of a Tswana village.

(1990:69).[39] This characterisation of both the history and 'tradition' of the Bamangwato is equally evident in Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind. 'Tradition' for Head is continuous, stable, dependable, an "ancient pattern" (Head 1981:xiii), a pattern, Head would have us believe, still imprinted on the minds of many of the old people, (hence her concentration on the 'oral' nature of Serowe):

> The majority, who are the poor, survive on little. It has been like this for ages and ages - this flat continuity of life; this strength of holding on and living with the bare necessities. Serowe is a traditional African village with its times and seasons for everything; the season of ploughing, the season for weddings, the season for repairing huts and courtyards and for observing the old moral taboos. (Head 1981:xi)

Head's account of 'tradition' in Serowe is, therefore, an interpretation rather than a reflection, an invention rather than a discovery. A perusal of Isaac Schapera's work, for example, indicates that Head's depiction of the homogeneity of Serowe society is tenuous and inaccurate. The creation of the Tswana population in Serowe was the

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[39] A fictional example of the depiction of tribal life as a river is in "The Deep River", the first story in The Collector of Treasures.

result of numerous factors, among them refugeeism, migration and an unending search for water.[40] Schapera (1970:57) points out that the Ngwato population is, as a consequence of their history,[41] by no means homogeneous. Only one fifth of the population belongs to the "ruling dynasty" and "other descendants of the people who founded the tribe"; the remainder are what are known as *bafaladi* - foreigners or refugees - "who became subject to the Ngwato chiefs at various times through conquest in war, voluntary submission, flight from an invading army, or secession from some other tribe" (Schapera 1970:57). Thus Serowe is, in fact a heterogeneous community, consisting of people who are "linguistically and culturally distinct" (1970:57), differing in "language,

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40 The Tswana people in Botswana migrated from what is now South Africa in approximately the eighteenth century. Their arrival in Serowe in the early part of this century is thus relatively recent. On their arrival in Botswana, they were attacked (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) by the Mantasi, the Ndebele, the Matabele, and the Transvaal Boers. While under Boer attack, Botswana became a British protectorate. Governed by British rule, the African inhabitants of the then Bechuanaland were divided politically into eight separate 'tribes' (*merafe*), each occupying its own separate land and, although subject to overriding British rule, in control of their own affairs under the direction of a 'chief' (*kgosi, morena*). The Ngwato, residents of the area in and around Serowe, constitute the largest of these groupings.

41 All references to the history of the Tswana are drawn from the following sources: Comaroff, 1985; Schapera, 1938; 1940; 1970; 1975 and Stewart and Armstrong, 1990.

custom and tradition" so that they now do not even have a "common cultural background" (1970:62). Bessie Head, therefore, has many diverse 'traditions' before her, many of which have been diluted even further by colonial administration, Christianity, mission school education and migrant labour, and it is this diversity that is played down in her texts, in favour of a more unitary vision of 'African tradition'.

Another dimension of Head's depiction of tradition concerns the contradiction in the notion that it is static and unchanging. At the level of 'deep' structure, 'tradition' ensures that everything stays the same, a view evidenced in the following description of life in the village: "we live by such an ancient pattern" (1981:xiii). It is this ancient pattern that, for Head, underscores all the actions and beliefs of the people in Serowe. However, whilst insisting that 'tradition' ensures that village life in unchanging, Head simultaneously concedes that everything has changed. Head says, "Tradition, with its narrow outlook, does not combine happily with common sense, humanity and a broad outlook" (1981:xiii). 'Tradition' is both a 'deep river' capable of absorbing even the most foreign idea, and yet a belief system that has a narrow field of vision and lacks common sense.

An interesting example of the ways in which these contradictions express themselves in her writing is provided by Head's descriptions of Khama. Despite the weaknesses Head perceives in the 'traditional' outlook, it is Khama's 'traditional' background that enables him to become the man Head has presented us with. She argues that "all men are products of their environment and ... only a basically humane society could have produced Khama" (1981:3). She exaggerates those aspects of Khama's personality that give substance to her argument - that he is who he is because of his tradition. Serowe's past, she argues "has created its present" (1981:77).[42] Whilst underscoring the 'traditional' nature of Serowe life, Head also emphasises that Khama and his son Tshekedi Khama caused the "old order of tradition, ritual and ceremony" (1981:xiii) to die. Confusingly, Head seems simultaneously to want to present tradition as continuous and unending, and yet she remains aware of the 'invention' of tradition undertaken by Khama. In many

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[42] Another example of Head's insistence that the people of Serowe are the way they are because of their *traditional* past is:
"Traditional African life has its mean individuals and its good individuals - the mean are often embarrassed into a display of generosity; the good, and Thato Matome is one of them, are simply a direct expression of all that is to be most treasured in the 'law' or traditional custom. This law or custom which people often refer to is so sacred, personal and immediate that it is written in the heart. It dictates how man should care for man." (Head 1981:83)

ways, Head's outlining of the history of the period is governed by her characterisation of 'tradition' as one of Khama the Great's guiding principles. Elsewhere she has written, and it is worth quoting in full:

> No new idea stands sharply aloof from the social body, declaiming its superiority. It is absorbed and transformed until it emerges somewhere along the line as 'our traditional custom'. Everything is touched by 'our traditional custom' - British Imperialism, English, Independence, new educational methods, progress, and foreigners. It all belongs. (1990:69-70)

An alternative reading is, of course, that Head perceives 'African tradition' as so powerful a force, despite the narrowness of 'bad tradition', that it can engulf any new development or alternative 'tradition' in its path. The evidence suggests once again that Head has consciously presented her work on Serowe as a tale with ancient origins about ancient occurrences and concerns. Even when relating incidents that occurred fairly recently (less than a lifetime earlier), she prefaces these accounts with phrases such as "the old people said" (1981:xix), and often uses this phrase to introduce or substantiate a point she herself is making.

Head says that in South Africa she had lost "that image of Africa, ancient and existing since time immemorial", an image that she regained in Botswana where "the presence of the timeless and immemorial is everywhere - in people, in animals, in everyday life and in custom and tradition" (Mackenzie 1990: 86). Head's aim became to express through the history of Botswana what she felt was the history of Africa. In 1984 she wrote "Most of Africa was gaining independence [by 1964] and I was part of the stirring of the times. It was consciously in my mind that African independence had to be defined in the broadest possible terms" (Mackenzie 1990:85).

Head does not, however, ignore the intrusion of 'modern' ways into village life. In the story "Life" Head asserts:

> On their [the migrants'] return they brought with them bits and bits of a foreign culture and city habits which they had absorbed. Village people reacted in their own way; what they liked, and was beneficial to them - they absorbed, for instance, the faith-healing cult churches which instantly took hold like wildfire - what was harmful to them, they rejected. (1977:37)

In this story what is rejected by the 'traditional' values of the inhabitants of the village is an economically independent woman, Life. Thus although Head states that the villagers were "always looking 'for the light' and by that they meant that they were ever alert to receive new ideas that would freshen up the ordinariness and everydayness of village life" (1977:38), it is the older, more conservative 'tribal' world that ultimately wins. Despite the fact that Life's husband is imprisoned, the message is clear: people who cannot conform to life in the village will be destroyed by it. The 'traditionalism' of the village, which results in the death of a woman, is described in the following compassionate terms:

> Custom demanded that people care about each other, and all day long there was this constant traffic of people in and out of each other's lives. ... It was the basic strength of village life. It created people whose sympathetic responses were always fully awakened, and it rewarded them by richly filling in a void that was one big, gaping yawn. When the hysteria and cheap rowdiness were taken away, Life fell into the yawn; she had nothing inside herself to cope with this way of life that had finally caught up with her. (1977:43)

Head's ambivalent treatment of tradition is evident even in her first novel, When Rain Clouds Gather published in 1969, five years after her arrival in Botswana. Many critics, among them Wilhelm (1983) and Mackenzie (1989), have argued that Head's aim is, in the main, to show up the negative aspects of tradition and tribalism. Craig Mackenzie explains that When Rain Clouds Gather is a "realist novel" with an "underlying tone of romance and pastoralism" (1989(1):13). He states, further, that the theme of the text is a "well-worn" one of "the conflict between modernity and tradition". He has, however, overlooked the contradictions in and arguments against this perspective that Head herself injects into the texts. This novel, for example, contains interesting insights into Head's perceptions of the ambiguous relationship between the positive and negative aspects of tradition that frustrate straightforward readings of the text.

There are, certainly, many instances in her work of how 'tradition' and its structures have "ruined a continent" (Head 1969:15). 'Tradition' is often characterised as the most ruinous element of life in Serowe, and Head often resorts to stereotypical behaviour and characters to make this point clear. Thus in When Rain Clouds Gather the following extract lends credence to Mackenzie's understanding of the text:

> It was the mentality of the old hag that ruined a whole continent - some sort of clinging, ancestral, tribal belief that a man was nothing more than a grovelling sex organ, and that there was no such thing as privacy of soul and body, and that no ordinary man would hesitate to jump on a mere child. (1969:15)

'Tradition', she argues, is responsible not only for a dangerous narrow-mindedness that is in itself hazardous, but results also in material conditions of poverty and starvation:

> Year in and year out people had grown the exact same crops. Somewhere along the line they had become mixed up with tribal traditions. They had become fixed. ... You could just not see beyond the tradition and its safety to the amazing truth that you were starving... (1968:43)

Thus despite Head's assertion that village life is so broad, inclusive and generous, it is also, she appears to be arguing, marred by certain 'traditional' behaviours, the customary practices that Head so deeply despises:

> Surely there was a flow of feeling here from people to people? She made her home at first in

> the central part of a particular village ward. They were all relatives, and she was amazed to uncover a permanent adult game that should really have been relegated to children: 'I'll bewitch you and you'll bewitch me'. ... This seemed to Elizabeth the only savagely cruel side to an otherwise beautiful society. (1974:21)

The 'flow of feeling' referred to above, evidenced in the simple statement "'People never live alone in the world', he said easily, 'You have friends here. We'll find them and they will look after the child'" (1974:176), is what comes to characterise Head's definition of 'good tradition'.

Her stress on the gentleness of African life in her texts arises from her interest in African religion. It is here that Head's selectiveness concerning African tradition is again demonstrated, as the religious aspects of African life result in a new set of "philosophies [which] were spun around the everyday events of people's lives and included the animals, the flowers and the occupations of mankind. Then mankind said: 'We like it'" (1974:41). Thus the ability to share and include is deemed uniquely African by Head, and again one is reminded of Vail and White's (1991) comment that the writers who focus on

'oral communities' focus also on the communal nature of those societies in an idealised, romanticised language.

Mackenzie (1989(1):35) has pointed out that Head's last three publications are an attempt to valorise what she perceives the African way of life to be. Our contention is that this valorisation has its roots early on in her career, a c[illegible]ction shared by Cherry Clayton (1988:57-8). Head's belief in the superiority of 'Africanness' is so strong that, even before her "outward-reaching" (Mackenzie 1989:48) texts have been written, she argues that white people who are 'generous' are actually African:

> ... the Eugene man totally blurred the dividing line between the elite who had the means for education and the illiterate who had none. Education was for all. He always turned up something for *everyone*. In this respect, he was an African, not a white man, and the subtlety of it spread to his conduct in everyday life. (1974:72)

Whereas Head's first three texts are, by and large, more critical of 'tradition' - with few exceptions 'tradition' is seen as a restrictive, inhibitive force - in the later texts Head refines her treatment of traditional

structures. 'Traditional' behaviour or, in other words, what Head believes traditional behaviour to be, is romanticised and sentimentalised to the extent that, for instance, African 'ways of life' are held up as the yardstick by which all other philosophies of life should be measured:

> They [white Christians] had brought a new order of things into the land and they made the people cry for love. One never had to cry for respect in the customary way of life. Respect was just there for people all the time. That was why he rejected all things foreign. (1977:10)

Thus particularly in the later works, selected traditional values and patterns of existence are depicted as flowing and continuous, and certain characters, for example Ralokae ("Heaven is not Closed"), are made to represent this "ancient stream of holiness that people had lived with before any white man had set foot in the land" (1977:11). Anti-social behaviour is presented as an 'innovation': "'There is thieving and adultery going on such as was not possible under Setswana law'" (1977:8). 'Setswana law' is therefore, simultaneously inhibiting but also logical, ordered and responsible for the promotion of peaceful co-existence.

A further, more complicated element is the ease with which Head so often equates the negative aspects of 'traditionalism' with tribalism, another form of 'ignorance' leading to extreme conservatism. The complex relationship between tribalism, traditionalism and 'evil', is most clearly demonstrated in When Rain Clouds Gather by the character Matenge. Head's portrayal of this man comes dangerously close to that of an impish fiend rather than what Head would like the reader to think he is: a frightening man who holds the reins of progress in Africa in his hands. It is worth quoting Head's description of Matenge in some detail, for it is here that many interesting aspects of Head's impressions of tradition become clear:

> It was he, Matenge, who really commanded the largest following of diehard traditionalists, the ones who from generation to generation saw to it that things remained as they were ... It was he, Matenge, who understood tribalism, that it was essentially the rule of the **illiterate man** who, when he was in the majority, feared and despised anything that was not part of the abysmal darkness in which he lived. (1968:44-5 emphasis added)

Thus 'illiterate' - not oral - people are 'traditionalist', 'tribalist' and, not only incapable of writing, but also incapable of clear, logical and rational thought. The 'illiterate' man (as opposed to the 'oral' man) lives in a world of darkness, a kind of spiritually abusive environment that, by extension, can only be alleviated through the 'good traditional' and 'oral' man's acceptance of 'literacy' and the 'light' it affords. Head has once again clearly set up the division of the 'oral' versus the literate 'man' and has subsumed into this oral/literate segregation images of the 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' man discussed by Vail and White (1991), although with a somewhat different slant. 'Orality' is civilised and leads, therefore, to literacy; 'illiteracy' is uncivilised and leads only to destruction. Thus true 'orality' implies a 'literacy of the soul' - the kind of literacy necessary if African people are to advance into the future.

Mackenzie's assertion that in Head's novels "modernity confronts tradition and Head clearly shows that she favours the first" (1989(1):22), does not encompass the complexities of Head's presentation of 'tradition'. As we have shown, part of Head's view of 'bad tradition' is exemplified in Matenge, but she also offers us a foil to Matenge in the form of Dinorego. Whereas Matenge is the arch 'illiterate traditionalist', Dinorego is an old man

who has used both his 'traditional' ways and his 'oral' nature to move forward and to advance spiritually. Dinorego, like Matenge, is a caricature (although a very pleasant one), who only comes to full expression in her later books. (Sebina in A Bewitched Crossroad is another such character. He is discussed in some detail in Chapter VI of this thesis.)

Dinorego is an old 'traditional' man, but he has retained only those aspects of 'tradition' and 'custom' which enable him to preserve the broad, unruffled, accepting view of life and the world that Head consistently argues is characteristically African. He is gentle and wise - an 'oral man', rather than an 'illiterate' man. Both Dinorego and Makhaya to a certain extent, remain 'traditional' in their use of the 'good' 'tradition' which gives rise to their willingness to accept new ideas. Head has repeated many times that 'tradition' is like a river, including all in its path as its own. Thus progress can only be achieved through the proper use of the inclusive nature of 'tradition'. Dinorego admires Makhaya for his implicitly 'correct' use of traditional custom:

> Dinorego was very impressed by Makhaya's relationship with the women. It seemed to him that Makhaya was well versed in ancient African

> customs where the man maintained his dignity and self-control in front of women, except that in former times this man had maintained it over a harem of concubines, while Makhaya had none. (1968:138)

Makhaya, it seems, is humane precisely because, like Dinorego, he has maintained only those 'traditional' customs which dignify human behaviour, a refrain repeated at regular intervals throughout Head's work. He is contrasted in the novel to the men who were the result of "a whole society [that] had connived at producing a race of degenerate men by stressing their superiority in the law" while "overlooking how it affected them as individuals" (1968:93). The strange union of needing to look back into the past and yet simultaneously into the future is thus best demonstrated by Dinorego and Makhaya. Makhaya's ability to break away from those aspects of tradition that Head feels are negative and unwanted in modern Africa is reinforced by her placing him in the "most custom-bound" 'tribe' in Africa - the Zulu - "where half the men and women still walked around in skin and beads" (Head 1969:124). The point is, that despite both the narrator and Makhaya's insistence that he is not a traditionalist, 'tradition' is the constant point of reference for all definitions of what he is. Head can,

evidently, only explain Makhaya by reference to his tradition, even if only to delineate what he is not.

A similar sleight of hand is involved in blending in the character Maru both the 'traditional' and the strongly anti-traditional. Maru is "magnificent because there is no-one else who could teach you a broader view of life," he is "majestic" with "gods in his heart who say, 'Marry that Masarwa.' Who else has gods in his heart?" (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:19). So Maru, although an often malicious schemer, also becomes a symbol of the 'new' African man Head so compellingly tries to create. Head once again resorts to 'traditional' terms to explain Maru's powers: he is simultaneously believed to be "the reincarnation of Tladi, a monstrous ancestral African witch-doctor who had been a performer of horrific magic", and someone who "had all the stuff that ancient kings and chiefs were made of" - it is the latter in Head's estimation that allows him the power to carry out his complicated plan.

In conclusion, it becomes clear that Head's use of 'tradition' and 'orality' is complex. She very creatively weaves tradition and modernity, and orality, illiteracy and literacy together through her narratives. The intricate weaving of these concepts is often so subtle an undercurrent that it is read by the critic as

exactly that which Head wishes us to perceive: a written record of a traditional, oral world.

A framework from which we can more easily understand Head's treatment of tradition has been offered by Lewis Nkosi who has argued, although not in relation to Bessie Head's works, that many African writers employ a 'usable tradition' (1987:97) in their texts. This 'usable tradition' develops from or consists of the customary practices writers cull from a perceived 'traditional' past which they consider 'usable' in their fictional depictions of the 'African tradition' in the present. Head emphasises the 'usable' aspects of Serowe's 'traditional' past and either ignores or is severely critical of those aspects of 'tradition' that do not adhere to her definition of tradition in Serowe.

Thus once Head has refined her fictional intention - to demonstrate both the 'traditional' and 'oral' nature of life in Serowe - she sets about creating a very consistent picture of the Africa she wishes her reader to be left with. The culmination of this art is Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind where, without close reading, one is quite simply left with the lasting impression that one has just 'heard' the story of Serowe through the mouths of its residents. In the next chapter we

demonstrate the ways in which Head achieves a unified oral impression in her texts.

CHAPTER IV

THE LITERATE SOUL II:
VISIONS OF ORALITY

Stories are not lived but told.
Louis O. Mink - 1974.

In the previous chapter, we demonstrated how Head's desire to recreate 'Africa' or 'Africanness' leads to an often 'invented' or imagined view of African 'tradition'. Head's re-interpretation of tradition similarly results in a transformed comprehension and presentation of orality. As has already been indicated, Head fashions concepts of 'orality' to accommodate her rewritten version of 'tradition'. Head's attempt to present the history of Serowe as orally 'recorded' and transmitted also effects a specific binary understanding of the relationship between orality and literacy - what has been termed the "great divide" by Brian Street (1988). One outcome of the "great divide" view of orality and literacy is that Head draws boundaries around orality

that, as this chapter indicates, are artificial given the ethnography of Serowe.

This chapter seeks to illustrate the techniques and strategies Head employs in creating this unified illusion of orality. These include her 'invention' of the *kgotla*, her definitions of both 'orality' and 'literacy', her depiction of Khama the Great as an 'oral chief', and, finally, the ways in which she edits the oral testimonies she collected for presentation in Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind. This chapter traces these strategies in a number of her texts and then examines how they operate in Serowe in some detail.

Bessie Head concentrates on two 'forms' of orality in her texts - the less 'formal' arena that she very broadly categorises as storytelling; and the more 'formal' orality of the *kgotla*. Head's perceptions of orality in the *kgotla* would appear to be idealised descriptions based perhaps on her own observations of the *kgotla* in action, but also, more importantly, on her reading of historical accounts of the Khamas' use of the *kgotla*. Interestingly, only two of the old men she interviewed for Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind speak about the *kgotla*. It is my contention that Head's depiction of the *kgotla* had less to do with what the *kgotla* actually was or what it meant to those who participated, and more

to do with what Head thought it was or should have been, in keeping with her own vision of 'traditional African life' discussed in the previous chapter.

Head maintains a distinctly romantic notion of the *kgotla* in her works, a view that is refuted by a reading of Schapera, so that there is a significant distinction between the *kgotla* in Head's imagination and the *kgotla* in 'reality', particularly in the way in which these council meetings of the ward were carried out. Although, as Schapera points out, the *kgotla* was ostensibly a forum for debate and discussion, in which "anybody may speak" "openly and frankly" thus enabling the chief "to ascertain the feelings of the people generally", the changes introduced in Botswana under the colonial administration meant that although topics were brought before the *kgotla* for discussion, the decisions made in the *kgotla* were generally "the same as those previously reached by the chief and his personal advisers, who as leaders of the tribe can sway public opinion," and much the same point could be made about the precolonial *kgotla* (Schapera 1970:73).[43]

Historically, each village, or collection of small villages, belongs to a ward under the leadership of an

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[43] Originally published in 1940, reprinted in M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1970).

"hereditary headman". Each ward has its own hamlet, and its own *kgotla* and, according to Schapera, this grouping into wards facilitates the easy absorption of immigrants or conquered people as every person must live in a ward (1970:58). However, just as many other aspects of 'tribal' life changed with the arrival of the colonial powers, so too did the role and function of the *kgotla*. As early as 1940, Schapera wrote:

> Much of his [the chief's] time is spent daily in his *kgotla* (council-place) where he listens to news, petitions, and complaints from all over the tribe, and gives orders for whatever action may be necessary. He must protect the rights of his subjects, provide justice for the injured and oppressed, and punish wrongdoers. Before the establishment of the Protectorate, he was the supreme judge of the tribe. This function has been taken over by the Administration, but his court is still the highest Native tribunal, to which a right of appeal lies from the verdicts of the others. (1970:69)

Proof of the diminishing powers of the chief in the *kgotla* is evidenced in Tshekedi Khama and Bathoen's legal action in 1936 against the High Commissioner for the

issue of the Proclamations[44] which, according to Tshekedi, "altered certain Native laws and customs, thus exceeding the powers conferred upon him, and violated treaty rights reserved to their respective tribes". Predictably, the court found in favour of the High Commissioner and only in 1940 did Tshekedi begin to apply the proclamations which he had until then ignored.

A major shift in the role of the *kgotla* occurred under Tshekedi Khama[45] who, unlike his predecessors, introduced much new legislation. Previously the chiefs had been more "concerned to maintain the existing law than to alter it". Khama's actions were unprecedented as he "introduced so many changes that the people themselves sometimes distinguish between 'traditional Native law' and 'Khama's law', although both are equally binding upon them" (Schapera 1970:69 ff). A significant shift in the

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[44] The Proclamations in question were (1970:66-7):
1. Native Administration Proclamation (No. 74 of 1934) which specified the rights, powers, and duties of the chief and other tribal authorities and made succession to chieftainship subject to the approval of the Administration, who could pass over an heir they considered unsuitable or unsatisfactory.
2. The Native Tribunals Proclamation (No. 75 of 1934) which removed from the tribal courts all cases of treason, sedition, murder or attempted murder, culpable homicide, rape or attempted rape, assault or intent to do grievous bodily harm, conspiracy against the chief, and a variety of other statutory offenses.

[45] Schapera uses the spelling Kgama; Head, Khama. Head's spelling has been adhered to throughout.

ways in which matters arising from tribal life were dealt with resulted, and an increasing need for administration developed. The consequence of this increasing need for bureaucracy in tribal administration was that Tshekedi was often referred to as the "office chief" rather than a "*kgotla* chief". The distinction between Khama and his son Tshekedi is made more sharply by Head, who says, "during Khama's time men listened 'not with their ears; but with their insides' and so were they governed" (Head 1981:38).

Head's idealisation of the *kgotla* reaches its peak in the story "Kgotla" and in Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind. On a practical level the *kgotla* serves the function of an 'oral' newspaper in a village where "no day passed without its news" (Head 1977:61). At an ideological level, however, it represents a world Head argues is in many ways superior to the one we have at present:

> Behind the kgotla, an administrative block had been set up to modernize village life. ... They had not time to listen to the twitter of birds in the ancient shady trees that surrounded the kgotla, but the two worlds daily travelled side by side and the bureaucratic world was fast devouring up the activities of the ancient, rambling kgotla world. (1977:62)

The *kgotla*, with its physical location in the centre of the village, is also the centre of the 'people':

> ... the kgotla was still the people's place. It was the last stronghold where people could make their anguish and disputes heard, where nothing new could be said about human nature - it had all been said since time immemorial and it was all of the same pattern, repeating itself from generation unto generation ... All this made the kgotla world a holy world that moved at its own pace and time ... (1977:62

Seeing in the *kgotla* an opportunity to exploit the grandness of 'traditional' African life, Head contrasts it with modern administrative structures, often denying the extent to which the *kgotla* itself was a form of administration for the incumbent chief. Mackenzie (1989(1):43-45) has correctly indicated the similarities between Head's fictional (The Collector of Treasures) and 'historical' (Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind) depictions of the *kgotla*. He has further demonstrated how the more 'historical' depiction of the *kgotla* has been submerged into Head's "partisan role ... in the writing of Serowe's social history" (1989(1):43). He has, however, failed to take into account the divergences between Head's account of the *kgotla* in Serowe and

accounts of the *kgotla* offered by two of the old men[46] interviewed in Serowe. Head allows the *kgotla*, both in Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind and in A Bewitched Crossroad, far more symbolic weight than do either of the old men. Head uses the kgotla as symbolic of customary practices and ways of life in general. The old men interviewed on the other hand are rather more critical or realistic about its role.

It is, essentially, Bessie Head who decides on how different aspects of the 'traditional' are ultimately characterised. Her attitude towards the testimonies she heard in Serowe is best demonstrated by her assessment of Serowe under Tshekedi Khama: "People seem anxious to bury this period of severe, Spartan work and yet it is one of the most glorious aspects of Serowe's history" (1981:76). It is this same 'editorial' voice that governs her presentation of, among other things, the role of the *kgotla* in Serowe.

In Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind Head offers the following description of the *kgotla*:

> In Serowe, the chief's kgotla is in the central part of the village ... It is now surrounded by

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[46] The old men referred to are Lekoto Digate (1981:40-1) and Grant Kgosi (1981:127-132).

> the administrative buildings of the Bamangwato Tribal Administration and the offices of the Central District Council. Today, breaking in on the ancient tradition are the clickety-clack of typewriters and a huge army of clerks, but during Khama's time men listened 'not with their ears; but with their insides' and so they were governed. (1981:38)

Two details in this description deserve mention. The first is that the quotation as to how men listen in the *kgotla* is taken from a magazine article also referred to by Head in the introduction to this section of Serowe (1981:37) and not from the oral testimony of the men she interviews, and the second is the biblical tone of the phrase, "and so they were governed" (we turn to this later in the chapter).

The only old man interviewed directly about the *kgotla* (this is the only interview in the section on the *kgotla*, in fact) concurs with Head's contention that it is 'ancient' and 'traditional'. He says that visiting the *kgotla* every day "is something deep in our custom" (1981:40). He also, however, concurs with Schapera's description of the *kgotla*, which differs quite significantly from Head's, when he lists the functions of the *kgotla*. Those aspects of the old man's description

which concur more with Schapera than with Head have been highlighted:

> Here public announcements are made from **higher authority**. Here meetings are called for the whole tribe and each year it is the duty of the chief's kgotla to announce *letsema*, that is the time for ploughing, and **permission is then given** for the whole tribe to start the ploughing season. [The kgotlas] ensure that the people are well-informed of all the events that are taking place, here in Serowe and in the whole country. (1981:40 emphasis added)

Another interesting comment on the *kgotla* comes from an interview with Grant Kgosi entitled "The End of an Era" (Head 1981:127-132). This interview indicates the extent to which the *kgotla* is not simply what Head wishes it to be, especially when one considers that despite the fact that Kgosi has so important a contribution to make about the *kgotla*, it is not even included in the section on the *kgotla*, evidence yet again of the editorial authority employed by Head in the structuring of the text. Kgosi protests that the *kgotla* "favours the important man. It is not easy in the chief's kgotla to get judgement against an important man ... That is what kgotla does for the important man. He [sic] favours him" (1981:131-2).

Head's presentation of Botswana's history affirms Nkosi's assertion that the 'usable tradition' is employed to enhance a point a writer is making in the present. Head's intention, in this instance, is to demonstrate that although many aspects of Botswana have changed, those *essentially African* features of the *kgotla* have survived the dialogue with colonial powers.

Bessie Head's insistence that Serowe is an 'oral community' is often belied by observations she herself makes. Her depiction of Tshekedi Khama as an 'office chief' is significant as it indicates quite clearly the 'literate' aspects of Serowe life. As early as the turn of the nineteenth century, literacy "was to play an important role in the process of socioeconomic differentiation" (Comaroff 1985:36). Conversion to Christianity included a probationary period in which converts had to commit themselves to "monogamy and minimal literacy; only after a period of sustained instruction were they examined as candidates for baptism"; in which "tickets, registers, and ledgers plotted the progress of each participant" (Comaroff 1985:141). In addition, the missionaries learned Setswana and, "with the assistance of Moffat's biblical translations, they soon began systematic instruction in literacy". Vernacular religious tracts, prayer books and hymnals were also printed (Comaroff 1985:141). As David

Vincent (1989:2) has pointed out: "Literacy became a consequence, a cause, a guarantor, and eventually the very epitome of progress," particularly in the church.

Despite much evidence that suggests that Serowe did indeed have a written history, as indicated above by, for example, mission involvement, Bessie Head insists time and again that the history of Serowe is oral: "Serowe is an historic village but not spectacularly so; its history is precariously oral" (1981:xii). This insistence on the history of Serowe as oral is juxtaposed against her use of statistics concerning population, water shortages and migrations recorded by missionaries already in Botswana at the time. Significant also is the fact that even the most illiterate person will participate in a documentary culture to a greater or lesser extent, and as Vincent (1989:12) points out, reading and writing enters "the fabric of popular culture" amidst the "story-telling and the folk songs, alongside the customs and rituals". The divisions between those who can and those who cannot read and write are not as sharp as Bessie Head has made them out to be. Recent research into orality and literacy has clearly demonstrated that "the literate and the non-literate, and their respective structures and artifacts [form] a complex series of conflicting and mutually reinforcing relationships" (Vincent 1989:13). The general point to be made here is that in a documentary

society, such as Botswana must have been at the turn of this century, there is clearly less of a chasm between literacy and illiteracy or orality than Head would have us believe.

Head's tendency to rely on the great divide between orality and literacy is evidenced in her view of Khama the Great. In her letters to Randolph Vigne Head praises Khama for his immense wisdom "without book learning" (Vigne 1991: 180), somehow implying that he was unable to read or write. Of this lack of 'book learning' Head says:

> I have seen how it works out in village life as I have worked with completely illiterate people who are brilliant at picking up facts and details and he [Khama] had that knack. Wherever there is that kind of spark you get records of it and the missionaries and travellers wrote reams about Khama. (Vigne 1991:180)

She characterises Khama's dialogue with the colonial powers as one method through which he was able to separate the positive aspects of 'tradition' from the negative. According to Schapera Khama was

> a man of exceptional ability and enterprise, who through sheer force of personality was able to do much for the material advancement of his people; but he was also firmly insistent on his rights as chief, and brooked no opposition. The right of appeal from the chief's verdicts established in 1919 did little to help, since, by an astonishing arrangement, the appeal court consisted of the District Commissioner and the chief himself! (1970:81)

The above characterisation of Khama as shrewdly and politically astute differs significantly from Head's depiction of him as an expansive personality, in touch with the feelings of 'his' people, a man whose "manner was very quiet", whose life evidenced a "spark of genius" and "true greatness" (Head 1981:4). It is not the intention to deny these assertions concerning the character of Khama, but simply to point out that, although Head acknowledges that many people were unhappy with Khama's actions, she does not easily entertain characterisations of him that differ radically from her own.

Bessie Head stresses the 'oral' in favour of the 'literate', seeing it in Khama's case as inextricably linked to his excellence as a leader. Although Head

wants us to view Khama as an 'oral man' she does not wish us to see him as what she has often characterised as the 'illiterate man'. Thus in Khama, we find the definitive example of what we term Head's 'literate soul'. The stress on Khama as an 'oral man' is in strong contrast to the facts of his life: he was a teacher at a mission school while still a young man. Khama must have acquired the ability to instruct other converts in the basic skills necessary to read from hymnals and prayer books. Furthermore, he also sent letters to the British government which he may have dictated but, even if did not write them himself, he was at the very least well-acquainted with the function and requirements of a letter.

The exact nature of the 'orality' in Head's texts is further complicated by her reliance on biblical language. The use of biblical language is understandable in that it is the one register still easily accessible in the English language to signify a sense of 'archaicness', and it is thus possible that Head has conflated these two 'forms' - the 'oral' and the biblical - into one 'African oral' tradition.

Biblical imagery which comes to the fore in A Question of Power is refined in pieces such as The Collector of Treasures and A Bewitched Crossroad. Mention is made of

Sodom and Gomorrah (1974:64); Moloch (1974:64), a deity to whom people of Israel occasionally sacrificed their children, somewhat reminiscent of "Looking for a Rain God"; Moses and the Jews (1974:86), and David's song, "I have been through the valley of the shadow of death ..." (1974:202). All these images and more resonate through the pages of A Question of Power and are woven subtly through the narratives in The Collector of Treasures and A Bewitched Crossroad.

Head's use of biblical language may originate from her own schooling at an Anglican mission school in South Africa. Assuming that this is the case, her enjoyment or 'feel' for biblical language would have been reinforced by the deep respect she had for Khama, and from her reading of Khama's letters and transcripts of his speeches. Khama based many of his arguments pertaining to the changes in Tswana law on Christianity and its lessons. Biblical language probably figured quite largely in both his own and the missionaries' written explications of his actions. An examination of the portion of Khama's speech reproduced in Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind lends credence to this argument. His speech is heavily loaded with biblical turn of phrase and resonance. Examples of this are: "You did not obey this law also ..." (1981:39) and "I say this law is also good; let it be upheld and continue to be law among black

people and white people" (1981:9). Head often yokes the biblical and the traditional together, and this may very well be a result of this deep-seated admiration for Khama, who in her opinion, managed to straddle both the traditional and the biblical in the best interests of the Bamangwato; "all Khama's reforms were to observe this base - a harmonious blending of traditional custom and Christian worship" (1984:55).

Despite the fact that Head privileges 'orality' as the central feature of 'traditional' African life, it is evident that most of her source material comes from written accounts such as mission records, historical texts and other archival material and she is compelled to refer to these just as frequently as she refers to the memory of the 'old men'. One reference which is particularly interesting is Nyembezi's (1955) collection of Zulu proverbs. Her acknowledgement of the text indicates that it has been used as a source. One of the more unusual texts Head made use of was the Livingstone Padiso Readers, a series of Setswana and English primary school reading books, one of which is referred to as the source of one of her stories in The Collector of Treasures.

The use of written adaptations of previously told oral tales in classroom readers has been documented by Isabel

Hofmeyr (1991). While on the one hand the presence of oral stories in the classroom may be evidence of "the power of oral culture to assert itself in literate locales", this integration in the classroom also had the effect of "usurp[ing] the role of non-formal education in the household". Furthermore, it had far reaching effects on "the style and place of telling; the meaning and definition of the genre; and the status of the teller" (Hofmeyr 1991:645). The stories themselves became more restrained and formalised but, most importantly, the stories told became "things that belonged to the realm of primary education and hence of children" (1991:647), a situation that has not always prevailed since storytelling at times included adults in its audience.

Bessie Head's style of storytelling has been influenced by at least one aspect of this 'story book' recording of oral tales - her stories are very short and, as is evident in "The Deep River", often the issues at hand have been 'streamlined' to facilitate easier recounting, and the style and setting of the story have been created to conform to how and where Head expects an oral storytelling session would occur. More importantly, however, is the fact that Head presents as 'oral' a story that was 'lifted' from its context, reworked, and then replaced, in this new form, onto the written page. Her

insistence on the 'oral' nature of Serowe's storytelling past must at the very least, be questioned.

Craig Mackenzie (1989(1)and(2)) has written in much detail of the oral format employed by Head to present the tales of Serowe. While his assessment of her use of oral forms in general is no doubt accurate, the interesting point is that although the stories are presented in an 'oral storytelling' format, they were initially collected in an interview situation, often in Setswana and thus through an interpreter. Head's distance from the stories is thus two-fold: one, she was not able to speak or understand Setswana; and two, the stories were transcribed and edited at least twice in the written form. Although the most logical way to understand Head's collection of the testimonies would be that they were collected in a more or less 'formal' manner, Vernon Gibberd doubts "whether she based Serowe on formal interviews. I suspect she absorbed the information as she went along - and either had a very good memory or a very systematic method of stockpiling bits of useful info[rmation]".[47] Either way, whether Head did interviews or simply remembered stories she was told, the illusion of 'oral storytelling' remains just that - an illusion. The relationship between an interviewer and

[47] Letter from Vernon Gibberd, 7 December 1992.

interviewee is significantly different to the relationship between the storyteller and his audience Head presents in her stories:

> Later that evening, as he sat with his children near the outdoor fire for the evening meal, a smile again flickered over his face. ... A gust of astonished laughter shook his family out of the solemn mood of mourning that had fallen upon them and they all turned eagerly towards their grandfather, sensing that he had a story to tell. (1977:8)

Head reinforces the oral impression by apparently 'objective' validation of the old man's story - he speaks "wisely", prefacing what he says with, "as you all know" (1977:8) and ending with the satisfaction of the listeners. Thus the short story begins and ends with the emphasis on the orally told tale: "The old man leaned forward and stirred the dying fire with a partially burnt-out log of wood. His listeners sighed the way people do when they have heard a particularly good story" (1977:12). This image of the storyteller is a refrain running through stories like "The Wind and a Boy" as well as in phrases like "for years and years ..." (1977:60) and storytelling by the fire (1977:71-2).

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It is clear then that Head does not simply and straightforwardly "make her experience the experience of others" (Mackenzie 1989(1):42), in a transfer of what she sees or hears into what we read. It would appear, rather, that she utilises any aspects of language, tradition and storytelling that she can in order to create for us the illusion that what we read was indeed her experience.

Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind constitutes the best example of Head's attempt to present, in written form, an essentially 'oral' history of Serowe. Her insistence that the history of Serowe is oral is sustained throughout the text, with phrases like "but only the very old people remember this" (1981:xi); "a number of people would repeat the same story" (1981:xv); and "one of his eyes has closed completely with age, but now, he says, his memory" (1981:11). Head underpins all the narratives in this text with these indicators of the 'orality' present in Serowe, despite the fact that she herself makes use almost exclusively of missionaries' records in her outline of the events in Khama's life (1981:3-9).

Head interjects the 'oral' narratives with authorial comment intended to bolster the impression that these storytellers are very old people and that they are indeed 'traditional historians':

> He can tell you endless tales about the long, dim past, which is a pain to no one, but nothing about the near present, which is a pain to everyone ... When he described new tools, new ways of living, he had an enchanting way of saying: 'Thakaa!' which means: 'I'm surprised!'. (1981:11)

Bessie Head shows the old man referred to in the above extract a photo of Khama. It appears that the purpose of this is to authenticate the old man's memory, which may not - as she claims - be so much for herself as for the readers. Tsogang Sebina, another of the old men interviewed by Head, makes a very revealing comment on the nature of oral testimony: "I can't remember so far back all the details of my life during Khama's time, but Khama was a gift of God to the people" (1981:23), indicating quite clearly that in some instances at least, 'memory' can be governed both by what the listener wants to hear, and what the speaker wishes to remember. Another interesting aspect of Sebina's account is that he is an extremely 'literate' man. Trained as a teacher in South Africa, he worked for Tshekedi Khama as a grain organiser, keeping record of the amount of grain people produced, hence his spoken testimony might be orally executed, but he is by no means the 'oral man' Head wishes to ennoble.

A further element in support of the contention that Head is not simply the scribe of an oral communication, is the fact that a number of the 'oral' accounts follow the same format, a clear indication that many of the 'oral storytelling' situations were, in fact, straightforward interviews.[48] On writing them down, however, Head has omitted her side of the conversation, thus creating the impression that the stories flowed naturally from the teller to the listener in one, unambiguous movement. It is clear, for instance that Akanyang Malomo and Kebotogetse Maseke, and Khunong Letsomo and Sekgabe Ntshwarisang are responding to the same questions at the outset.

Akanyang Malomo's account begins, "I was born in Serowe. I have never been to school. My mother used to make these pots for our house and I learnt from her" (1981:43). In almost identical terms, Kebotogetse Maseke's account begins, "I was born in Serowe. I have never been to school. I tan skins according to the way of our forefathers and the knowledge was passed on to me by my father" (1981:44). One can almost hear the questions being asked: Where were you born? Have you ever

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[48] Despite the fact that Clayton, among others, acknowledges that Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind contains "authorial selection of oral history to illustrate her topics" (1988:57), Head's insistence that they are, in fact, 'oral narratives' is never doubted.

been to school? (It is possible that this question contains the hidden question 'Do you read and write?') How did you learn to make pots/tan leather? Despite the fact that Head acknowledges that she asked questions and thus directed the form of the tale (1981:58), by leaving the questions out of the transcribed record, Head has, at a surface level, quite successfully created the impression that it is the nature of an oral testimony to follow this, and other, formats. Interestingly, the credibility of one of Head's informants is questioned by the people in the village. Kebonang Ramosamo (1981:76) is characterised by the others as an old man who gets confused and knows little. Head reveals her own role in the structuring of the interviews with the words: "People seem anxious to bury this period of severe, Spartan work and yet it is one of the most glorious aspects of Serowe's history," (1981:76) clear indication that it is her own interest which dictates the selection and presentation of the testimonies in this text.

A second example of Head's ordering and structuring of the tales is to be found in the narratives of Khunong Letsomo and Sekgabe Ntshwarisang. Letsomo's account begins, "I was born at the time the tribe was moving from Shoshong to Palapye and I was born in Palapye" (1981:47). The second narrative begins, "I was born in Serowe and attended primary school up to Standard Two" (1981:49).

It is clear that from a comparison of the above four accounts alone, a number of questioning patterns begin to emerge. Thus, in part at least, the exhibition of these accounts as 'organically' told 'oral tales' is a carefully constructed illusion on Head's part, an illusion that most readers, while acknowledging its existence in The Collector of Treasures, have tended to overlook in Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind.

Th only story which retains the original interview format is that of Ramosamo Kebonang, which she describes in the following way:

> One interview I had with the old man, Ramosamo Kebonang, seemed at first the most frustrating task I had ever undertaken. He was very old and ill. He wheezed and whined his way through the interview. He couldn't concentrate and he said all sorts of irrelevant things. Yet later when I came home I laughed to myself and thought: 'I've had a lovely day today with Ramosamo Kebonang!' I decided to record the irrelevant. (1981:67)

Many of Head's descriptions of the old people she interviewed contain such depictions of the old men which

can only be described as quaint and charming,[49] evidence of the rather heavily sentimental and romantic notions Head entertained about the old men of the village.

'Christian worship' is a complicating factor in Head's 'oral man/literate soul' equation, for it was the missionaries who were to bring literacy to Africa. The complex relationship of Christianity, literacy, and Africa, is explored in most detail in A Bewitched Crossroad. Her attempt to 'solve' the problem of the missionaries begins in Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind, where Head, making an exception, says of the missionary John Mackenzie that it was "not his aim to mock at despise black people and his observations of all the rituals and ceremonies of the people are recorded with stunning accuracy" (1981:4). Unlike other missionaries and colonial administrators, "his sympathies were broad and generous, his Christianity flexible and adaptable to all situations" (1984:48).

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[49] Descriptions such as these are not restricted to old people, and her descriptions of other people in the village are similar. Her tone is often that of a bemused parent or elder. For example, she says the following in regard to the self-help projects in Serowe: "The poor and illiterate are slowly building up their own economy where no one is exploiting them and they control their own affairs. It is a common sight at *Boiteko* to see a member pick up a garment or an article and say, with a very learned air: 'Now what are my production costs? How am I going to price this article?'" (1981:172)

Head cannot, if she chooses to exalt 'literacy', dismiss the missionaries out of hand as her belief that literacy and education are essential for progress in Africa have to lead her to acknowledge that it was the missionaries who first brought reading and writing to the Southern African people. Despite her avowed dislike for Christianity, Head asserts that its message is an "eternal" one, unfolding as a "daily drama around the mission houses" (1984:49). The 'unfolding' of the Christian 'drama' is very similar to Head's descriptions of the movement of village life. 'Tradition' is not disturbed by Christianity, but moulds and adapts the new beliefs. She has also to acknowledge the role of Christianity, as she cannot downplay its part in making Khama into the compassionate leader she has presented to us.

In A Bewitched Crossroad, Christianity and literacy become intertwined, a logical extension of the fact that all literacy classes were aimed at giving converts the skills necessary to read the Bible. 'Causing the book to speak' confuses only the old, especially the old man Sebina who says:

> We are a people accustomed only to speech, so the urge is to enquire about this new mode of communication. My people wish to say, wait! So

> you mean these are really the words of men? Is this what men are really saying? Is human thought now so preserved like the fresh greens of early summer? ... The old man delighted in testing out the preservation of human thought on paper. He asked many times that the passage be repeated to him to ensure had it had not flown away like a bird and been lost. (1984: 79)

Why the young are not intimidated by reading, and turn to it eagerly is never explained, but it is logical to assume that Head believes the young to be the natural leaders, the new generation of Africans who are going to lead Africa forward into a 'literate' future. Despite the fact that it is literacy that is going to lead the way into the future, Head still emphasises how the positive aspects of Bamangwato 'tradition' absorb new innovations, stressing that only useless traditions gave way in the face of "that cool, intellectual world" (1984:65) represented by Khama's Christianity. The 'deep' traditional structure of life does not change: "It had not mattered where the old man migrated with his people, he had always looked out over an unchanging view of flat open plains and dreaming hills" (1984:163).

Illiteracy is once more associated with inhumanity. This tendency is especially clear in her description of the

Ndebele: "as though an inhuman brute force, that was almost a kind of dull illiteracy, informed the heart of the Ndebele nation" (1984:156). However the relationship between illiteracy and inhumane behaviour has to be ambiguous as some of the most sensitively and sentimentally presented characters in this text are also illiterate. These gentle illiterate people, we have argued, are characterised by Head as 'oral' and yet also 'literate' in a more 'spiritual' sense. The separation between those who are predominantly 'oral' and those who are predominantly 'literate' is evidenced in A Bewitched Crossroad when, after a number of years, Sebina's grandson and his young, educated friend encounter the old man on their return from school: "The two young men walked into Sebina's yard together. In one giant stride they represented a completely new generation of learning" (1984:194).

It is therefore evident that Bessie Head has contrived an intricate oral illusion so successfully that it has, for the most part, been assumed to be an accurate reflection of the orality present in Serowe. Equally importantly, it is evident that the orality present in Head's texts is an illusion and not, as so many critics have assumed, simply the result of a writer in Africa having access to the ways in which orality is employed in African society. In the next chapter, we turn our attention to how Head's

depictions of 'tradition' and 'orality' confound a simple feminist reading of her characterisations of women.

CHAPTER V

'AN INFERIOR FORM OF HUMAN LIFE': FOREGROUNDING WOMEN'S CONCERNS [50]

Many of the critical responses to Bessie Head's work are governed by the assumption that she is a feminist writer, in part because writers assessing her work from a feminist perspective assume her portrayal of women in Serowe to be an accurate reflection of reality.[51] Her feminism is consequently seen as residing in her sympathetic and sensitive portrayals of women's subordination, and it is as a spokesperson or representative of these women that she is hailed. One of the critics who assesses Head's works in terms of its feminist intent is Robin Visel, who argues that Head's feminism is implicit in her criticism of "the corrupt, inefficient, sexist, and racist traditional chiefdom"

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50 Mackenzie and Clayton (1989:15)

51 A cursory reading of the Schapera (1938;1940; 1970;1975) Comaroff (1985) and Stewart and Armstrong's (1990) belies the accuracy of Head's depictions of women.

(1990:17). Visel argues further that both Paulina and Makhaya (When Rain Clouds Gather) succeed in organizing the villagers "against the rigid hierarchy in which women and slaves have low status and few rights" (1990:117) and concurs with Frank's (1984:39) assertion that it is the "madwoman in the village" that haunts the works of Bessie Head. Deidre LaPin too characterizes Head's texts as predominantly feminist. Bessie Head, she argues, traces the struggle women wage in order to claim the right to make choices for themselves particularly in A Question of Power (1984:115).[52]

Bryce-Okunlola argues that at least one of Head's novels, A Question of Power:

> exemplifies the feminist notion of the indivisibility of the personal and political, or, in psychoanalytic terms, the body and the text. In the act of writing, the woman writer recreates herself, her text the site of her resistance from within her captivity to the patriarchal symbolic order. (1991:213)

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[52] Clayton (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:3); Mackenzie (1989) and Bryce-Okunlola (1991) are three further examples of works in which arguments for Head's feminism are based on the assumption that Head's depictions of women in Serowe are accurate.

There is, of course, much in Head's texts that supports such readings, and she has also encouraged a reading of feminism into her texts. In a 1983 interview she said, "I can apprehend people's - women's - suffering" and "if I talk about women in Botswana then I talk about them only from my knowledge of Bamangwato history" (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:15-16). In an interview with Jean Marquard, Head characterises The Collector of Treasures as "mainly about calamities women experience in the village" (Marquard 1978/79:50)

However, from Head's letters - and in her texts as we shall show - it seems that the question of Head's feminism is not as straightforward as certain critics have indicated. The publication of her letters casts doubt over whether her fictional portrayal of women is indeed 'accurate' since many of her letters are disparaging of the women around her. Furthermore, Head denied feminist intent in her work in a later interview, saying: "very often I have needed a masculine vehicle just because there was nothing else that would suit it [her message]" (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:12). In the following extract from the same interview, Head clearly does not perceive herself as feminist:

> oh, I love these big men! If I haven't got them, I create them! ... There's this big feminist

> movement in the world today and we dare not say 'this grand man' but rather, 'this nitwit'. Well, anyway, forgive me feminists ..." (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:16)

In a 1968 letter to Randolph Vigne she wrote:

> You know who is the spreader of racialism? It is the women, always women. They are the real poison. Men can't afford to be racialists. They sleep around too much. ... God, the genuine African woman is a dominating terror. I'm scared shitless myself, how much more must a man be? (Vigne 1991:71-73)

The women in Head's non-fictional responses are, it is evident, very different to many of her often romanticised fictional depictions. In addition, many of Head's more 'feminist' characters are presented as independent and strong-willed, they are not depicted as the prime movers in bringing about the changes in their position in society. By and large, Head attributes what female emancipation there has been in Botswana to two male forces: one, Khama - for abolishing bogadi and enabling women to bring complaints against men without a male sponsor - and two, Christianity - which gradually

eliminated polygamous marriage. A Bewitched Crossroad demonstrates this assertion quite clearly.

In dealing with Head, then, one faces a central dilemma - the critics have tended to see her work as feminist while her texts themselves only partly support such readings. One way out of this dilemma is to reassess the question of how 'accurate' Head's fictional depictions of women are. If we abandon the notion of Head as 'spokesperson' or documenter for Serowe women,[53] then we open the way to reading her depictions of women as an 'invention' and, therefore, like Head's other fictive inventions, it is governed by certain ideas and intellectual currents. As we have seen, Head's thinking often has a binary and, at times, contradictory, character to it, and her view of women is no less ambiguous. By recognising the ambiguity of Head's depictions of women, we are able to move away from readings that see her work as unequivocally feminist, towards a more sophisticated assessment that is able to encompass the contradictions - rather than the supposed feminist unity - of both her fiction and non-fiction work.

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[53] Lloyd Brown's (1981:34) assertion that Bessie Head "is speaking on behalf of and about the African woman", while compelling our attention "as a voice for all women" is one example of such 'spokesperson' approaches to the feminist nature of Head's work.

One central contradiction in assessing Head's view of women takes us back to the question of 'tradition' since most feminist readings of her work assume that all women are involved in a struggle against the oppressive might of an out-dated, male-dominated 'African tradition'. However, as we have already indicated in Chapter III, such a straightforward reading of African tradition as 'bad' and modernity as 'good' is not possible. Instead, if we are to grasp the complexity of Head's texts we must begin by recognising that she does indeed see certain aspects of tradition - albeit male-dominated - as something to which women should submit. Certain women, like Dikeledi in "A Collector of Treasures", can resist oppressive 'bad' tradition but overall it is the 'good' women who uphold the 'good' tradition.[54]

As Kibera puts it

> The women - Maria, Paulina, Margaret - are strong, independent-minded individuals; the men - Gilbert, Makhaya, Maru - are enlightened and sensitive. Yet, before and after marriage, they all fall back, part of the time at least, on the

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[54] The ways in which 'good' women uphold 'good' tradition is especially evident in A Bewitched Crossroad, as we demonstrate in the next chapter of this thesis.

old gender roles of female docility and male mastery. (1991:323)

However Head does not just show women in relation to an overarching male tradition, she also focuses on a sub-tradition of women's craft. This dignifying of women's craft is a strategy common to other black women writers[55] but we argue that it is, at least in Head's case, not just a reflection of how the world is, but rather an active - creative - intervention necessary if she is to gender the notion of tradition in any way. In pursuing this argument regarding Head's view of tradition, this chapter begins by showing how her binary view of women (and men for that matter) conforms closely to her view of 'tradition' and 'orality' as having 'good' and 'bad' aspects. Secondly, in keeping with her need to portray Serowe as predominantly 'traditional', she slots women into this picture by focusing on a set of 'women's traditions' - mainly associated with craft - and these the chapter examines. This foregrounding of women's craft can thus be regarded as a type of gendering of tradition and this chapter extends this argument by analysing her treatment of polygamy and monogamy in the same light. Interestingly the area of 'female tradition'

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[55] Many black American women writers, for example Shange (1982) and Naylor (1988) have included recipes, weaving designs and 'household hints' in their texts to the same end.

that some critics assume to be present in Head's work - namely a 'female oral tradition' - is not much in evidence, as we demonstrate later in this chapter.

Head's approach to her female characters is often as problematic as are her depictions of 'tradition' and 'orality'. She elevates women who are, by her definition, going to accompany the 'new' African man into the future whereas 'bad' women are often, for example, presented as conspiratorial and viperous. In When Rain Clouds Gather the women "were determined to keep her [Paulina] trapped in a frustration far greater than their own. In fact, on several occasions, this powerful little clique had stepped in and with a few, cunning words destroyed tentative friendships [with men]" (1968:93). Particularly in the first three novels, friendships between women are presented as extraordinary. Elizabeth's friendship with Kenosi, one of the few friendships between women in Head's texts, is not that of two equals, and her comments on Kenosi's notebook are quite patronising.

Head tends also to buy into the 'scheming woman' stereotype in her depictions of 'bad' women. Maru - an example of the 'new' African man - finds all the women with whom he has had affairs 'bad women'. They confuse him because he discovers "that a tender smile and a

scheming mind went hand in hand, a beautiful voice turned into a dominating viper who confused the inner Maru, who was the king of heaven, with the outer Maru and his earthly position of future paramount chief of a tribe" (1971:35). 'Good' women are the opposite of the above instances of 'bad' women. For example, Margaret Cadmore is spiritually rather than physically attractive and, because she is the 'good' woman who finally succeeds in attracting Maru, she is "emotionally passive" (Head 1974;16).

'Good women' often also evidence the same blend of 'traditional' and 'modern' as the 'good men'. In "Heaven is not Closed", Galethebege achieves in her life the perfect blend of Christianity - from which much of her goodness flows - and her place in 'traditional' Tswana life by agreeing to marry Ralokae according to his wishes. She manages, through her actions, to do what the Christian missionary is incapable of doing by achieving in her own life "a compromise of tenderness ... between two traditions opposed to each other" (1977:10-11). Ralokae, her husband, in many ways represents 'good tradition', that "ancient stream of holiness that people had lived with before any white man had set foot in the land" (1977:11). Galethebege rejects the Christianity offered by the missionary and turns to the more

understanding 'tradition' - represented by her husband - in which she is able to maintain her belief in God.

Johannah, in "Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest" is also a 'good woman'. She becomes Jacob's wife and shows Jacob, through her actions, that "there were strict, hard-and-fast laws governing the conduct of family life" (Head 1977:34). Johannah's insistence that her children be reared in accordance with these rules pleases Jacob as "half of the customs too agreed with the many good things the Lord had pointed out to [him]" (1977:35). The behaviour of the 'good women' in Bessie Head's fiction serves to reinforce the 'good' aspects of custom that Head consistently promotes in her texts.

Another way in which Head's portrayal of women can be linked to her construction of tradition is through her identification of a series of 'female traditions'. As part of her insistence on the larger 'traditional' framework of Serowe life, she often hones in on one area - that of work or craft - in identifying a 'women's tradition'. Her concentration on the role of women in the maintenance of daily life is one way in which Head could be said to 'gender' the tradition of everyday life, distinct from the 'tradition' at the level of the polity which is predominantly 'male' in character. She has said, for instance, "Those skills of agriculture are

ancient skills. All women have that" (Mackenzie and Clayton 1989:9-10). In When Rain Clouds Gather she states: "The women were the traditional tillers of the earth, not the men. The women were the backbone of agriculture while the men on the whole were cattle drovers" (1968:34). Much of her writing stresses the creative powers of women's hands. For example, in "The Collector of Treasures" Dikeledi is described as having "soft, caressing, almost boneless [hands], hands of strange power - work of beautiful design grew from those hands" (1977:90). Head stresses also how women's hands are involved in maintaining the cyclical nature of life in Serowe:

> Women's hands build and smooth mud huts and mud courtyards and decorate the walls of the mud courtyards with intricate patterns. Then the fierce November and December thunderstorms sweep away all the beautiful patterns. At the right season for this work, the mud patterns will be built up again. There seems to be little confusion on the surface of life. ... It has been like this for ages and ages - this flat continuity of life; this strength of holding on and living with the barest necessities. (1981:x-xi)

These skills relating to the building and maintenance of the home are clearly ascribed to a lineage of women's skills. In Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind, Head quite clearly establishes just such a female lineage: "Akanyang Malomo is one of the last **traditional** pot-makers in Serowe. She learnt the trade from her mother but in turn has no daughter or granddaughter who is willing to carry on the **tradition**" (1981:42, emphasis added). Clearly the concept of a lineage of skills specific and important to women is inherent in her description above and, in the sense that it defines a significant role for women in the maintenance of everyday life, is almost certainly 'feminist'.

Another way in which Head could be said to 'gender' tradition is through her treatment of monogamy. Many of the critics who have claimed Head's works as the new voice for all African women very often stress her insistence on monogamy, without paying attention to how she manages to convey the *impression* of monogamy as the 'natural', logical extension of incidents buried deep in a 'traditional,' polygamous past. Schapera (1940:334) has pointed out that the fact that the majority of Tswana marriages were monogamous is in reality of little consequence as all rules and regulations pertaining to marriage and the position of women in society relied on the ideal, polygamous form of marriage.

Bessie Head presents monogamy in her texts as the only humane form of marriage. She further stresses its importance by making characters who subscribe to this form of marriage noble in their far-sightedness. Through her fictional depictions of marriage, Head argues that the roots of monogamy are as 'traditional' and 'ancient' as are those of polygamy. The superiority of people, particularly men, who opt for monogamous relationships is clearly explicated in, for example, "The Deep River" and "The Lovers", where the hero leaves his 'tribe' to live in a monogamous marriage with the woman he loves.

In "Hunting," Tholo's goodness is exemplified in the way he reacts when Thato tells him that she is pregnant, thinking that this will cause him to leave. She wishes him to leave as she has fallen in love with him and believes he will hurt her as all her other lovers have (1977:107). Instead of leaving, Tholo simply says: "We can get married ... I can arrange everything" (1977:107). The most significant aspect of this story is that it (the final story in the collection - set in the present) in many ways parallels the first story in the collection, "The Deep River" - set in a distant past. Both the male characters in these stories, although generations apart, choose more or less equal, monogamous relationships with their wives. Thus the text comes a full circle, and the

more 'modern' man, like his ancestor, *chooses* monogamy over polygamy.

Head further emphasises the 'natural' state of monogamy by making certain aspects of male and female identity undesirable when 'bad' characters resort to polygamous behaviour. For example, the male characters in Head's texts who do not get involved in monogamous, more or less equal relationships with women become "wilting, effeminate shadows of men who really feared women" (Head 1968:93). The 'bad' women who cooperate in polygamous behaviour "had been lying to themselves for so long in their sexual frustration that they would not admit the real reason that Paulina dominated them all was because she was the kind of woman who could not lie to men" (Head 1968:93).

Makhaya (When Rain Clouds Gather) rejects the traditional forms of marriage offered to him by his 'custom' and chooses instead only Paulina. As soon as he moves in with Paulina, he terms it a 'marriage' and calls her his 'wife'. The way in which Head 'rolls' more modern social structures back into elements of marriage patterns of the past remains unexamined in the analyses of her works.

However, Head's treatment of monogamy results in the relative passivity of women once it has been established.

This passivity is evident in the following incident from When Rain Clouds Gather. When Paulina discovers that her child is dead, Makhaya will not allow her to follow customary practice which dictate she look at her son's remains - saying, "'All these rotten customs are killing us. Can't you see I'm here to bear all your burdens?'" (1968:162). In this incident, only African traditions that are deleterious are subverted - Head seems incapable of meting out the same treatment to traditionally held gender specific roles which assume that, once married, women will submit to the decisions of men.

Implicit in a number of assessments of Head's work is the assumption that because so much of her writing is about women the narrator must hence also be a woman. Bryce-Okunlola is one critic who has insisted that because Head, among other women writers, uses motherhood as "a metaphor for the creative process itself" (1991:201) her storyteller must be female. The use of motherhood as a metaphor for creativity, Bryce-Okunlola asserts, points to "the communal story-telling tradition or their [women writers'] foremothers" (1991:201). Fido (1991:335) argues that Bessie Head writes in a style "full of abstractions and moral terms, [and] seems both mission-school and close to the African traditions of moral teaching though words", a language which helps her deal with the "divorce of the tongue from the heart which

accompanies the division of mother from daughter." Somehow, Fido seems to be arguing, the orality of the African people will allow Head to get closer to her mother. Orality, in Fido's sense, is thus strictly a female mode of communication.

The impression that the 'orality' in Head's texts is a distinctly female orality is misleading. An examination of The Collector of Treasures, the text most concerned with women, reveals that only two stories make explicit reference to women as storytellers. In "The Wind and a Boy," a 'storyteller' who is the young boy's grandmother is referred to. The fact that she is a storyteller happens, in Head's words, "quite accidentally" (1977:71). Despite the fact that the woman has appropriated her story into a traditional format, her storytelling centres on Robinson Crusoe (1977:72-3), a remnant of the old woman's days at school.

The story "Hunting" has a more definite female 'storyteller' character, Thato. This storyteller sits and watches a fire as she tells her stories with "the unerring heart of a good storyteller" (1977:108-9). The function of her storytelling is, largely, to relate "the incredible muddle and nonsense people make of their lives each day" (1977:109) to her husband. Whether this

activity is essentially female or not is difficult to determine.

It might of course be argued that some of the participant observer narrators who appear in stories like "The Special One" and "Jacob the Faith Healing Priest" could be construed as female. However, the case is not clear-cut and while there is a case to be made that the narrator in "The Special One" may be female, in the other story there is no direct evidence of this contention.

What is evident is that Head's stories do not so much provide a means through which the centuries-old 'oral' voice of women, (see LaPin (1984) for example) can be heard, as much as they are narratives constructed around the lives of women, intended to bring to the fore the difficulties or 'calamities' women face in their everyday lives. Very often, the medium through which the story is communicated is 'the old men', (1977:6;8;24;61), the 'old people' (1977:47), simply 'they' or 'people' (1977:44;57;69) or the 'gossip-mongers' (1977:77;80).

To sum up, we argue here that Head's inconsistent treatment of women and their changing role in society has much to do with her need to find a place for women within her elevated depictions of 'tradition' and, to a lesser extent, 'orality'. Much of what Head presents as

'orality' is, in fact, a particular form of male orality centring on history and custom. Where the women of Serowe do speak it is generally of their lives (the individual's life, not the 'life' of the polity) or of their crafts (again a personalised arena). An interesting omission, on Head's part, of the role women played in the 'life' of the polity is evidenced in her lack of regard for the role women played in both the Christianity and literacy of Serowe. The great majority of women were church-goers and, by 1940, four times as many girls were receiving early education as boys. Bearing in mind that literacy was a pre-requisite for confirmation in the church, literacy has, in Head's texts, remained more or less the preserve of men.

If we understand 'feminism' as the critical attempt to foreground, understand and challenge the oppression of women, then much of Bessie Head's writing can most certainly be viewed as broadly 'feminist'. Her feminism is particularly evident if we examine her fictional intentions and the message underlying her presentation of both the 'good' men and women in her novels. It is not our intention to deny the feminist aspects evident in many of Head's characterisations of women but, rather, to point to the problem which inheres in the critical insistence on her feminism - a selective reading of the texts.

Thus despite the progressive nature of many aspects of Head's vision of male/female relations, her attempts to establish a 'new' African woman are inhibited by her own deep belief in the essential identities, roles and behaviours of males and females. In addition, she uses these gender categories to understand other areas of life, for example, when she attributes male and female characteristics to certain forms of behaviour. An example of this tendency is the comment in A Question of Power that the only 'true' friendships are those between men, and that friendship therefore has masculine qualities. All the strong female characters in the first three novels find their ultimate source of strength in their male companions. Tom, in A Question of Power raises this issue with Elizabeth:

> 'You are a strange woman, Elizabeth. The things you draw out of a man! You know, men don't really discuss the deep metaphysical profundities with women. Oh, they talk about love and things like that, but their deepest feelings they reserve for other men.' (1974:24)

Elizabeth's response to this remark is equally telling:

> Why, yes, she thought, that was the only reasonable explanation of the relationship

> between Sello and her. The base of it was masculine. Right from the start, Sello had the air of one who was simply picking up the threads of a long friendship that had been briefly interrupted at some stage. (1974:24)

Unlike Buchi Emecheta (in The Joys of Motherhood), Bessie Head does not offer her characters the more 'radical' or 'revolutionary' option of rejecting their position in society. Head's characters are subject to more gentle, gradual change. Head rarely deviates in any sustained way from commonly held notions of the place of men and women in society. Or, as Kibera says: "marriage alters [her characters] to fit their conventional roles" (1991:323).

The inconsistencies present in Head's female characters are evidence of her attempt to create not only a 'new African' identity in general, but also a revised identity for African women within the 'new' boundaries of 'tradition' that she herself has drawn. Her depictions of woman therefore centre around the gendering of craft, and the identification of a 'place' for women in her own view of the essentially male 'tradition' of the polity.

What becomes especially clear is that Head's work on women is as difficult to categorise as are her visions of

orality and tradition. She draws on ideas and ideologies when and how they suit her and, in this light, the critics' insistence on her 'feminism' indicates once again how the construction of a 'women's literary tradition' which is implicitly feminist can become misleading in so far as it encourages a partisan reading of, in this case, Bessie Head's texts. Despite Kibera's (1991) insightful comments into the nature of Head's depiction of women, she concludes that Head belongs to "that small band of female writers who, between the 1960s and the 1980s, grappled with and succeeded at the task of depicting societies in transition and giving voice to the female dimension of experience" (1991:327).

As Carby (1987) has warned, we must not read texts as though they reflect fixed gender identities. Many critics' reading of Head has come close to positing just such a fixed identity - a type of 'Third World Woman' that Head's texts are seen to reflect. The woman it is assumed Head's writing depicts is similar to the type of 'Third World Woman' Mohanty has outlined - a woman who leads "an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)" (1984:337).

Instead of reading texts in such fixed ways, we should try to view literary texts as active interventions and - 'inventions' - in on-going debates and discourses regarding gender roles and the struggle over their definition. This chapter has attempted an initial step in this process by setting out the extent to which Head has invented an idea of 'women' rather than simply reflecting it.

CHAPTER VI

A BEWITCHED CROSSROAD

"Cause the Book to speak, child!"

Thus far we have indicated how Bessie Head has fabricated a sense of tradition and orality in her texts. We have also indicated how her portrayal of tradition interferes with her depictions of women. We have traced these areas of fabrication in a range of her texts. Here we turn to an examination of A Bewitched Crossroad, a text in which these fabrications are particularly evident. By employing the framework established thus far in this thesis, we hope in this chapter to stimulate new insights into Bessie Head's least-examined work.

A Bewitched Crossroad appears to have confounded the critics, with many of them simply ignoring its existence, even in critical works written or compiled a number of years after it was published. One possible reason for this could be that this text does not fit the category -

'African feminist woman writer' - assigned to Head by almost all her critics.[56]

Thus while the critics have written much about Head's earlier works, the same cannot be said about her last work, the text she considered her most important piece on Khama the Great. In 1973 she wrote of what was to become A Bewitched Crossroad: "I have done a little work, very little, in my Serowe book, on Khama the Great. The real work, if I ever attempt it, is still far in the future" (Vigne 1991:179). And yet this work, her "real" work, is neglected by the critics. For example, a recently published collection of feminist interpretations of African, Caribbean and Asian women's writing (Motherlands 1991), contains four essays which deal directly with Head's texts. Not one of these essays, however, makes mention of A Bewitched Crossroad.

Where critics have examined the text, they have concluded that it is a failed attempt to combine the historical and fictive discourses Head experiments with in her earlier works. Ronge's assertion (1985:27) that the text does not succeed, in part because the names of the characters

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[56] The only notable exception to feminist categorisations of Bessie Head is Ojo-Ade's 1977 article, in which he argues strenuously against viewing her work as feminist. His later writing (1983), however, too resorts to broadly feminist interpretations of her work.

are "tongue-twisting mind-benders", ignores the crucial questions attendant on any attempt to analyse the text. Mackenzie's (1989(1):47) summing-up is far more sensitive and attuned to the issues, although he attempts no major critical understanding of the text in any of his published pieces. Mackenzie argues that although the text is a "much-needed reappraisal of the history of the Southern African region", it fails as a piece of fiction and "cannot claim its place as a thoroughgoing historical work either" (1989(1):47). The text is not historical, he contends, because it has none of "the dry, unremittingly factual quality of the school text-book", and argues that the novel is, instead, an "idiosyncratic mixture of fact and fiction" (1989(1):18).

While Mackenzie acknowledges that Head, in some sense, creates an oral impression in her texts, he nonetheless assumes that her accessing of this 'oral tradition' is unproblematic. Of The Collector of Treasures and Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind he says, "[the stories] are contained by a larger narrative framework ... which contextualises the tales for the reader and transcribes the oral tale into the written short story" (1989:23). Her stories, he continues, "are lifted from the stream of daily village life for the edification, in the main, of a literate, removed audience" (1989:24). While Mackenzie has not directly addressed the issue of orality in A

Bewitched Crossroad, we can assume that it would not differ significantly from his conceptions of her use of orality in the two texts mentioned above.

Clayton's reading of A Bewitched Crossroad too contains many insightful comments on the text. This text, she contends, is "a corrective historical study ... [which] draws on her deep sympathy with the African past" (1988:61). However, she too reads Head's telling of the history of Serowe through the character of Sebina as an unproblematic "confluence of African tradition and Western innovation" (1988:60). A Bewitched Crossroad, Clayton argues, evidences the "happy co-existence of modern idiom and African proverb" in which there is a "constant drawing on traditional song and legend" (1988:62).

We intend to demonstrate that A Bewitched Crossroad is not simply an attempt to render an oral memory in the written form. This text, rather, constitutes a conscious, deliberate undertaking on Head's part to present to the reader a constructed, invented 'oral history'. However, at the same time, Head attempts to embed this oral voice in a literate historical narrative and we examine this synthesis as a response to the problem of writing historical novels in Southern Africa. If Head's view of orality is 'invented', then so too is

her depiction of women and, in conclusion, this chapter examines the ways in which women are portrayed in A Bewitched Crossroad. In keeping with the argument established in the previous chapter, we attempt to show how her view of women is subordinated to her model of tradition.

In A Bewitched Crossroad, Head relies quite heavily on a number of written sources in order to recreate an oral texture on the written page. Her debt to the texts listed in her bibliography starts to become evident on pages 22-24 of A Bewitched Crossroad, which is, more or less, a summarised version of Omer-Cooper's (1966:24-48) The Zulu Aftermath. The description of Shaka's insanity seems almost certainly to have been derived from Ritter's gruesome accounts of his actions (for example Ritter 1955:308-336). Head says of Ritter's text:

> I dedicated my book [?] to Shaka, after reading Ritter. I accept his version and interpretation, because I grew up in Natal and Zulu-speaking people are like that, they are like Shaka, having never forgotten him, that one personalit. mped a mass of people ... I grew up surrounded by that atmosphere. (Vigne 1991:124)

Although Head lengthens and shortens accounts to suit her purposes, the historical style employed by Ritter - of telling the story of a nation through the actions of a few individuals - is maintained. Ritter's (1955) account of the rise of the Zulu empire too seems to have been influential in determining the model Head uses to approach telling the story of Khama the Great, and many of the contradictions pointed out in relation to Head's use of 'orality' are also present in Ritter's text. In the introduction to Shaka Zulu: The Rise of the Zulu Empire, Ritter says that his book "attempts to portray Shaka, the founder of the Zulu nation, as the Zulus saw him ..." (1955:IX). He wishes, he continues, to describe this period of history in the "vivid and dramatic style peculiar to their [Zulu? black?] nation", a style that arose from the fact that

> almost every evening Zulu fathers spoke to their children of the traditions of the Zulu nation, which they in turn had learned from their fathers. ... The earliest chronicles of all peoples were presumably oral: they were nonetheless chronicles for that, and the author has not hesitated to refer, occasionally, to the Zulu oral tradition as a chronicle, and to the elders who spoke it as chroniclers. (Ritter 1955:IX)

Bessie Head, it seems, had less confidence in the memories of the 'chroniclers', relying as heavily as she does on the books listed in her bibliography for the information necessary for A Bewitched Crossroad. Ritter's listing of his 'oral' sources contains an irony of which he seems unaware. His sources are mentioned in the following order: first, Ritter's father, Captain C.L.A. Ritter, 'Native Commissioner' and magistrate; second, his maternal grandfather, the Rev. C.W. Posselt, a missionary; third, Chief Sigananda Cube, servant to Shaka; and, lastly, himself. It is perhaps superfluous to mention that only one of Ritter's sources - Chief Cube - would be able to provide him with a description of Shaka "as the Zulus saw him" (1955:IX), and not even with a vivid imagination could any one of the other 'oral sources' be considered Zulu.

The third of Head's sources we examine is Twenty Years in Khama's Country, the memoirs of missionary J.D. Hepburn. Bessie Head's dislike for Macheng's disrespect for Christianity is reminiscent of Mrs Hepburn's description of him:

> Macheng now openly persecuted the Christians, giving orders for certain regiments to go out to the veldt (country) to herd his cattle every Sunday, while others were ordered to appear at

> the khotla (chief's courtyard) to sew and bray skins of wild animals - anything to prevent the young people from going to school or church. ... Macheng was the most repulsive-looking African I have ever seen. He had lived with the Moselekatse in Matabeleland for many years, and had thoroughly imbibed the abominable customs of the people. (Hepburn 1970[1895]:4-5)

Compare this to Head's description of Macheng:

> Macheng favoured the old customs, and the existence of Christianity in the town with its powerful leader, rankled. Towards the end of his five-year rule Macheng was driven to a frenzy of despair, abolishing sabbath observance and ordering day and night drum beating and wailing. (1984:53)

Another similarity between Hepburn and Head's accounts concerns "Khama the Good" (Hepburn 1970[1895]:5), rationally Christian and morally superior, who triumphs. Head's description of how the people followed Khama to Serowe has been, almost word for word, plagiarised from Hepburn's account. Here are the two descriptions side-by-side:

> Hepburn: For weeks long strings of people - women with baskets on their heads, men, some with bundles, and other driving pack-oxen - filed up the kloof. The stream flowed steadily on, until the town of Bamangwato proper became almost deserted, and only a few old men and servants remained with Sekhome and Khamane. (1970[1895]:21-22)
>
> Head: For weeks after Khama had left the town, long streams of people - women with baskets on their heads, and men driving pack-oxen loaded with goods - moved out of Shoshong until the Bamangwato capital was almost deserted. Only a few old men and servants remained with Sekgoma and Khamane. (Head 1984:54)

Head has, in fact, 'lifted' many incidents in Hepburn's book and merely 'oralised' them through Sebina for use in her book. Sebina himself, in fact, is a certain Mogalakwe in Hepburn's book. Despite Head's explanation that the character of Sebina is "representative" and derived from an essay entitled "History of Makalaka" by Peter Mazebe Sebina (1984: Author's note), she has lifted him out of Hepburn's pages and on to her own.

In Head's text, Hepburn reads to the old man Sebina who asks for the reading to be repeated many times over. He wishes he could read, but "Alas! the new learning was lost to him. His eyesight was too poor and only received a vague blur in the material handed to him. 'But I have many eyes that will see for me,' he thought" (Head 1984:79), and he ensures that his son learns to read. Hepburn's account is worth quoting in full:

> 'Read that again,' he said; and I read it again, and read it a great many times over to his request.
>
> He took the books in his hands, and looked at the place I pointed out to him with my finger. How his heart yearned to read the words, but he could not.
>
> 'What am I to do?' he said. 'I can't read, and these old eyes of mine will never learn. ... but it is too late for Mogalakwe; he can never learn.' ...
>
> He said, 'You must tell my son all this, and he must make haste and learn to read, then he will be able to explain and read it all to me.'...
>
> The next day he brought both his wives to me to teach them to read. (Hepburn 1970[1895]:54-5)

Hepburn too admires the old man for his depth and breadth of vision - similar to the way that Head makes him into the ultimate 'literate soul': "From all I saw of Mogalakwe and from all I heard about him, I believed him to have been, although a heathen, a truly brave and great-souled man" (Hepburn 1970[1895]:56).

That Bessie Head has deliberately created the impression of orality in many of her texts has been argued in some detail in Chapter IV.[57] This impression of orality is conveyed in A Bewitched Crossroad through Sebina. Head uses the incidents of his life to unfold the story of Serowe. In addition, he is the means whereby his people come to understand the 'new ways' of Khama. Sebina reinterprets or explains what Khama has decided to the people in his ward. His role in the text is, therefore, not restricted to providing comfort and leadership for his people, but extends also to telling them their history: "The old man shifted his posture to that of an

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[57] For example, the story of "How the Phuti Became the Totem of the Bamangwato" in Serowe is attributed to Mokgojwa Mathware (1981:16), but could just as easily have been derived from, for example, Mary Benson's account (1960:24-25) which Head had already read when she was doing research for Serowe.

ancient historian recounting the history of his clan" (Head 1984:62)[58] from his point of view.

Another hallmark of Head's 'invention' is apparent in her views of literacy. Despite Sebina's 'orality', for example, Head characterises the way he views the world and even understands history in 'literate' terms: "and page by page, like some gigantic and invisible book, its [the town's] life, its confusion, its turmoil and new direction would be comprehended by him" (1984:67). Head subtly weaves orality and literacy together, until literacy becomes an almost natural consequence of the 'proper' use of 'tradition' and 'orality'. Sebina is said to like the cool, rational, logical thought of Khama (1984:65), and the only obstacle in the way of his learning to read himself is his eyesight (1984:79). Thus once again, as demonstrated in Chapter III, the best kind of 'oral' man has a 'literate soul'.

Bessie Head's sources for A Bewitched Crossroad are, therefore, clearly not 'oral'. She has managed, in certain chapters at least, to give a fairly consistent impression of 'orality' through the character of Sebina. In addition, she has bolstered the overall impression of

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[58] What posture do ancient historians have? Perhaps the intention here is to physically reinforce the 'oral' nature of the history being related.

an 'oral' style, by adopting the narrative frame of an oral chiefly history in which time is imagined as passing in agnatic units or 'chiefly chunks'.[59] Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind is based on three such divisions of time: the era of Khama the Great; the era of Tshekedi Khama and, lastly, Patrick van Rensburg. This model of 'chiefly' history based on the explication of agnatic relationships appears as well in A Bewitched Crossroad and we are introduced to it on the first page: "They were still in the midst of their uncertain wanderings when Motswaing died. He was succeeded by his son, Motshiping" (Head 1984:9), and "Tumbale, the blasphemer, replaced his father as Mambo at Damboshaba" (1984:14).

However, this 'oral' style is not the only one that she uses and alongside it she develops a more 'literate', 'western' style of historical narrative. In this latter mode time is marked by dates rather than agnatic links and 'tribal' migrations: "Before the year 1816 ... " (1984:19) and "About the year 1820 ... " (1984:25) are time markers.

What Head is, in effect, trying to do is create the illusion of combining two styles of historical narrative

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[59] For an in-depth discussion on the ways in which oral historical narrators use chieftaincy as "one of the shaping horizons of their narratives", see Isabel Hofmeyr (1991), Chapters 5 and 6.

- an oral and a 'literate' or an 'African' and a 'western'. While the point may appear obvious it is worth stressing since certain critics like Mackenzie have read this text as an attempt to combine 'fact' and 'fiction'. However, as Mink has pointed out (1974), such a distinction is not valid since historical facts cannot be sundered from the narrative in which they are embedded. Mink states further "An historical narrative does not demonstrate the necessity of events but makes them intelligible by unfolding the story which connects their significance" (Mink 1974:111).

Head's attempt to provide us with an 'oral' recounting of the history of the Bamangwato people is not a failed attempt at either fiction or history, it is simply an attempt to do something different with both these forms. Again, Mink is useful: "narratives are in an important sense primary and irreducible. They are not imperfect substitutes for more sophisticated forms of explanation and understanding" (Mink 1974:123). Thus the difficulty with Head's narrative is, in part, a complication associated with wanting to marry together often disparate historical 'voices' in order to create the 'complete' picture of Khama she would so much like to offer.

Head sets out, therefore, to write an historical novel much like Plaatje's Native Life in South Africa and

Mhudi. The structures of Native Life in South Africa and Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind are very similar - both purport to tell the history of a certain historical period through the recorded stories of the individual players. Head's summing up of Plaatje's work is similar to her intentions in A Bewitched Crossroad and Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind:

> Native Life is wide and deep in its historical reach. A full portrait of the times emerges and we are presented with a view of history reaching back nearly five hundred years and up to a period of transition as it has affected the lives of black people ... [Plaatje's] main aim is to present the black personality as deserving justice, humanity and dignity. (Head 1990:81)

Head emulates Plaatje's attempt to write in a manner in which the historical facts of the lives of black people are made readable and powerful in their influence. In the "Introduction" to the 1978 edition of Mhudi, Tim Couzens could easily be writing about Bessie Head's last work and it is thus worth quoting at length:

> Plaatje is concerned not only to defend the customs of traditional life of the Barolong (and, to some extent, by extension, of the blacks

> generally) but he is also intent on reinterpreting history from the point of view of his own people. This does not, however, imply that he is totally and idealistically backward-looking and incapable of accepting change. As a Lutheran himself, Plaatje praises Moroka for his acceptance of the Christian missionaries Broadbent and Hodgson, and see himself firmly within a particular [literary] tradition. (Plaatje 1978:11)

Two more significant similarities between Plaatje and Head's works emerge in Couzens' discussion. The first is their attempt to reproduce an 'oral' history in the written form. Both resort to biblical register and epic language to reinforce the archaic style of the language. Of this use of biblical language Plaatje says: "The similarity between all pastoral nations is such that some passages in the history of the Jews read uncommonly like a description of the Bechuana during the nineteenth century" (1978:12-3). A Bewitched Crossroad contains an analogous idea: "'The Jews,' Sebina said, eagerly. 'They are so much like us! We have listened to these stories in great wonder, astounded to hear things in the new learning that do not differ from our own customs'" (1984:78-9). Sebina's son concurs. After reading to Sebina from the Bible he says: "'Is this any different

from our life father? ... The Word of the Book does not differ from our own life.'" (1984:79). Couzens concludes, much as we have about Bessie Head, that "Plaatje's choice of registers here is, to some extent, a creative act" (1978:13).

The second similarity referred to above is the crafting of an 'oral' impression evident in both the texts. According to Dr S.M. Molema, Plaatje "seems to have called Mhudi his 'evening reader'" (1978:15). Couzens points out that

> By this he [Plaatje] did not mean that it was trivial evening reading. Quite the contrary. He seems to have regarded Mhudi as analogous to folk-tales, legends and oral history passed from one generation to another around the fireside at night. It should thus contain the wisdom and history of his people, the very core of his own culture. Mhudi is very close to the spoken word because that is the way Plaatje learnt much of the history and fable he recounts in the novel. The form of the novel is not so much a 'reader' but that of a *spoken story* told to the writer ... (1978:15)

By arguing that Head has 'invented' an oral tradition, we are not wishing to detract from her achievement. Indeed, her 'inventions' are often ingenious responses to one of the problems of an on-going South African genre - the historical novel. Head's response to the problem of how one combines 'fact' and fiction is to combine two historical styles, building on a legacy she inherits from Plaatje. Even her lifting from .epburn is not without precedent in South African literature. Peter Abrahams has also, in his historical novel Wild Conquest, lifted sections from Mhudi.[60] Interestingly, Abrahams' borrowings entail lifting the 'oral' sections from Mhudi and may have been transferred to solve similar problems that Head faced in creating an oral voice in a written text.

The last area to which we turn our attention is Head's presentation of women in A Bewitched Crossroad. Women are, by and large, neglected in this text, something that is inevitable if, as we have argued, Head is using a predominantly male-centred form of historical narrative for the telling of her story: all the historical actors are male; and all the incidents in the text are related through male characters and at least one aspect of her

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[60] The most obvious example of plagiarism in Peter Abrahams' book is the song on (210-211) - which comes from Plaatje's text (51).

oral style is taken over from male chiefly narrative. Finding an overt, active place for women within such a heavily agnatic style is a difficult enterprise. As a consequence, women's concerns are neither foregrounded nor detailed. Female characters are always presented as adjuncts to the male characters in the novel, where they are even discussed at all. It is our contention that the lack of sensitively drawn female characters in this novel is, in part, a substantial reason for the critics' neglect of the text. If one has argued so coherently for Bessie Head's inclusion in a black women writers' tradition that is feminist, then one has, by force, to ignore this text which is so male in orientation. Despite the fact that more women than men were members of the church (Comaroff 1985) and hence literate, their role in the literacy and Christianizing of the Bamangwato people is in this text largely ignored by Head.

The only chapter where women's concerns are dealt with directly is Chapter 12, where Head outlines the abolition of *bogadi*. The abolition of *bogadi* is presented as part of the on-going dialogue between Christianity and customary practices and, yet again, it is the male characters - Khama, Sebina, and the other elders - who are the main players in this scene. Sebina's wife, disturbed by the prospect of no *bogadi*, says:

> 'The women would never approve of the abolition of bogadi,' she grumbled. 'Bogadi has been marriage and security for the children. What is human society coming to in Bamangwato country?' ... Bakhwi was a woman who knew her place, which was in her own yard. ... She believed women should not comment on social matters - that was the preserve of men. (1984:168)

It is the old man, Sebina, who is most pleased by the prospect because "it pleased [him] that some subject had finally bestirred Bakhwi out of her traditional, conservative mould" (1984:168). Bakhwi's ability to straddle the 'traditional' and the 'modern' is the superior old man evident in so many of Head's stories. Bakhwi, because of her dependence on the 'old' ways makes a "shameful and retrogressive statement" (1984:173):

> 'May I ask what is wrong with a good beating from a husband?' her deep, **masculine** voice boomed over the assembly. 'A beating ensured that a woman remained on the right road. We are going to have a lot of women with loose morals in this society.' (1984:173 emphasis added)

It is significant that her voice is masculine for, in much the same way as Head sees feminine qualities as being undesirable in a man, 'masculine' qualities are undesirable in a woman. It is almost as if Head is saying that not to want emancipation is unfeminine. Head continues to adhere to the essentialist, 'natural' qualities of gentleness and subservience to men that define women in her earlier texts. The impression that the emancipated woman is also in some way a feminine woman is reinforced in the following extract:

> A few weeks later bogadi, or the bride-price, by general public approval was abolished from Bamangwato society. But the women did not immediately react in an overt way to their newly earned freedoms. In fact, they kept their shawls around their shoulders and looked as conservative as everyone else. But there were the beginnings of an independent and emancipated woman in the society. (1984:173)

Hence even the liberation of women has perforce to be an even, quietly achieved act so as not to disturb the equilibrium of the even-handed society so carefully engineered by Khama.

A Bewitched Crossroad is overtly different from Head's previous texts. This difference is most discernible in the style with which she approaches the work. However, the issues examined in her last work remain the same as those in the earlier works. It is clear that if we approach this text with a view to examining the ways in which orality and tradition have been constructed and streamlined, we are able to arrive at a more complete understanding of the ways in which A Bewitched Crossroad is an extension of Head's previous works.

Despite the fact that the text is, in many ways, "heavy going" and a "familiar tale of colonialism all over again" (Ronge 1985:27), it is also a very sophisticated attempt to present as 'oral' large chunks of the history of a period so negatively overwritten by colonial historians. For Head has succeeded in at least one respect: the players in the history of colonial Africa have become active participants in the decision which so affected its future. Despite the idealisation of Khama and Sebina, the text makes clear that the history of Botswana could so easily have become the history of so many other countries in Africa, were it not for the astute political vision of Tshekedi Khama.

Above all, what the text demonstrates to us as critics is the extent to which Head has so carefully manipulated our

own convictions concerning history, orality and tradition. We assume that she is presenting us with either the 'real' or the 'imagined' picture of Serowe, and fail to take into account the blurring of the line between these two styles. If the text fails, it fails partly due to our own inability to recognise what it is, and our insistence that it be assessed in terms of what it is not.

CONCLUSION

SEROWE: HEAD'S 'HALLOWED GROUND'

It is fitting that the most perceptive remarks on Bessie Head's works must, ultimately, come from her own writing. What we have argued in this thesis is not that different to what Head believes she has achieved:

> The least I can ever say for myself is that I forcefully created, under extremely hostile conditions, my ideal life. I took an obscure and unknown village in the Southern African bush and made it my own hallowed ground. ... My work was always tentative because it was always so completely new: it created new worlds out of nothing; ... it brought all kinds of people, both literate and semi-literate together, and it did not really qualify who was who - everyone had a place in my world. (Mackenzie 1990:28)

Or, as she says elsewhere, she has created a "Botswana of my own making" (Mackenzie 1990:62).

We have argued that Bessie Head's creation of the illusion of a 'traditional' and 'oral' Serowe, and the emphasis that this thesis has placed on these aspects of her writing, should be seen in the context of her intellectual concerns. Her stated desire to write "a vast kind of panorama of tribal life" (Vigne 1991:188) combined with her Africanist beliefs, her deeply-felt respect for African religion, and her interest in history, make her concentration on orality and tradition a logical aspect of her texts. Bessie Head was caught up in a number of often contradictory currents and much of her writing constitutes a creative attempt to resolve many of the contradictions in her own thought.

Three of Bessie Head's intellectual concerns have been of particular importance to this thesis: her attitude towards 'tradition', her conception of 'orality' and her beliefs about the social position of women. What becomes evident through a reading of her texts is that her concepts of 'tradition' and her beliefs about the nature of 'orality' have led to very specific renditions of these aspects of Serowe life in her texts. Both 'tradition' and 'orality' figure largely in her texts. Starting as a mere backdrop to much of her early writing, tradition and orality achieve places of prominence in her later texts.

In particular, Head uses Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind and A Bewitched Crossroad as the vehicles for her recreation of a sense of what she believes the essence of African life should be. Just as many other African writers have done, Bessie Head 'goes back' into what she perceives Africa's past to be. From this 'past', she gleans those 'usable' aspects of African life and employs them to construct her assessments and depictions of Africa in the present and her hopes for Africa in the future. What results is an apparently unified body of writing in which Africa is seemingly faithfully represented through the eyes of the African people.

The illusion of both the 'orality' and 'tradition' of Serowe in her texts is best understood therefore as a strategy - one that she consciously employs in order to best satisfy her intellectual concerns. Eileen Julien, recognising the strategic nature of the use of 'orality' in written texts, has argued that oral references in the works of African writers "hold the means of imaginative solutions to problems of aesthetic and ideological dimensions" (1992:Preface). The extent to which much of the orality of Serowe in Head's texts is imagined has been discussed in much detail in this thesis.

Head's task of 'recreating Africa' is, as Julien points out, fraught with a number of aesthetic difficulties. In

addition to the need to 'create' the illusion of a Serowe that is still both oral and traditional, Bessie Head has also to find for herself an acceptable 'voice' through which to communicate this impression. Common to many South African writers, Head has also to find a voice that is able to speak across the social divisions which are so much a part of South African life. In addition, this voice must by definition be 'recognisably' African. In Bessie Head's case, however, speaking for others becomes even more difficult as she does, especially in her inability to speak Setswana, an 'outsider' in the community she was trying so hard to depict. Her solution to this problem was to adopt the illusory position of participant observer - an observer who putatively had access to the ways in which 'oral history' and 'tradition' are orally transmitted in an African community. For example, many of the interviews in Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind are presented as tales spontaneously arising from the oral nature of Serowe existence. As was indicated in Chapter III, however, Head's role as interviewer and editor of these 'orally transmitted' tales is submerged and what remains is an illusion of the oral nature of Serowe.

By submerging her own role in the gathering of the oral testimonies, Head succeeds in her adoption of yet another strategy employed to solve the problem of speaking for

others: she invent in her texts the fictional equivalent of the 'true' African 'oral' voice, presumably that voice which the participant observer would have 'heard'. Thus, as we have shown in the previous chapter, Sebina is an invention - Bessie Head's solution to the need for an 'oral historian'. By 'speaking' as she does through the voice of an 'oral man', Head is able to present us with what we would perceive as the 'true' story of Serowe's history. Overall, therefore, Bessie Head's solutions to these aesthetic considerations have without doubt been not only imaginative, but also highly successful, judging by the critics' unquestioning response to her creation of these illusions. It is our belief that once the invented nature of Head's works is more widely accepted, new areas of investigation in the scholarship on Bessie Head's writing will open up.

What is equally noteworthy is that despite the 'invented' nature of the 'orality' in her texts, she anticipates in her wri ing both the movement towards the use of 'oral' history in broadly revisionist historiographies. The use of a community's own 'oral' stories to construct the history of a period - recorded in a written text - has become a much-used format. In many ways, therefore, Head's work prefigured the current movement towards oral testimonial literature. An example of this type of historiography is Bozzoli's (1991) Women of Phokeng which

consists of oral interviews recorded by a literate listener and transmitted to a literate audience through the written medium.

What must not be forgotten, and what the works of Bessie Head have quite clearly indicated, is that even such apparently 'objective' recordings of 'orality' are determined by the listener's needs and intentions. An 'oral voice' does not just simply emerge spontaneously from below but is created by a series of mediations and interventions on the part of intellectuals, writers and academics. A critical look at the work of Bessie Head can indeed lead us to investigate critically many areas of revisionist scholarship in which oral testimony has been used.

Head's works and the critical reactions they have elicited, also evidence the symbolism with which many scholars invest orality in discussions on African literature. Julien has outlined this symbolism and she points out that many writers and their critics believe that "almost invariably there is something ontologically oral about Africa and that the act of writing is therefore disjunctive and alien for Africans" (Julien 1992:8). It is clear that certain critics, such as Fido

(1991), have subscribed to this idea.[61] To a certain extent, Head's works also conform to this idea, but it is interesting that she moves beyond the limitations inherent in the symbolism of orality by creating a logical, 'traditionally' determined move from 'orality' to 'literacy' and by making 'true orality' contingent on a form of spiritual literacy. The belief in the 'illusion' of Serowe's orality would not have been maintained for so long had such an unquestioning approach to her writing not been the case.

By making true 'orality' contingent on literacy, Head achieves two of her aims. Firstly, she manages to integrate the beneficial aspects of the past with those of the present in her fictional texts. Secondly, she manages to argue, through this fictional combination of past and present, for the Africanist assertion that African ideas are, ultirately, necessary for the 'rebirth' of Africa. This blend of 'Africanism' and modernity is, she feels, necessary for the survival of Africa in the future. In her continual stress on the river-like nature of tradition and its ability to absorb

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[61] Fido (1991:335) argues that Bessie Head's use of English is "close to the spirit of African traditions of moral teaching through words" and that it is through Head's "idiosyncratic English style" that she is able to "deal[ing] with the divorce of the tongue from the heart which accompanies the division of mother from daughter".

even the most foreign of ideas, Head is identifying what she believes to be a mode of continuity for Africa - a mode that does not alienate itself from modernity, and that takes from the 'traditional' and the 'modern' what will, ideally, allow its followers to reject racism, brutal sexism and the abuse of power.

The re-examination of Head's works in this thesis has attempted to extend current critical thinking which sees Head as spokesperson for African women, accessing reality and transcribing it in her texts. We have demonstrated that in order to achieve a more complex understanding of her work, we have to question such characterisations of her writing. Such assessments of her works, we have argued, have led to narrow and selective readings of the depictions of women - and, in fact, tradition and orality - in her texts. We have attempted to broaden the arena in which the critical response to her work can occur by arguing that such straightforward attempts to make her texts exclusively 'feminist' limit our appreciation of her skills as a writer. Furthermore, by reading 'feminism' directly into her texts, critics have obscured the extent to which her depictions of women are as 'created' as her depictions of 'tradition' and 'orality'.

The type of approach to the works of women writers advocated by Barbara Smith - that all assessments of the

work of black women be "feminist, radical, and analytical" (Carby 1987:10) - is insufficient if we are to understand the ways in which women writers actively participate in creating their own visions of the world. An insistence on the underlying essential similarities in the works of women writers leads critics to elevate certain aspects of women's texts over other, possibly more challenging, areas in their work. The approach we have attempted to use in this thesis has taken heed of Carby's advice - that we approach the works of women writers within a context-specific, questioning framework so that we are better able to assess their achievements.

Head's insistence on African 'tradition' and 'orality' is not 'false' and, perhaps, even retrogressive but is, rather, evidence of her active participation in the shaping and definition of Southern African literature. We need to credit women writers with an engagement with their work, rather than simply assuming them to be passive 'inheritors' of a 'female tradition' of one sort or another. In order to do this, we need to challenge our own, as well as the writer's assumptions, about the nature of their work.

The final word must, once again, belong to Head. She believes that Ellen Kuzwayo has achieved much in her writing, for

> ... at the end of the book [Call Me Woman] one feels as if a shadow history of South Africa has been written; there is a sense of triumph, of hope in this achievement and that one has read the true history of the land, a history that vibrates with human compassion and goodness. (1990:89)

In the same way, Bessie Head has, by her own admission, created an idyllic and appealing Serowe. As critics, we need now to move beyond assessments of her work that limit her skills to mere description and recording, and into approaches to her work which enable us to identify and understand t e ways in which she has managed to persuade her audience that she has cap.ured the essential character of Africa on the written page.

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