

## Chapter-VI

### Conclusion

The significance of this dissertation lies in its contribution to the current discourse on black womanhood literature from Africa and its diaspora. There are many scholars the likes of Carole Boyce Davies and Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie in *International Dimensions of Black Women's Writing*, Sushila Nasta in *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, Filomina Steady in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, Carole Boyce Davies in *Black Women's Diasporas*, Gina Wisker in *Black Women's Writing* and Gay Wilentz in *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*, who have examined the lived experiences of black women from Africa and the black diaspora. Of these, only Gay Wilentz's is a relational study that predicates itself on African and African American women authors. On the other hand, Steady's text explores black women's lives through a sociological perspective while Boyce-Davies', Wisker's and Nasta's texts are a compendium of essays that are concerned with various black women authors from Africa, its diaspora and Southern Asia respectively. However, there seems to be no single book-length study that compares and contrasts the two black female writers that I have chosen for the study, in relation to construction of black womanhood.

In comparing the two writers, I have investigated the crucial traits and matrices that control specific constructs of female identities and their literary representations in the black diaspora. I have shown how the absence of a positive self-image due to racism and self-hatred is a recurrent theme in these texts; after analyzing the often problematic relations between females and males in communities where the familial dislocations caused by slavery

have left their mark, I moved on to study the idiosyncratic definitions of mothering and maternal roles which have emerged throughout black cultures in the Americas. By investigating what is one of the most original aspects of these cultures as reflected in their literatures, I have attempted to foreground the importance of cross-generational as well as non-biological mothering relationships that can be found in just about every text under consideration in this study. Finally, I have examined the role played by same-sex bonding and identification as illustrated in the texts by these two authors.

The writers indeed deal with universal issues in their narratives, however what distinguishes them from each other is their geographic location, the socio-cultural practices and traditions of their respective societies and their individual experiences. These differences cumulatively inform and determine their portrayal of black women's lives. Bessie Head, for instance, draws from the apartheid climate of the day to make race a core issue in her novels. She similarly demonstrates how dreams and spiritual possessions impact the daily lives of black people since these are considered to be integral sources of knowledge. This is exemplified by the younger Margaret Cadmore in *Maru*, whose possession by an artistic muse results in her creative output as an artist as well as Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*, who gains insight into the diabolic aspect of power and that goodness and evil are separated by a thin line. The significance of African spiritual knowledge is also illustrated through dream sequences and possessions. Alice Walker, on the other hand, uses history to explore the dislocation of black people into the diaspora as a way of bridging the gap in Africa's oral records that fail to explain the reason behind the existence of people of African descent in the

USA. As a result of this dislocation and the obliteration of African beliefs and practices, she endeavors to reclaim African culture to instill a sense of black pride in black diaspora people.

My study reveals that although black women take issue with their marginal social positioning and recognize men's role in relegating them to the peripheries, they however do not advocate a society that negates men. This runs contra to the claims of some African male writers and critics who have accused African women writers and activists of emulating western feminist values that exclude men. Even western feminist critics like Florence Stratton and Katherine Frank who despite celebrating black women's spirit of resistance suggest that black women subscribe to a brand of feminism which excludes men. Instead, they all appreciate the significance of an integrated community and believe in an inclusive society that takes in everyone regardless of gender, race or class into its fold. The writers' portrayal of a wide range of characters makes it evident that the women seek reformed societal structures and a dismantling of traditional practices and beliefs that have hitherto proved oppressive to women and consequently hampered progress and development.

The black female protagonists in the novels of Head and Walker struggle to answer the question of "Who am I?" in environments highly charged with racist, sexist and classist discrimination and prejudice. They manage to find an answer inspite of oppressive limitations. Since the struggle for realizing selfhood is somehow universal, for women in general and non-white women in particular, and by understanding the experiences of these female heroines, the study of black women becomes valuable to all societies as it can make it easier to rise above the complex of stereotyping and to obtain clairvoyance regarding women's personalities. In the introduction to *"Race", Writing and Difference*, Henry Louis

Gates seems to echo Deborah McDowell's skeptic query concerning the existence of a "monolithic black female language" (McDowell 154), when he writes that the recurrent tropes of a black literary tradition have been, "doubleness, alienation, equivocality" (Gates 21). Whereas for white women language had to be regained from the control and validation of their husbands and brothers, for women of color the repossession was a twofold one: both from the hold of sexism-including black men's control over their voices-and also from the grip of racism, a silencing imposed upon black women by both white men and women. Thus, in all these texts of self-discovery and genesis, the authors write to subvert and contradict the voices of patriarchal, white hegemony, even as they speak from the strata of myriad voices that live inside them. The present work reveals the futility of trying to arrive at a single definition of what the literary portrayal of black women has been. The texts that I have explored in my study therefore posit a multiplicity/duplicity of voices and linguistic acts that define several sub-texts and embedded narratives which have always characterized conventional black rhetorical games and rituals, both oral and literate, and consequently define a "narrative common ground" and a community of writing experiences.

The complete understanding of each character is based on the analysis of each character's response to the dilemmas caused by her racial and sexual identity. The findings of my study thus reveal that a core aspect of these women's narratives is a commitment to depict the complex reality of black women's lives. This not only entails challenging and correcting the distorted representations of women by male writers, but also illustrates how women are complicit and active participants in their own as well as other women's

subjugations. By demonstrating women characters who reinforce the values of the status quo, the writers are able to depict their compliance in their oppressed situation.

A case in point is the figure of Medusa in *A Question of Power* who by participating in Elizabeth's mental ordeal and torture exemplifies how male supremacist codes are internalized and reproduced by women. An American feminist, Joyce Ladner expresses similar thoughts when she says, "Black women do not perceive their enemy to be black men, rather the enemy is considered to be oppressive forces in the larger society which subjugate black men, women, and children." (277)

Furthermore, as this study illustrates, there exists a constant tension within the texts, between the emergence of the specific voices of black women writers and the acute awareness on the part of these same writers of their belonging to communities with their own history, culture and social traits. In the case of black women authors, one must keep in mind that "race," gender and social constraints have played a crucial part in the formation of the black communities to which they belong. Because of these very constraints, these women's mode of empowerment and articulation of their power as well as the "multiple individualities" which define them, and which I have explored in this study, are truly idiosyncratic to the many cultural, historical black communities.<sup>6</sup> As Toni Morrison suggests, the black writer is faced with the necessary merging of a singular "I" with a communal "we," – one that is explicit or not in the narratives in this study. In her essay on "Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison debunks the traditional Western myth of the writer in her aesthetic isolation and comments: "That is to say, when the writer is one of them (the people for whom they speak) when the voice is not the separate, isolated ivory tower voice of a very

different kind of person but an implied ‘we’ in a narration” (343). As a result, the black poets’/writers’ voices, and in particular those of black women, are the voices of spokes-people rather than those of self-proclaimed visionaries. In so doing, black female authors participate in what Elizabeth Abel and other contemporary feminists have defined as a “distinctive female I,” one that they define essentially through concepts of community and empathy rather than through autonomous individuation (Abel et al. 10). This sense of *communitas* is thus quintessential to the texts considered in this study. As Alice Walker suggests in her compilation of essays, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, the sense of connectedness with one’s artistic and existential predecessors and with one’s spiritual and aesthetic lineage is crucial to her work and to the works of black artists in general, as well as to the terms of the discourses which they choose to express themselves. In effect, the process of re-connectedness of the “I” with the writers’ communal identity in these texts occurs through a renewed awareness of the multiplicity of rhetorical devices and stratagems that exist in all languages. Finally, on the uses of voice and narrative strategies, I could find that a deliberate attempt to merge the singular “I” with the “we” of the cultural and historical *communitas* as well as a complex interaction between individual, autobiographical voice and a communal, more public voice all continue to govern these texts and support the wealth and diversity of these literatures. Commenting upon the immense odds accumulated against the existence and survival of black women artists, M. H. Washington reaffirms the centrality of the concept of culturally produced communal experiences specific to black women and writes:

In order to develop the intrepid faith in her own work, the courage to defy restraint or convention or stigma, the artist is desperate for the nourishment and sustenance that come from community, from connectedness, [and] from [Adrienne Rich's words] a "dialogue with brave and imaginative women who came before." (*Black Eyed Susans* 45)

Thus we see, that writers who belong to "liminal" groups that have been marginalized because of their ethnic origin, their sexual preference or their gender, increasingly proclaim the reality of their existences and traditions even as they testify to the vitality of their narratives and of literatures in the making. The two authors I chose for this study privilege cultural and poetical connectedness over the prevailing feeling of alienation that one gets from reading several of their European or American contemporaries. Each of these texts proclaims its own idiosyncratic narrative strategies and voices and affirms that there is still room for a wealth of narrative discourses and for the richly complex, myriad individualities and communities of affinity that they celebrate.

The study also closely examines the cultural affiliation between African and African American women, and this is clearly demonstrated in the novels of Bessie Head and Alice Walker. While the sense of a *communitas* of shared history of racial and class oppression and slavery, as well as gender discriminations, unites texts written by black women and men, this thesis contributes to the growing dialogue between women writers and critics of the African diaspora by examining the two writers in terms of not only the cultural connections that exist but also the way those cultural imperatives have been mothered into being. As part of reclaiming their cultural heritage these women writers also portray in their works that Africa

and diaspora share the same umbilical cord; that they are forever connected, that they are the same, despite being bracketed by man-made boundaries. They are working to reunite the dislocated African communities through remembered linguistic and geographical ties. Since the African, the African American and the African Caribbean share common ancestry, historical experiences, cultural traditions and spirituality, the literature which is derived from the same historical and cultural experience is the same. This provides a healing framework that is rooted in shared historical experiences and cultural heritage. They also produced narratives that add up to a larger collective story of a people grappling with shared and specific historical experiences. They forge a literature that is seamless with African people's process of being and becoming. Gay Wilentz points to the dynamics of the uniqueness and oneness in the lived and shared realities of these writers which lends them a commonness of spirit. While much writing on black women has already uncovered the commonalities among women of the diaspora, formerly hidden by hegemonic western cultural/literary practice, it is also imperative to analyze how these cultural connections have been passed on within Africa and the diaspora through the writings of such representative women. In Africa and its diaspora, reconstructing history has been involved with an uncovering of heritage and emergent cultural traditions which oppose Eurocentric hegemony. The works examined in this study, by women on both sides of the Atlantic, not only attest to the continuation of African cultural heritage in the Americas as well as in Africa by writing emergent literature based on the residual cultural practices of an African past but also clarify how these values have been passed on by women through generations.

The study touches upon Gay Wilentz's concept of "generational continuity" – the passing on of cultural values and personal history- as traditionally a woman's domain. I have examined this matrifocal system of education in relation to the contemporary African woman writer as well as to the cultural continuity of African values and customs in the New World. The theological framework of this study hinges on the relationship between women and the oral tradition, particularly, in regard to black women's historicity and women's role in orally transmitting the values and mores of their culture. I have examined the importance of the oral tradition and orature in African society and woman's role in passing on the values of her culture and have cited the (limited) existing scholarship on women's province in the oral tradition. The discussion focuses on how the cultural traditions and value systems are passed down through the female members of the society, from grandmother to grandchild across time and the Atlantic to foster both modern African and African American cultures.

With respect to the oral transmission of customs and values from one generation to the next, since it is women who most often fulfill the role of tale teller and instructor, black women began to look back to their foremothers to recreate their stories. This is true for both African and African American women, but since the line between the Americans and their African past was forcibly broken by their dispersion into the Americas they have had to make a larger imaginative leap than their African sisters. Thus, contemporary African American women writers have had to take their search a step further to envision their African foremothers, and now sisters, whose use of oral traditions and storytelling to impart cultural values has been passed down from generation to generation. So, it is within a traditional African context, that I have taken a dialectic approach in terms of how the female characters

pass on their cultural values and traditions and how the authors themselves, as women, communicate their cultural heritage to generations of readers. Through the telling of stories, the authors discussed in this thesis extend the cultural practices of the communities to words on a page. They reassemble the fragmented sounds of their foremothers' voices, rendering explicit the implicit memory of African orature. In their oral literature these two women have told the story of their heritage to the children, the audience or the community of readers, just as their women characters pass on the cultural practices and traditions within the world of each book. In other words, my exploration shows how the authors themselves assume the role of the storyteller (conventionally assigned to women), to edify the audience and engender appreciation for black social history by instructing the reader community in their traditional beliefs, cultures and practices. More importantly, the writers leverage their role as narrators to articulate the discourse on black womanhood. Through the portraits of elderly women, the writers teach us the art of negotiation, while the portraits of insanity are used to depict the depth of women's suffering, not to mention, its usage as a tool for resistance. The writers throw light upon the kind of oppression and marginalization faced by black women, but more significantly, they demonstrate repeatedly, the resistance and struggle exercised by generation after generation of women writers to preserve their self-esteem and dignity. By using the creative power of their narratives, they purport to restore voices to those who have been silenced by conditions of exploitation and oppression.

Moreover, even in their differences in approach as well as in culture, country and continent, these writers' roles as African women storytellers and their diasporic commitment to tell the tale have remained constant. Their texts are informed by a consciousness of what

must be passed on to future generations; the telling of the tale is paramount to the survival of the culture. The myths, legends, stories they heard themselves became a veritable raw material for them to reclaim their heritage. In that way, they challenge the Eurocentric boundaries; the hegemony of the dominant culture which bracket their experiences. Although separated from traditional African culture assimilation and the imposition of the dominant cultural values, they aim to reflect on that part of their cultural heritage which has been denied by hegemonic (neo) colonialism. They bring women of African descent together to reclaim land, heritage and selves, to explore their identities, questioning and re-defining what that Africanness could mean, within their particular communities. Where slavery and colonization sought to dim memories of African presence in the world, they sought to recreate that presence and where African sense of self confidence and dignity was undermined, the writers created characters who are ready to accept and embrace who they are and reclaim their self-esteem and dignity, bearing in mind that they share the same umbilical cord. The question of embracing an African identity is inseparable from the restoration and recovery of historical memory that is central to African women writers' dialogue. This is because awareness of one's traditions and heritage may have helped women of Africa and the diaspora to survive the horrors of servitude and slavery and enabled them to keep the notion of their origins alive. Thus, for them, this orature has been a fount of material as well as of strength to write in spite of the opposition. However, despite the connectedness and power gained from one's heritage, women still suffer the limitations handed down from their African forbears, compounded by the otherness of being black and female in a patriarchal, Euro American society. Thus, women writers of African descent are already maintaining a

black feminist theory which is largely concerned with re-informing and re-defining cultural and gender imperatives unique to the experience of black women throughout Africa and the diaspora. Their fundamental purpose has been to re-educate and re-inform and also for most black women writers (African and African American), to explore how they could pass on their cultural heritage to future generations, to continue the work done earlier by their foremothers and to look back into the experiences of women. The goal of this education, self-recovery and re-invention calls for African women writers who create images of courageous and confident African women ready to tackle today's tasks guided by African cultural and historical memories. Such images call for an alternative process of revalidation and reinvention of African humanity, the reconstruction and reassembling of fractured identities, the restoration of self-confidence, self-awareness and dignity and the reassertion of African world outlook. The tasks of repossession and reconstruction cannot be achieved by a puerile retreat to the past but by utilizing culture,<sup>7</sup> as lived philosophy of life, to rearrange the African landscape into a site of resistance and healing.

My argument in this study is that the two writers under discussion illustrate that all black women share similar experiences of marginalization and this peripheral position has rendered them a silenced and consequently muted category. This experience of subjugation has been buttressed by society's dismissive attitude towards their songs and stories through which black women have traditionally narrated their experiences of womanhood, thereby depriving them from establishing a subject position and circumscribing their growth. The novels studied in detail in this thesis show that the impact of gender stereotypes on women dictates them how to behave/act in certain predetermined ways and how any deviation from

the norms results in hazardous consequences. Such stereotypical norms are perceived as a contrived means to exploit black women in both the US and the South African contexts.

However, a point of crucial significance of these writers, for me, is their ability to subvert their positions of marginalized subject-hood and instead use them as a device for resistance. Through their narratives they demonstrate a commitment to challenge black women's oppression and subjugation and carve out a space for them; by portraying the real life experiences of black women, they are able to contest and rewrite the misrepresentations of black womanhood.

The two writers in question lucidly depict a reality which not only foregrounds the varied and diverse experiences of women, but also present the complexities of an existence that is fraught with dilemmas. Despite their diverse cultural and historical perspectives, Alice Walker and Bessie Head portray minority women striving to create new possibilities for themselves by confronting the ways in which racial and sexual oppression has shaped their ethnic and personal histories. The novels of both the writers bring into sharp focus non-white women struggling to relocate themselves in the context of their history as women and as colonized and oppressed people. Their stories identify and acknowledge black women's suppression however they demonstrate a persistent refusal by black women to dwell on their situation of victimhood and focus on their affirmative attitude towards life. There is a constant foregrounding of black women's resilience, strength, resourcefulness and relentless perseverance to alter their circumstance of marginality. I believe that the portraits of these self-reliant black women who have resolved to transform the situation of their lives, is a celebration of their determination and capacity for survival.

The novels of both Bessie Head and Alice Walker present a dexterous blend of reality and fiction. Reading their novels stir the feelings of the readers and stimulate in them the emotions of pity and fear. At the time when the concept of one world is being accepted by almost all the countries the world over, one cannot ignore the inhuman atrocities being inflicted on black women, to whatever part of the globe they may belong to. The thesis not only voices the cries of these oppressed and subjugated people but aims at arousing the sympathy of all peoples of the world that they may criticize and condemn the promoters of the colonial mindset in the bitterest of the terms. If this thesis succeeds in awakening only a few people against the contemptuously impertinent and insolent attitude of the whites towards black women in particular or the black people in general, the object of my research work shall get fulfilled.

#### Notes

1. To use Victor Turner's term, which he defines as "the repository of the whole gamut of the [African-American] culture's values, norms, attitudes, sentiments and relationships" (Victor Turner, 103).
2. As discussed earlier, they took remnants of African symbols of culture, exhumed, and revised African myths and symbols and embodied them with African spiritual and political significance as demanded by liberation and resistance in their new environments.

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