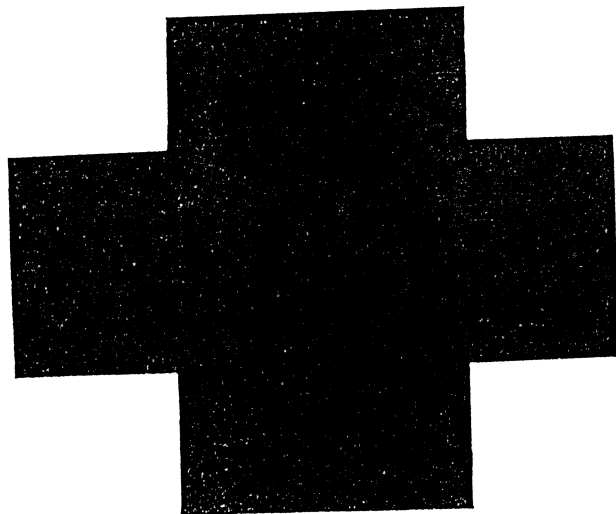


THE **BLACK** SCHOLAR



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FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN AFRICAN FICTION: BESSIE HEAD AND BUCHI EMECHETA

by Nancy Topping Bazin

Bessie Head, born in 1937 in South Africa, has probably received more acclaim than any other black African woman novelist writing in English. Buchi Emecheta, born in 1944 in Nigeria, is rivaled only by Flora Nwapa, another Nigerian, for second place. Other black African women have published novels of distinction in either English or French.¹ However, except for Lloyd W. Brown's *Women Writers in Black Africa* and a few articles, this growing body of literature has received a minimal amount of attention from critics. As Lloyd W. Brown has said, "Western male Africanists have contributed heavily to an old boy network of African studies in which the African woman simply does not exist as a serious or significant writer."² The books and journals on African literature have accorded little or usually no space to women writers.³

Leading African women writers' descriptions of the female experience are quite different from those that have emerged from works by most of their male colleagues.⁴ This is one reason that it is important to read their works, for many myths have circulated about black African women, even in feminist circles. One of the primary myths is that they have other priorities, such as economic development; therefore, sexual equality is not a topic they wish to discuss.

Tales of the wealthy market women in West Africa have led many to say that African women are already liberated. Cultural relativists also promote the myth that

the African woman's situation is so different that one cannot and should not presume to judge what in it is unjust. Another myth erroneously attributes the African woman's problems only to colonialism and not at all to "indigenous mores."⁵ All of these myths are negated by the novels of the two leading African female novelists, Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta.

Bessie Head's three novels are *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1971), and *A Question of Power* (1974). Buchi Emecheta's novels are entitled *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Destination Biafra* (1982), and *Double Yoke* (1982).⁶

Their works reveal a great deal about the lives of African women and about the development of feminist perspectives. The first perspective evolves from personal experience. It requires personal growth on the part of the individual to extract herself from an oppressive environment. Personal growth leads into a second perspective that is social or communal. It demands an analysis of the causes of oppression within the social mores and the patriarchal power structure.

This perspective enables the woman to see that all women share problems such as "dependency, secondary existence, domestic labor, sexual exploitation, and the structuring of their role in procreation into a total definition of their existence."⁷ The third perspective allows women to see the similarities between the experience of women and that of other oppressed groups in all cultures throughout history. In this framework, domination and oppression of

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all kinds are rejected. Finally, in the fourth perspective, problems of women are seen in a philosophical and moral dimension; principles of justice and equality become the basis for a new world view.⁸

In the works of Buchi Emecheta, the feminist perspectives are primarily of the first two types—personal and social. There are some insights into the third perspective where similarities are found between women's oppression and other forms of prejudice and exploitation. In the works of Bessie Head, all four feminist perspectives are evident and the philosophical or spiritual perspective embraces and informs the other three.

Bessie Head's ability to provide a philosophical framework makes her literary achievement greater than that of Buchi Emecheta. The chronological development of Emecheta's skill as a novelist suggests she is moving towards a vision that includes greater complexity and subtlety. Someday she may attain the philosophical or spiritual dimension present in the novels of Bessie Head.

This paper examines the novels of Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta to determine what the nature of the black African women's experience is and how this experience can be analyzed in increasing depth and breadth by progressing through the four feminist perspectives—personal, social, multicultural, and spiritual/philosophical.

Both Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head have recorded in their literary works the personal experiences that were the foundation of their feminist outlook. Buchi Emecheta clarified in an interview that the experiences of Adah in her second novel *Second-Class Citizen* were, in fact, her own.⁹ Adah's parents were so bitterly disappointed when she was born, because her father "did not want a girl for his first child," that they did not even bother to record her birth.¹⁰

Adah felt the pressures of son preference again when her daughter was born: "Everyone looked at her with an 'is that all?' look. . . . It was nine good months wasted. She paid for it, though, by having [her son] Vicky soon afterwards" (p. 122). Emecheta's novels echo over and over again the difficulty

she had in getting to stay in school as a child. Educating a girl who would just be turned over to her husband's family was viewed as a waste of scarce resources.

For example, in *Second-Class Citizen*, in order to get money for the "entrance examination fee," Adah had to pretend to lose the money she was given to buy meat. For "losing" it, she was beaten one hundred and three strokes. The beating made her happy because it enabled her to feel that she "had earned the two shillings" (pp. 22–23). Ultimately, Adah was allowed to stay in school only because it would bring a bigger bride price for her (p. 18).

Then, when Adah's father died, her "Ma was inherited by Pa's brother" as was the custom (p. 18). In return for supporting her, the daughter, a relative would have her as a servant and eventually receive her bride price (pp. 18–19). She finally married just to get away from home so she could have a place to study. The price Adah paid for this was a series of babies at an early age, and a husband who, after she followed him to London, exploited her ability to earn money by refusing to work at all to keep the family.

Yet he made the rules in the household that she was to obey, abused her physically, and refused to allow her to use any birth control. Adah's marriage, like Buchi Emecheta's, finally broke up because of her husband's reaction to her writing her first novel. Her husband refused to read it or to take her desire to write seriously, and he actually burned her completed manuscript. He insisted that "she would never be a writer because she was black and because she was a woman" (p. 184). In a September 1981 interview, ¹¹ Emecheta said people find it hard to believe that she has not exaggerated the truth in this autobiographical novel. The grimness of what is described does indeed make it painful to read.

The life history of Bessie Head has been even more painful than that of Buchi Emecheta. As she made clear in an interview with Lee Nichols,¹² her third novel *A Question of Power* is largely autobiographical. Like Elizabeth, the protagonist in *A Question of*

Power, Bessie Head was born in a South African mental hospital. Her mother, a wealthy, upperclass, white woman, was to spend the rest of her life there, because in an apartheid society, she had allowed herself to be made pregnant by a black stableman.¹³ Until age thirteen, Bessie Head, like Elizabeth, was raised by foster parents and then put in a mission orphanage. Because her mother left her some money when she died, Bessie, who loved books, did receive a high school education.

Bessie Head's own marriage broke up after a year and a half.¹⁴ In contrast to Emecheta, who had five children, she left her marriage with only one. She evidently concluded that "it cost a woman too much to love a man."¹⁵ In her beautiful novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), Bessie Head writes that there were two kinds of relationships women could have with men: the free, casual, purely physical kind that caused no mental breakdown or the serious kind that "could lead to mental breakdown and suicide on the part of the woman, because, on the one hand, it assumed that the man was worthy of adoration, while in reality he was full of shocks and disappointments."¹⁶

Her own mental breakdown, described in *A Question of Power*, records the nightmare experiences she has with two male figures, Sello and Dan. In her hallucinations, Sello tries to control her spirit and Dan strives to control her body. Because Dan knows Elizabeth is strongly attracted to him, he purposely parades before her his "seventy-one nice-time girls" and, calling himself "the king of sex," boasts of his exploits with them (pp. 163, 168). Head takes her reader with her through this nightmarish, insane world, which demonstrates what evil is through the cruel power plays of these men.

These personal experiences breed rebellious female protagonists in the fiction of both women. But the female protagonist's struggle often leads to a victory that is little more than just the courage to survive. This is so in Head's *A Question of Power* and in Emecheta's three novels *In the Ditch*, *Second-Class Citizen*, and *The Joys of Motherhood*. Sometimes the strong female protagonist ultimately succumbs to male power as in

Head's *Maru* or in Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* or *The Bride Price*.

In the process of personal growth, the protagonists in the novels must acquire the feminist perspective that makes connections between a woman's personal experience and those shared by women as a group. This allows the protagonists to name the social and structural causes of their suffering. These causes are embedded in traditions often viewed as sacred or simply unchangeable. The protagonists in the novels of Head and Emecheta confront and only sometimes outwit the traditions that oppress them.

In the world described by Emecheta a girl may fear to announce her first menstrual period, because it means her parents will force her to marry. In this world, too, a woman is told that she is unclean when she is menstruating, thus restricting where she can go.¹⁷ She is likewise taught that an unpaid bride price will make her die in childbirth, or it will cause the marriage to fail or the children of that marriage to die.¹⁸ She also has to accept that when a father dies, the family ceases to exist.¹⁹

In the novels of both Emecheta and Head a woman must accept the double standard of sexual freedom; it permits polygamy and infidelity for both Christian and non-Christian men but only monogamy for women.²⁰ These books reveal the extent to which the African woman's oppression is engrained in the African mores.

FEMALE COMPLICITY

Both novelists demonstrate female complicity in their own victimization. Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* draws a parallel between Ojebeta's being bought as a wife and her having been bought as a slave years before. Indeed in her state of wifedom, she is worse off, but ironically she fails to see this. Even the rebellious women in these novels sometimes fail to recognize the extent to which they have been subjected to what Kate Millett calls "interior colonization."²¹

Because of their patriarchal socialization, mostly by their own mothers, they too see

life from a male perspective and often accept the value system and rules which follow from that. The novelists themselves demonstrate some blind spots that further illustrate that point. Bessie Head, for example, describes Margaret Cadmore in *Maru* as being rejected by her community for being a Bushman, and Head uses sexist language such as man and mankind throughout her books. Both Head and Emecheta frequently reveal through their fiction a longing for a strong, stable man who will save and protect them.

The best depiction of how the patriarchal system functions is in Emecheta's powerful novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. Emecheta explores the evils not of motherhood but of what Adrienne Rich calls "the institution of motherhood"²²—that is, the way in which a woman's role as mother is used to render her an inferior, second-class citizen.

The Joys of Motherhood is about the life of Nnu Ego who marries but is sent home in disgrace because she fails to bear a child quickly enough. She then is sent to the city by her father to marry a man she has never seen. She is horrified when she meets this second husband because she finds him ugly, but she sees no alternative to staying with him. Poverty and repeated pregnancies wear her down; the pressure to bear male children forces her to bear child after child since the girls she has do not count.

She is particularly shamed when she bears female twins. The impact of son preference upon both mothers and daughters is clearly shown in this novel. The awareness of Emecheta's protagonist increases until she is able to make this statement:

The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband—and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build.²³

The consequences of rapid urbanization, conflicts between old and new concepts of justice, and new educational opportunities abroad for African males are also revealed

in the book. Despite rapid changes, however, the patriarchal attitudes prevail. As the ageing mother Nnu Ego, impoverished and exhausted, returns to her village at the end of the book, with her two sons abroad and her husband in prison for attacking a potential son-in-law who was from the "wrong" tribe, she has to listen to a taxi driver complain: "This life is very unfair to us men. We do all the work, you women take all the glory. You even live longer to reap the rewards. A son in America? You must be very rich, and I'm sure your husband is dead long ago." Like so many other women, Nnu Ego bears the burden of such attitudes silently:

She did not think it worth her while to reply to this driver, who preferred to live in his world of dreams rather than face reality. What a shock he would have if she told him that her husband was in prison, or that the so-called son in America had never written to her directly, to say nothing of sending her money. (p. 223)

Only her daughters, not her sons, support her in her old age, so the primary reason for preferring sons that led her to bear so many children brought no benefit to her.

Despite her awakening, Nnu Ego gains status and decision-making power only after death when she is honored with a shrine for her fertility. The young women in her village pray to her spirit when they are unable to get pregnant or bear sons. But the spirit of Nnu Ego chooses not to grant the wishes of these women to bear many, especially male, children, for she has known personally the slave-like state created by this self-defeating practice.

The third feminist perspective draws parallels between the ego-mania that causes the domination of women and that inherent in Nazi anti-semitism, Ku Klux Klan behavior, Black Power fist raising in the United States,²⁴ slavery within Africa, the treatment of the African male as Kaffir,²⁵ and black Africans treatment of "Coloureds" and especially the Masarwa tribe (or Bushmen) in Botswana.

The protagonist in *Maru* is a Masarwa educated by a missionary so that she can teach school. But she is taunted even in the

classroom by her students ("Since when did a Bushy go to school?"), and the principal thinks firing her will be unusually easy because she is female as well as a Masarwa.²⁶ A tribal chief's son, Maru, challenges this prejudice against the Masarwa tribe by marrying her. The author comments on the irony of black Africans treating others as the white man had treated them:

How universal was the language of oppression! They had said of the Masarwa what every white man had said of every black man: "They can't think for themselves. They don't know anything." The matter never rested there. The stronger man caught hold of the weaker man and made a circus animal out of him, reducing him to the state of misery and subjection and non-humanity. The combinations were the same, first conquest, then abhorrence at the looks of the conquered and, from there onwards, all forms of horror and evil practices (p. 109).

Such parallels are more obvious to Bessie Head than to Buchi Emecheta. Emecheta is aware of her dual burden of being black and female and how in England the African is made to suffer for both but one does not detect in her books the same desire to see domination and oppression more wholistically. Perhaps because she is younger and more instilled with middleclass values, she is not as far along on her journey from the personal on through the social and the multicultural to the spiritual/philosophical. Yet the sense of good and evil forces doing battle, intertwined within people and social conventions, does inform, to some extent, two of her more recent books *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Slave Girl* (1977).

ALTERNATE VISION

It is Bessie Head who carries us further into the fourth feminist perspective. She implies more strongly that another way of being is possible in the future. At the end of *Maru*, she suggests that each individual's courageous act opens the door of freedom one bit more:

When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom, which was blowing

throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. As they breathed in the fresh, clear air their humanity awakened. They examined their condition. There was the fetid air, the excreta and the horror of being an oddity of the human race, with half the head of a man and half the body of a donkey. . . . How had they fallen into this condition when, indeed, they were as human as everyone else? They started to run out into the sunlight, then they turned and looked at the dark, small room. They said: "We are not going back there." (pp. 126-27)

Head also places responsibility on the victims of oppression to cease playing their role: "People like the Botswana, who did not know that the wind of freedom had also reached people of the Masarwa tribe, were in for an unpleasant surprise because it would be no longer possible to treat Masarwa people in an inhuman way without getting killed" (p. 127).

Even in her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Bessie Head portrays a couple who have qualities that hint at the way of the future. Makhaya, the male protagonist, is like Head herself, an exile from South Africa living in Botswana. Scarred by his experience with South African apartheid, he has to relearn how to love and trust and be generous. But he also insists upon changing the definitions and behavior of males and females.

When a grandmother offers him her very young granddaughter to sleep with, he thinks: "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, 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" (p. 15).

When his father died, he had tried to free his sisters from their subordination. He refused to play the "Elder Brother" role; he had his sisters "address him by his first name and associate with him as equals and friends" (p. 15). When he worked with the village women on an agricultural project, at first the women "felt a little inhibited. They were unaccustomed to a man speaking to them as an equal. They stood back awhile, with uneasy expressions, but once it struck them that he paid no attention to them as women,

they also forgot he was a man and became absorbed in following his explanations" (p. 106).

He scolds Paulina Sebeso when she says "in alarm": "Don't touch the fire. It's a woman's work." He replies: "It's time you learned that men live on this earth too. If I want to make tea, I'll make it, and if I want to sweep the floor, I'll sweep it" (p. 139). Yet it is Paulina he finally marries, for she stands out from the other women: "She was the kind of woman who could not lie to men," and she was a leader because she was "so daring and different" (p. 93).

Bessie Head, like her protagonist Makhaya, obviously struggles to eliminate the hatred that she sometimes feels; she stresses in her novels the ideals of humility, love, truthfulness, freedom, and, of course, equality. An elderly woman in Head's first novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* explains that one should forgive because "people who err against human life like our chief and the white man do so only because they are more blind than others to the mystery of life" (p. 131)

The dangers of power, ego, and hierarchy are evident in her rejection in *A Question of Power* of a God in the sky, because "God in heaven is too important to be decent" (p. 197). Her ideal is to bring holiness down to earth. The Gods are, in fact, those "killed and killed and killed again in one cause after another for the liberation of mankind."

She saw the Gods as "ordinary, practical, sane people, seemingly their only distinction being that they had consciously concentrated on spiritual earnings. All the push and direction was towards the equality of man in his soul, as though, if it were not fixed up there, it never would be anywhere else." She concludes that "there are several hundred thousand people who are God" (p. 31). Her prayer is "'Oh God, . . . May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds'" (p. 100).

This can occur only through the loss of ego and excessive concern for self. In *A Question of Power*, the protagonist Elizabeth and her spiritual mentor Sello had at one point "perfected together the ideal of sharing everything and then perfectly shared everything with all mankind" (p. 202). It is through the horrors of her contact with Dan in her hallucinations that she has learned the most:

he had deepened and intensified all her qualities. . . . He taught by default—he taught iron and steel self-control through sheer, wild, abandoned debauchery; he taught the extremes of love and tenderness through the extremes of hate; he taught an alertness for falsehoods within, because he had used any means at his disposal to destroy Sello. And from the degradation and destruction of her life had arisen a still, lofty serenity of soul nothing could shake" (p. 202).

The aim must be to tap into one's powers, and she places her emphasis on the soul: "'If it's basically right there, then other things fall into place. That's my struggle; and that's black power, but it's a power that belongs to all of mankind and in which all mankind can share'" (p. 135). . . .

Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head speak for millions of black African women through their novels, for they describe what it is like to be female in patriarchal African cultures. Their feminist perspectives are solidly founded in their own personal lives. However, they grew to understand how son preference, bride price, polygamy, menstrual taboos, nine-month mourning periods for widows, male inheritance rights, wife beating, early marriages, early and unlimited pregnancies, arranged marriages, and male dominance in the home functioned to keep women powerless.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Their analyses of the patriarchal system and attitudes led them to see connections among all forms of oppression. Buchi Emecheta saw parallels between sexual and racial discrimination and parallels between buying wives and buying slaves. Bessie Head saw similarities between inflated male egos

and those of Nazis or white colonizers; the need of such, in fact, insecure people to feel superior victimizes women, Jews, and Bushmen. Therefore, Bessie Head goes on to conclude that we even need to redefine our concept of God, our way of being, and our vision of the future if we are to solve the problems of women. The only hope lies in the "continual expansion and evolution of the human soul."²⁸

Buchi Emecheta's novels remain more on the level of individual experience and social custom with less attention to spiritual questions and implications. Bessie Head explores good and evil within the soul and within society, and she emphasizes the philosophical framework that determines our social attitudes and behavior.

Bessie Head's is the larger vision and she perhaps the greater artist because she attempts more. However, Buchi Emecheta's later novels deal with serious themes within the controlled structure of tales someone might tell around a fire in an African village. These works not only have their aesthetic appeal but they are also rich in meaning. Emecheta is younger than Bessie Head and already her output is greater. Perhaps she is not as far along on her feminist journey from the personal to the philosophical, but she is certainly someone to watch. She is well on her way. □

FOOTNOTES

1. Among the black African women who have written novels in French, Aminata Sow-Fall and Mariama Bâ of Senegal are the two who have received the most acclaim.
2. Lloyd W. Brown, *Women Writers in Black Africa* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 5.
3. See Lloyd W. Brown's discussion of this phenomenon in his "Introduction" to *Women Writers in Black Africa*, pp. 3-13. The works of white African women—Olive Schreiner, Isak Dinesen, Nadine Gordimer, and Doris Lessing—have received considerable more attention.
4. For specific examples, see Brown, pp. 7-9.
5. Brown, p. 6.

6. Bessie Head has also published a collection of short stories *The Collector of Treasures* (1977) and the history, as told by its people, of *Serowe Village of the Rain Wind* (1981). In addition to her novels, Buchi Emecheta has written plays for television, teenager's novels, children's stories, articles, and poetry.
7. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 30.
8. These four feminist perspectives are not exactly the same as but are similar to the four stages of liberation described by Ruether in *New Woman New Earth*, pp. 29-31.
9. In the September 1981 issue of *Opzij*, a Dutch feminist monthly, Buchi Emecheta said in an interview that this novel was "largely a personal document." The translated title of this interview is "It's Me Who's Changed."
10. Buchi Emecheta, *Second-Class Citizen* (Glasgow, Scotland: Fontana/Collins, 1977), pp. 14, 7. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.
11. The interview appeared in the Dutch feminist monthly *Opzij*.
12. This interview appears in *Conversations with African Writers: Interviews with Twenty-Six African Authors*, ed. Lee Nichols (Washington, D.C.: Voice of America, 1981), pp. 49-57.
13. Bessie Head, *A Question of Power*, African Writers Series, No. 149 (London: Heinemann, 1974), especially pp. 15-17. Subsequent references to this edition may appear in the text.
14. Lee Nichols, ed., *Conversations with African Writers*, p. 50.
15. Bessie Head, *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Villages Tales*, African Writer Series, No. 182 (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 106.
16. Bessie Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, The New Windmill Series, No. 168 [London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1972 (1969)], p. 98. Subsequent references to this edition may appear in the text.
17. Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price* (Glasgow, Scotland: Fontana/Collins, 1978), p. 93.
18. Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, pp. 154 and Buchi Emecheta, *The Slave Girl* (London: Allison & Busby, 1977), p. 174. Emecheta feels her own marriage may have failed because her own bride price was never paid (September 1981 interview in *Opzij*).
19. Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, p. 28.
20. See Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*, p. 70 and *The Slave Girl* p. 173; also, note the female acceptance of Maru and Moleka's promiscuous behavior in Bessie Head's *Maru*.
21. *Sexual Politics*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), p. 25.
22. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Bantam, 1977), p. xv.
23. Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, African Writers Series, No. 227 (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 187. Subsequent reference to this edition may appear in the text.
24. Head, *A Question of Power*, pp. 47, 92, 132-33.
25. Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, p. 171.
26. Head, *Maru*, African Writers Series, No. 101 (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp. 17, 41. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.
27. See, for example, Rosemary Ruether's *New Woman New Earth*, Naomi Goldenberg's *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), and Elizabeth Dodson Gray's *Green Paradise Lost* (Wellesley, MA: Roundtable Press, 1981).
28. Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 54.