

# CONCLUSION

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A study of the black women as portrayed by black female novelists is beneficial for the non-white student who is interested in understanding him-/herself, and for the white student who is willing to understand the suffering of black women and attempts to effect change. The black heroines 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 in spite 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 the female heroines in the novels of Head and Walker, the study of black women is 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. This dissertation reveals the futility of trying to arrive at a single definition of what the literary portrayal of black women has been. 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. In order to show how Alice Walker and Bessie Head relocate women in the social paradigm, four axes have been chosen to investigate their novels, each of which forms one chapter of the study.

The first chapter, “Gendered Stereotypes of Women in the Novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head”, starts with a brief account of the evolution of black feminism and womanism, and explores the intersecting areas between feminism and postcolonialism as well as theories of race and gender. The ideas drawn from these schools of thought have been applied to the investigation of two novels by Alice Walker (*The Color Purple* and *Meridian*) and a novel by Bessie Head (*A Question of Power*). An examination of these ideas reveals that there is a movement in Head’s text

from individual to collective identity, for, a little unlike Celie in *The Color Purple*, Elizabeth does not become the 'I' of the narrative. Rather, the text continually emphasizes that her identity is not only attainable within her community, but is fully inextricable from it. At the text's conclusion the narrative relates that Elizabeth has "fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man" (206) whereas Walker's *The Color Purple* gives a final impression that women thrive most within sisterhood. The emphasis on universalism and inclusiveness allows Head to work against the establishment of a counterhegemonic ideology such as the one proposed by the BCM, for she is aware of the possibility that such a discourse can be used to deny class and other social cleavages within and outside of black communities. In contrast, Walker's *Meridian* comes to clarify misconceptions inherent in the Civil Rights Movement, to stress the importance of non-violent resistance, and to emphasize black women's role in it. Besides, Walker's sisterhood in *The Color Purple* allows women to challenge the oppressively patronizing and exploitative patriarchy within the Afro-American community.

The three novels by both writers, however, seek to redefine the place of women of colour in societies (the US and South Africa and Botswana) where racism and sexism are prevalent discourses assigning women to an inferior position. Whereas Walker tends to attribute women's liberation and acquisition of autonomous identities to their economic, artistic and intellectual independence and to establishing connection with their ancestral heritage, Head in *A Question of Power* portrays an educated heroine (being a teacher) who also has artistic skills (both in writing her comments in poetic language, and even in growing gooseberry in her garden – with her flourishing garden in Motabeng being a symbol of her new home and identity). Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Meridian* are arenas of interracial and intra-racial struggle where women are

the most affected by elements of race and gender, but where also the cathartic effect takes place as the struggling women are finally able to attain their identities and independent sense of the self. However, the state of redemption takes place only with the help of certain important factors. First comes the will to effect change, to regain what has been taken – i.e. the female self and the freedom of choice. Secondly, collaborative sisterhood appears as a necessary element in liberation of oppressed women. Thirdly, a reinvestigation of one's past and the present and comparing them with the needs of the present and the future are necessary steps to consolidate the newly created female self.

*A Question of Power* attempts to escape the tyranny of absolutes, monoliths, and hierarchies through its emphasis on the universality of human love, and Elizabeth's philosophy emphasizes relational power rather than systems of domination and exploitation. Similarly, in *The Color Purple*, Celie's ultimate subject position as the 'I' of the text is in a sense a relational rather than completely independent position, for she does not view herself as fully autonomous from her community, but rather connected to the characters in the novel, especially Shug Avery, Nettie, Sofia, and her son and daughter. In *Meridian*, Meridian also finds out that realizing her goal towards self-attainment and self-recognition is part and parcel of how she realizes herself in relation to her community. The crucial difference between both the writers hinges on the fact that while Walker's heroines are conscious of their blackness, and are proud of it, Head's heroine tries to annihilate the differences of colour, race or gender, stipulating for love as the basis of the *modus vivendi* for one and all. Head and Walker offer different but complementary interpretations of the forms black women's subjectivities may take: Head absorbs the individual black woman into her community, whereas Walker maintains a partial sense of the individual 'I' within the

communities in which *black* women function. The subjectivities that Head and Walker attempt to establish in their narratives eschew the autonomous ‘I’ of Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* in favour of a subject position that establishes and builds alliances. The emphasis by Head and Walker on community and intersecting, rather than autonomous, identities, begins to break down traditional structures of narrative by interrogating the authority with which the narrating voice is invested. The female characters in Walker’s novels achieve their potential by breaking the gendered roles, yet not in isolation from their community, but within the community they live in; Elizabeth’s subjectivity is also finally stabilised and reinforced by the hybridised and multicultural community she lives in, but this happens only after she is able to overcome the racialised prejudices trying to persecute her growth. The illumination of these intersecting identities makes it crucial to distinguish differences between fictionalised, potential identities, and actual identities that are inevitably limited, in this case by both the racist social and patriarchal hierarchy in the US (in Walker) and the South African state and the disparate economic conditions engendered by apartheid under which black women exist (in Head). This deconstruction of narrative categories in turn necessitates a re-evaluation of subject positions available to black women in both the US and South Africa.

*The Color Purple* and *A Question of Power* portray an awareness of the tyranny of categories of black and white: Nettie and Sofia are good examples of white racism and colonialism; Elizabeth exists in the gaps of apartheid binaries, always “almost but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994: 91). Nettie testifies to the exploitative white colonialism of the Olinka land (in Africa) and how the Olinkas are displaced and deprived of their own resources by the white coloniser; Sofia’s suffering has been made an example for all the black people, and black women in particular, who is aspiring to cross the red

line; Elizabeth has been driven to two nervous breakdowns from which she ‘recovers’ only by advocating a philosophical “brotherhood of man” (206) in which all individuals are subsumed within a community. Like Meridian, who does not abandon her community nor the Civil Rights Movement (but rejected certain aspects of it, i.e. violence and male-chauvinism), Elizabeth does not ‘free’ herself from her black community, but rather from her implication within the apartheid state and from her culpability for contributing to the exploitation of other blacks. For the subjectivity of the female self to exist, Walker, in fact, denounces any form of oppression that could in any way deprive the black female from her identity and freedom of choice. In contrast to a complete deconstruction of established categories of identity, however, Head recognizes that her protagonist must also claim a space within which to adopt a potential subjectivity: she is acutely aware that politically and mentally, black women require access to the various identities denied to them before they are theorised out of existence.

The act of narrating an identity, of writing a self, may itself be interpreted as a form of theory effected by both Walker and Head. Both the writers offer female characters whose specific needs require specific problems faced by black women, and such problems are mainly caused by the gendered stereotyping of the roles of black women – roles that biased forms of oppression have concocted to keep black women under control. Eleni Coundouriotis suggests that “[f]iction writing functions metaphorically as an ideal system of governance in which legitimacy is granted, not withdrawn” (27) – we may interpret these novels as systems within which Walker and Head establish a discursive space for black women. Contemporary feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Gayatri Spivak and Helene Cixous understand the act of writing as a means of escape from and resistance to the oppression of what they read as cultural

colonisation. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous confirms that “[w]oman must write her self .... Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement” (481). For Cixous, writing is characterized by “the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (484). Kristeva similarly focuses on the subversive potential of writing in her assertion that “[i]n every kind of society and situation, the text’s function is to lift the repression that weighs heavily on the moment of struggle, one that particularly threatens or dissolves the bond between subject and society, but simultaneously creates the conditions for its renewal” (208). The act of writing, then, is invested with cultural power. Walker’s and Head’s narration of subject positions shatters what Cixous calls the “snare of silence” within which women are confined (1976:881): *The Color Purple*, *Meridian* and *A Question of Power* are political gestures of resistance. To write is to enter a political space, and both authors politically empower not only their protagonists, but other black women as well, by authorising a subject position for them.

The act of writing as a powerful political gesture is unmistakably apparent in the three novels discussed here. The narratives emphasize racial tension and a desire for political reform. In *The Color Purple*, for example, there are many examples which reveal metaphorical slavery. Sofia’s employment as a nanny for the mayor’s children is one case. She is presented in the image of a stereotype of the ideal “black mammy”, which was certainly forcible – during the time of slavery, black women were kept by rich white plantation owners as nannies to look after their children, and were like slaves always at their command, and so Sofia is forcibly put in the box of an ideal nanny. Moreover, Celie’s rape is reminiscent of the rape female slaves were subjected to at the hands of white plantations owners. Besides, Celie’s letters to God, and then to Nettie,

and Nettie's letters as well reveal many aspects of the oppression, part of which is clearly induced by politics which favoured the white over the black. Likewise, Meridian, who writes poetry, gets involved in politics to resist the political status quo in order to secure a better position and create an audible voice for blacks in general, and black women in particular. *A Question of Power* similarly highlights the subversive power of writing as a medium within which to effect resistance – an example of this is Elizabeth's way of taking notes for the agricultural project and her resentment of a white lady taking her notebook to scribble on it, viewed by Elizabeth as an attempt by the white lady to appropriate Elizabeth's text and a desire to monitor and control Elizabeth's textual production. Another instance is Tom's comments on the stylistic aspects of Elizabeth's notebook: "Her version of agriculture was so poetic and fanciful, she was so liable to fill in her gaps of knowledge with self-invented agriculture" (112-113). The connections between the establishment of the garden and Elizabeth's writing (fragmentary notes though) are not accidental; rather, this link provides her with the impetus to begin to tell her own story, which is ultimately a story of communal identity. These fragmentary notes become, of course, the text of *A Question of Power*. Head successfully narrates a communal subject position for black women through the act of writing and textual production.

The establishment of identities through the act of writing allows Walker and Head to provide subject positions for other black women: Head relinquishes the 'I' of the narrative in favour of a new communal subjectivity, whereas Walker maintains an individual subjectivity in relation to a community. Both writers offer two distinct textual solutions to the lack of identity experienced by black women in the US and South Africa: The novels discussed here are disparate but complementary texts in their establishment of various subject positions for black women. In addition to individual



instances of writing as a political act in each novel, each text may itself be considered a site of resistance to orthodox narrative conventions and contemporary ideologies of subject formation. In Walker's novels, the representation of female characters stands as a war cry for women to claim their identity and position and defy the sources of oppression, both in writing and in action. *The Color Purple*, in particular, reveals harmony between the themes of the novel and the developing awareness of the protagonist making it a prerequisite to pay attention to both the form of the novel and the progress of the character from utter submissiveness to complete independence. *Meridian*'s nonlinear plot has a thematic value, attempting to stress the importance of knowing and negotiating history for the formation of (female) black identity. However, in Head's novel there is no distinction between form and content; rather, reality and nightmare merge and Elizabeth's mental breakdown is complemented by a parallel breakdown in textual communication. The chaotic visions of her deranged mind are inextricably linked with the non-linear structure of the text, which leaves the reader floundering to establish meaning in Elizabeth's "nightmare soul-journey" (35). Unlike the representation of black women in texts by men, then, Head's "idiosyncratic omnidexterity" prevents her protagonist from being readily consumed as stereotype by readers (Linda Beard, Qtd in Ibrahim, 145).

Jacqueline Rose suggests that the discomfort of many readers with the cacophonous form of *A Question of Power* results from "an anxiety that the text might be speaking with a hostile voice, one which is alien or unfriendly" (403-404). Head's subversion of narrative expectations challenges the reader to draw order out of apparent chaos, but what is significant about this writing style is that it resists critical mastery and appropriation. Similarly, *The Color Purple* eschews narrative convention by interweaving generic conventions of the epistolary novel itself: before getting a human

response from Nettie, Celie's letters have primarily been addressed to God, a last recourse for finding a listener when Celie was aware that nobody was there to listen to her, and in such case it is a one-sided correspondence. By letting her protagonist assume the existence of a "white" "male" God to whom Celie addresses her letters, Walker seems to focus ironically on the creation of a medium through which to establish a speaking position that does not necessarily assume the white or male reader as its first recipient of address.

Comparatively, though with a sense of political naiveté in the case of Head, both writers are politically engaged with the role of women within their various communities, and their preoccupation with writing subjectivities for potential readers is an ideologically inflected one, especially for Head: while Walker is able to trace her origin to Africa, and this origin is expressed with a sense of nostalgia, Head finds it difficult to locate her identity in terms of origin. However, *Meridian* and *A Question of Power* form a basis on which future communities of women writers may rely for mutual empowerment and validation. In addition, Walker and Head provide and maintain a sense of hope in spite of the suffering that they witness. Although *A Question of Power* is a novel rooted in the exploration of exploitation and oppression, it is also a record of hopeful trends: Elizabeth's cultural psychosis is cured by subsuming her subject position within a new, localised community. Similarly, both *Meridian* and *The Color Purple* invoke a sense of hope in imagining a way out of a world bound by colour or class or gender strictures, for both Celie and Meridian assert the fact that they can break the gendered roles and defy the prejudiced community in order to create a space for themselves.

Alice Walker and Bessie Head forge a new tradition of writing for women in the United States and South Africa: *The Color Purple*, *Meridian* and *A Question of Power*

encourage new ways of reading and concomitantly signify the necessity of a new recognition of the nature of cultural, political, and aesthetic power in the U.S. and southern Africa. Writing is transformative in its ability to foreground both the transgressive and the not-yet imagined, and these texts specifically challenge the subjects that dominate literature written by black men. These texts are integral to this chapter, for they establish new media of address, write into existence subject positions for black women that acknowledge the collusion between racial and sexual domination, and delineate intersecting personal and communal identities.

In the light of the heated debate in feminism regarding the re-evaluation of mothering and motherhood, the second chapter, entitled “The Politics of Motherhood in the Novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head”, has dealt with the theme of motherhood in three novels by Alice Walker (namely, *The Color Purple*, *The Third Life of Grange Copland* and *Meridian*) and three novels by Bessie Head (i.e. *A Question of Power*, *Maru* and *When the Rain Clouds Gather*). Based on the views of Nancy Chodorow (along with some other feminists, such as Adrienne Rich and Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva) regarding the nature of motherhood and the role of mothers as far as women are concerned, the discussion reveals that both Walker and Head appear to have not only posed pressing questions regarding the issue but also used motherhood as a catalyst to relocate their women characters in the social paradigm. Their female characters take motherhood to another dimension, far away from the stereotyped conceptualization of what a mother and motherhood are traditionally expected to be.

It has been argued that African-American motherhood as well as African motherhood can be seen as a contested terrain involving three distinct points of view, i.e. the African-American view of motherhood, the white view of motherhood, and the white view of black motherhood. African American mothers are faced with a set of

standards to maintain ‘good enough mothering’ – to borrow Winnicott’s phrase (1965, 1971) – and to keep the tradition of “Black Mythical Mother” (as defined by Barbara Christian). Slavery and its aftermaths, along with several related issues such as racism, rape, and sexism also bear an impact on African American motherhood. In *The Color Purple* as in *Meridian*, Walker shows that early motherhood can be a major obstacle to self-discovery and not at all the self-fulfilment. Walker attacks the myths of self-fulfilment through motherhood by showing natural resentment of a child brought about by an unwanted birth, especially as far as Meridian is concerned. Similarly, Head shows the character of Elizabeth in *a Question of Power* as having no desire to bear another child (implicitly by rejecting any relationship with any other man) though, unlike Meridian, Elizabeth is committed to looking after her son. As for Elizabeth, it is perhaps due to her psychological instability that she is shown not completely able to look after her son as well as readers may expect. Unlike Meridian, whose concept of motherhood becomes rather communal, Elizabeth achieves peace with herself and the society she lives in, with her biological son beside her. Just as Meridian is involved in reforming her society, so is Elizabeth in her own individual way.

Meridian’s attitude to motherhood can bear some similarity to that of Shug. Shug attempts to pursue her destiny away from her children, and frankly states that she does not miss anything (*Purple* 48). This implies that if she had got pregnant due to her relation with Celie’s husband (or anyone else) she would opt for abortion, because pregnancy would stand as a stumbling block in her career. Motherhood for Shug, as for Meridian, is hindrance to growth and self-fulfilment.

In addition to this view of motherhood, the concept of “good enough mothering” has become an issue for intra-feminist controversy about the maternal role in subjectivity. Some find this conception an effort to keep women attached to

traditional, gender-bound roles related to childcare. Others see it as an emblem of valuing of qualities generally associated with the feminine. Julia Kristeva introduced modifications into these concepts and moulded them in a new perception, i.e. the perception of abandonment for the sake of subjectivity (de Rosa 2004). The mother must abandon her child for subjectivity to occur. According to Marianne Hirsch (1989: 190) “Clearly, Walker and her generation of women writers need to find a position between ... staying home and not changing and ... leaving home and rejecting it or turning it into artifact.” The idea of good enough mothering has been discussed in this chapter in detail. The question that remains unanswered is how to judge a character as a “non-good-enough mother”? On which stereotyped basis? Any answer to such question will remain debatable. But, so far as mothers are concerned, the common denominator for any convincing answer will have to consider motherhood as an obligation inflicted on women or as an experience that women can live through and take pleasure in.

In spite of the fact that Meridian and Elizabeth live in different places, they live similar circumstances, the ordeal of oppression and the dilemma which drive them to choose between motherhood/conjugal life and loneliness. Finally, both of them end in a resolution to abandon martial life and motherhood (more children in the case of Elizabeth) and search for peace with(in) the self. Motherhood in the novels of both Walker and Head is subjected to the repercussions of racism, exile, gender problems and patriarchies. Elizabeth shares with Meridian disgust for men/husbands. While Elizabeth sees them as homosexuals, hedonists and racists, Meridian’s experience is traumatised by sexual exploitation from early childhood and later during her college days. The possibility of sharing a harmonious life with a male partner is shattered, and therefore to bring more children to their worlds would be an unwanted burden.

An important aspect of the role of motherhood in forming female personality is related to the existence or lack of mother-daughter relation. It has been discussed in the chapter that the existence of a *healthy* reaction between mother and daughter is itself an important and enriching experience for both mothers and daughters. Lack of communication or marginalizing one another's point of view of mothering can result in a gap between the mother and her daughter. Mens-Verhulst (xiii) is of the opinion that "a better understanding of the dynamics between mothers and daughters could be helpful in understanding the dynamics between women in general". Mothers play an important role in the experiences of the body and sexuality during adolescence and adulthood (Flaake 8-10; Sayers 62-69). Most of the problems that the characters face with motherhood in the novels discussed show a direct or indirect connection to the availability of effective interaction between mothers and daughters. Although she shows excellent protective instincts towards her mother and sister at the beginning of the novel, Celie appears to lack motherly guidance as to what motherhood is: when her mother asks her about who got her pregnant, she says "God". Besides, she appears too submissive to retain her son and daughter. One might excuse her mother's non-defensive attitude towards her daughter's children, but it seems that the unawareness of Celie towards her motherhood is the result of the lack of communication and guidance on the part of her mother.

Again, the lack of understanding between mother and daughter is manifest in the relationship between Meridian and her mother. The initial agreement (or submission) Meridian shows to her mother's views regarding marriage – i.e. how to behave with her boyfriend and how to attract him and get married and make a family – is followed by a downright rejection as Meridian considers her mother a failure in terms of self-fulfilment, one who wants to reflect and impose her failure on her daughter.

Later on, the novel transpires a sense of redemption for the mother-daughter connection as Meridian, now at peace with herself, considers her mother as a source of emotional love and deliverance.

The mother-daughter theme is central to the understanding of several characters in the novels of both Head and Walker. The relation between mothers and daughters appears to mould not only the attitude of daughters to motherhood and mothering but also the whole personality of the daughters. In *A Question of Power*, deprivation from any real maternal affection or guidance throws the heroine's individuality under the social, racial and sexual pressures surrounding her, hence affecting not only her relationship with her only son but also her attitude towards the whole community. Furthermore, the absence of the physical presence of mother as a source of guidance affects the life of most of the female characters in Head's novels: Elizabeth, Margaret Cadmore, and Maria. Not only that, the inheritance of racial features from their mothers badly influences the lives of Elizabeth and Margaret in particular. The three characters grow up without their physical mothers; they are orphans. They did not receive proper motherly treatment, which would have informed them of how to be mothers. Besides, Elizabeth and Margaret in particular have to cope in their world with the racial "stigma" they have inherited from their mothers, and to strive on their own in a road fraught with racial, sexual, political and gender-oriented pressures.

Feminism and feminists do not renounce maternity or devalue women's experiences of mothering and birthing: they are, however, against the valorisation of motherhood as dictated by conservative patriarchies. Adrienne Rich (1986) opines that motherhood is both 'a complex site of women's oppression and a potential location for women's creativity and joy'. In this regard, distinction has been drawn between motherhood and mothering (Silva 1996). The fact that Meridian is unable to maintain

motherhood does not deny the fact that she could maintain mothering for the African American community. Likewise, though Mma-Millipede in *When the Rain Clouds Gather* appears to have no children, she represents the women's natural instincts to mothering. Meridian's rejection of motherhood and her choice to make abortion tally with the feminist voices which seek to liberate motherhood from the institution and the myth that confine it to a narrow arena of the conventional family, leaving no space for women to choose alternative identities. Besides, according to Ross (144) "African-Americans used birth control and abortion as a form of resistance to slavery. Abortion and infanticide were acts of desperation, motivated not by a desire to avoid the biological birth process or the burdens of parenting, but, instead, by a commitment to resist the oppressive conditions of slavery". Meridian seems to hold a belief that "the acceptance of the domestic ideal is the foundation of women's oppression" (Chodorow *Reproduction of Mothering*). In a similar vein, motherhood in *The Color Purple* is a duty forced upon Celie and she performs the role of mother with a complete dissatisfaction. Bereaved of her two biological children, she – out of a sense of duty and in harmony with the slave-like mentality – carries on mothering her husband's children. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, two black mothers stand as a foil to each other, Mem and Margaret. While both have a common denominator in their responsibility to share in the sustenance of the family, Margaret's submissive attitude towards her husband Grange and, later, her frivolous loss of control over her life not only damage her family (severely affecting her son's perception of mothers and wives) but lead up to her committing suicide and killing her newborn illegitimate son. By contrast, Mem's toil to better the status of her family and her defiance to the subjection of her husband, Brownfield, elevate her to the status of a legend in the novel, albeit murdered at the hands of her traumatised husband.



Walker's message through her characters is that traditional and patriarchal concepts of motherhood and mothering can have a detrimental effect on women's individual growth since these concepts are interlinked with several other issues: i.e. issues related to the picturisation of mothers in the African American society in terms of the mother-daughter relation, issues related to how the mother figure stands for the African ancestors (i.e. part of the formation of the African American identity), and issues related to modern mothering problems, such as abortion.

*Maru* portrays how racism and classism can affect motherhood. All the protagonist knows about her mother, who died during childbirth, is that her mother "looked like a Goddess" at her birth, though she is a Masarwa, a bushman, untouchable. Being of such an origin, Margaret inherits her mother's bushman-ness and society's pejorative attitude (just like Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*, who is said to have inherited her mother's madness). The mothering function of the white lady Ms. Cadmore, who adopted Margaret, appears to have double functions in the novel. First, it supports Chodorow's point that when biological mothers do not parent, other women, rather than men, virtually always take their place (*Reproduction of Mothering* 3). Secondly, it highlights the racist circumstances surrounding the whole issue of adoption: with none willing to adopt the newborn bushman baby girl, Ms. Margaret Cadmore adopts the child but is unable to show her any real affection. Instead, Margaret's adoption, it appears, is only to prove a 'Ms. Cadmore theory' that "environment, everything; heredity nothing" (*Maru* 15), i.e. though Margaret is a bushman, education and good upbringing can make her a good woman.

Finally, in *When the Rain Clouds Gather*, Head presents three characters which highlight the theme of motherhood in the novel. Mma-Millipede stands for a utopian concept of natural mothering, or Mother Africa; Paulina Sebeso, a widow with two

children, is a representative of the lone mother in a racist community who has to bear the grunt of their discrimination and who, nonetheless, manages to progress with her personal life despite the prejudice and the loss of her son; and lastly, Maria, Dinorego's daughter and later Gilbert's wife, represents a woman who grows without her mother. Despite the mutual affections she reciprocates with her father renders to her, the absence of her mother can make the reader expect her prospective motherhood as that of Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*. She is purported to have two women in her: one is "soft and meditative" while the other is "full of ruthless commonsense, and these two uncongenial personalities clashed and contradicted each other all the time" (*When Rain Clouds Gather* 101). This apparent self-split is perhaps the result of the absence of mother to help her unify the "two women" into a 'Maria'

The third chapter of the dissertation is titled "The Psychological Impact of Race and Gender on Black Women: Walker's *Meridian* and Head's *A Question of Power*" and seeks to explore the tensions in the lives of the female protagonists of two novels by Bessie Head and Alice Walker within the dialectic of opposing tendencies such as male domination and female subjugation and oppression, inferiority and superiority, public responsibility and private pain, and power and powerlessness. Two novels by both the writers are investigated here, *Meridian* and *A Question of Power*, since these two particular novels clearly manifest the repercussions of such subjugation and oppression on the personal lives of their protagonists. Both the novels present the traumatic circumstances of two black women suffering from racial discrimination and stereotyped gender roles in two different societies: (the south in) the US and South Africa (and Botswana). The novels show that although women are integral to all aspects of society, racial oppression can cause tremendous pressure on them and can sometimes drive them to taking extreme measures and even create mental problems

more than others in the community. Besides, the situations of both heroines, Elizabeth and Meridian, are similar to a great extent, as both of them try to achieve personal and economic independence and strife towards self-determination. They live the crises of different forms of oppression stemming from colour, race and gender. Both abandon their husbands (and also lover in the case of Meridian) and struggle not only to maintain their own independence, but carry through noble causes to liberate their oppressed communities; consequently, their decisions have to brave the rough waters and grapple with the psychological agony incurred by their struggle. Both also were abused in their childhood either physically or mentally. However, even after the abandonment and suffering, both protagonists are able to reconnect with their communities again, with a new form of illumination or epiphany.

In discussing Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness*, Shoshana Felman (2) indicates that female psychology is conditioned by an oppressive and patriarchal male culture. Besides patriarchy, the heroines of both the novels are faced with political prejudices fed by racist discrimination. In their attempts to find their location in such atmosphere, both the heroines suffer psychological disorders which hamper them from realizing their potential. However, they finally manage to relocate themselves in spite of the many challenges. Obviously, the discussion in this chapter involves a background drawn from psychoanalysis, black psychology, race theory, gender theory, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory in order to address questions related to women's psyche in the face of racial and sexist discrimination in both the US and southern Africa.

Starting with Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, it is obvious that the protagonist, Elizabeth, has been driven towards two extremes – isolation and despair or survival and self-understanding. While in Head's other novels, *When the Rain Clouds*

*Gather and Maru*, women are entangled in webs of romance which are magical and self-denying, Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* struggles against all odds to resist the controlling dominance of men to the point of going mad. The case of Elizabeth is a documented historical witness that discrimination on the basis of race and gender negatively affected black women throughout the history of the relation between the blacks and the whites in the apartheid South Africa. It has been observed in the novel, which carries within tremendous similarities to the life vicissitudes of the author herself, that the protagonist's psychological trauma has been caused by several factors interacting at the same time. First of all, Elizabeth is an illegitimate offspring of a white Scottish descendent woman and a black South African man, thus defined according to the South African law as a "coloured", a queer specimen of humanity that does not belong to either the white or the black race – "half-breed" (104), a "mixed breed" (147), and not "genuinely African" (159). This 'curse' haunts her since her birth, through school days, and up to her life in Botswana. That is, everybody around Elizabeth defines her in terms of what she lacks, i.e. blackness or whiteness. The Immorality Act, which was applied in South Africa prohibiting sexual intercourse between the races, proves that there is a strong link between Elizabeth's mental instability and the political and social systems that prevailed in South Africa for about forty years. This is because by virtue of this view, Elizabeth sees herself not only as a racial impurity, but as an inferior to both blacks and whites. Even after she tries to refuge to Botswana, she is faced with multiple problems accentuating her existence as an Other. She is sensitive to the fact that she does not speak any indigenous African language, which makes her feel more estranged from the villagers around her.

A refugee and lone mother with a child to support – basically after she breaks up with her husband, who turned out to be unfaithful – Elizabeth begins to have

hallucinations in the form of two men (Dan and Sello) and a woman (Medusa). With Dan as a psychological projection of the South African society from which she attempts to escape, the hallucinations of Dan's persistent racial and sexual persecution of Elizabeth not only make her feel inadequate, but also lead her to view herself as a social reject. Medusa as portrayed in the novel is active and helps Elizabeth in locating her plural identities and selves while at the same time attempting to silence her, representing the pure black body which Elizabeth does not and is unconsciously hoping to have. She questions Elizabeth's lack of Africanness, and Elizabeth situates her within the framework of an African oppression over the coloured people, who are not genuinely African. Elizabeth fails to identify herself with the blacks of Africa nor with the white colonizers. In this way, race and sexuality combine to bring forth madness, and merge into an intricate web for which Elizabeth struggles to free herself.

Generally speaking, Elizabeth is trapped between dualisms: Good and Evil, Dan and Sello, definition and negation, past and present, subjectivity and abjection. She sets on an internal as well as external journey. Her external journey is that of taking exile in Botswana. Her internal journey or 'soul-journey' unfolds on three interrelated and, indeed, inseparable levels: personally, her journey is a quest for identity and self-affirmation; socially, it is a quest for belonging and for community; and spiritually, Elizabeth's journey can be seen as a quest for both enlightenment and regeneration. Psychologically, Elizabeth passes through two stages: The first is that of recognizing oppression, which is complete when the novel begins; the second is one of naming and dispelling the horrors. Elizabeth is first concerned with figuring out what to do with oppression once it is recognized. But to do that, Elizabeth has to recover from two nervous breakdowns. Her refusal to remain an abject object and her insistence on achieving a subject position, an "I", entail that she must name the horror and spell it out

in the form of a text so that the readers can share her oppression and at the same time she can become an agent (rather than an object) of description. Elizabeth's ultimate reconciliation with the "question of power" tends to have a universalist resolution based on all-inclusive human love, tolerance and acceptance irrespective of racist, sexist or ideological differences.

It has been implied in the text that Elizabeth's madness has hereditary causes through her mother. Interestingly, if one investigates the reasons of Elizabeth's mother's madness, one may come to a striking conclusion that it is because of racism and sexism that she went mad. But the knowledge of her mother's madness impacts on Elizabeth throughout her life, creating a sense of guilt in Elizabeth, similar to that of Meridian in *Meridian*. Meridian lives the guilt of thinking that she made her mother suffer because of her. Again, like Elizabeth, Meridian does not find fulfilment in marital life and, thus, begins on her outer and inner journey – though, unlike Elizabeth, Meridian abandons her son. She felt limited by the only options open to her: motherhood and homemaking. Her adventure or journey begins after her teenage pregnancy and resulting marriage. The decisions she makes regarding marriage, motherhood, education, abortion, and activism do not appear harmonious with what the stereotyped image of "Black Mythical Mother" (Barbara Christian) nor with the restrictions and limitations imposed on the African Americans in general and the female African American in particular.

Meridian abandons her son and husband because she contends that she entered into marriage without having been told what marriage is and, thus, felt that married life has circumscribed her growth. In so doing, she develops guilt for betraying her family, her mother, and her maternal ancestors. Meridian took this decision because she herself felt abandoned. This feeling initiates her journey: she is still interested in learning and

the desertion of her husband provides her with a chance to avoid “Mythical Black Mother” because, to her, black motherhood presupposes defeat, submission, slavery, and eternal sacrifice. Walker demonstrates that when Meridian rejects her motherhood as a role model, she has symbolically broken with her maternal history.

Meridian’s psychological trauma culminates at Saxon College while undergoing a delirious fit, followed by a gradual reconciliation with the self. In order to trace the main causes of Meridian’s disorder, one has to start from her childhood. Meridian seems to have received no real maternal affection from her mother. Their lack of such emotional attachment is further intensified by her feeling that she – along with her siblings – have curbed and “stolen” her mother’s individual growth – a chapter in the novel entitled “Have You Stolen Anything” symbolically sums up the relation between the mother and daughter, though this chapter reveals an attempt by young Meridian to establish a dialogue with her mother. In addition, an incident of racial child abuse happened to Meridian when she was a child: a white man, George Dexter, molested her in return for some candy and money. African American women are prone to molestation even at the hands of fellow black men: during college days, Meridian was abused by a Mr. Raymond, the black professor Meridian has worked for to earn money for her own upkeep.

After joining college and the Civil Rights Movement, Meridian has a chance to maintain a relationship with Truman, an ardent activist in the movement. However, after seeing him in pursuit of white exchange students (and starting an affair with a black Jewish lady, Lynne), Meridian gives up her faith in him and decides to make abortion even without telling him of having his baby. During college days, Meridian has to support herself financially, especially after her father could not send her any more money. In addition, Meridian’s conception of the Civil Rights Movement begins

to get shattered due mainly to the inequality of sexes and violent path the movement started to take. With her disillusionment at love and at activism (and motherhood and daughterhood), Meridian suffers emotional fatigue. Meridian believes in the sacredness of life and cannot accept the principle of killing, even for the Revolution. Meridian points out that the revolution does not begin with an act of killing but with teaching. Meridian's transformation and mental balance is achieved gradually. She expiates her guilt for having failed as a daughter and as a mother by finding direction in her life through her social and political work. She dedicates her life for the cause of black people. The ensuing understanding Meridian has of the maternal history of black women and of feeling a connection to the past indicates her reconciliation with the maternal guilt she holds: she is convinced that freedom of choice is an opportunity that was denied to her ancestors but is available to her. It is also the herald of Meridian's initiation of valuing her own self. The re-evaluation of the history of the Civil Rights Movement is also necessary to Meridian's healing process, since her personal relationship with her mother is intimately intertwined with the history of black people in the 1960s.

Like Head, who believes in the power of human love, Walker redefines the notion of revolution: instead of violence and death, "love is the revolutionary emotion" (*Meridian* 5). Since revolution lies in transformation of the inner self, it must first occur within. However, while in Walker's novel activism appears to be part and parcel of the heroine's life, Head's heroine appears to have had so much psychological damage by politics that what she now tries to do is to achieve subject position on the face of racial and sexist challenges. Both writers indicate human love as a panacea for sexism and racism, which are shown as two main threats to the psychological and social wholeness of not only black women but black men as well. This chapter has revealed that mental



illness in Afro-American and African women has a historical reason, especially as women are unable to minimize the serious nature of their problem and that understanding the sources of mental disorder for women means understanding how cultural, racial and economic forces interact to undermine their social status.

The final chapter of the study, “The Body as a Site of Oppression in the Novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head”, underscores the problems of race and gender with relation to the female body as depicted by Bessie Head and Alice Walker in *A Question of Power* and *Maru* and *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* – of course cross-references are made to their other novels. Obviously, the body as the central locus upon which competing discourses are written is significant because self-definition, and particularly female definition, begins with the human body. With the female body as centre of investigation, the theme of sexuality has been avoided because it has been discussed extensively by many scholars and, instead, emphasis has been placed on issues related to race and gender. Therefore, the analysis revolves around the portrayal of female bodies in highly racist societies, socially as well as politically, where women of colour have to struggle to secure a subject position, despite the multifaceted challenges, by making certain decisions which, though received by others derisively or with antagonist attitudes, finally yield some results. In this regard, the discussion has shed light on the concept of “body” in feminist, poststructuralist and postcolonial studies, and also with reference to critical race theory, focusing on how traditional views of gender, class and sex circumscribe women’s growth and potential.

The theoretical exposition in this chapter has briefly touched upon critical views of the body as an object and as subject, referring also to the body’s relation to paradigms of power (Foucault’s views of power, the body, and the ‘gaze’). Postcolonial views of the body and how racism affects the individual are discussed with reference to

Frantz Fanon's conceptualization of colonialist and postcolonial discourses regarding the body, contending that the body is a crucial site for inscription. The views of Judith Butler (e.g. differentiation between sex and gender, and performativity), Elizabeth Grosz (the body as a cultural, not just a 'natural' object vis-à-vis the process of inscription and performance of body in phallographic culture), Julia Kristeva (abjection), de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*), Luce Irigaray (three categories of women in *This Sex Which Is No One*), and bell hooks (the relation between black men and women in a sexist, racist and classist society) have been taken to represent feminist and poststructuralist views of the body. The analysis also takes into consideration certain concepts, such as chromatism, somatophobia (Vicki Kirby), capitalism, body politic(s), and body objectification as manipulated in the works of both Bessie Head and Alice Walker.

Along with feminism, special emphasis has been placed on critical race theory since it focuses on racial injustices and the structuring of society based on racial differences which, according to Delgado and Stefancic (7), are considered to be products of social thought, eliminating the conception that races result from biological or genetic differences. In this respect, racial disparities can be explained as being created by the individuals in society that rank others in distinct racial categories for particular purposes. Consequently, an individual's genetic composition has no influence on the distinctions between races; instead, it is individuals in society that consciously create these differences. The dominant group in society constructs the differentiation in race in order to produce a suitable workforce from those they have rendered powerless by virtue of their race. This particular way of organizing society then results in racism, benefiting only the hegemonic group within a society; thus, racism is not seen as problematic to that segment and, as a result they do not wish to

eradicate it. Furthermore, critical race theory further explains how racial stereotypes develop based on the emphasis on the differences between racial groups (Delgado & Stefancic 7). Besides, Ian Lopez (1964) supports this point and maintains that race is a social construct rather than a biological reality. Teun van Dijk's theory of ideology further consolidates the previous arguments, explaining racism issues and how the white people maintained their colonialist rule during the era of inequality.

The idea that a body's dependence on others accentuates this body's vulnerability and subjection to control by others is dominant in the novels of both Bessie Head and Alice Walker. In fact, it has been shown that the driving force of colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy has been based on subjecting the bodies of the subjected individuals. Even the attempts by these "controllers" to subject the minds of the individuals are seen as means to control their bodies. The whole situation aggravates all the more when racism and sexism become pillars of such subjection. The selected texts of Alice Walker and Bessie Head reflect such machinations and emphasize the unjust and divided societies of US and Botswana/South Africa. In these societies, the power and authority of race is of significance as human fate was dictated and manipulated by a person's ancestry and appearance. For instance, African Americans have suffered under slavery for decades, and even after slavery had been abolished, capitalism came as the other side of the same coin. Similarly, African people were mainly considered as workforce for the colonialist powers. The situation is even worse as far as women are concerned: African American women have been shown in Walker's novels to suffer even more at the hands of their male counterpart; in Africa, Head has shown that while black women undergo maltreatment at the hands of black males, coloured women (and Masarwa women) are even regarded as "filth".

In Bessie Head's novels, it has been shown that unlike the black African people, who were a race and ethnicity of their own, the coloured people (e.g. Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* and Margaret in *Maru*) felt as if they did not have a specific position in society as they were regarded as both black and white. The white community deemed them to be too dark in skin colour whereas the black community considered their skin colour to be too white; thus they acquired the label of half-breed. *A Question of Power* is a live evidence of racialization as experienced by Head herself in both South Africa and Botswana. Elizabeth is the fictionalized representation of Head's subjective experience where even though half of Elizabeth's genetic composition is from a white character, her mother, she is still discriminated against because of her black genetic composition. Elizabeth's childhood – Fanon's theory is applied here – has always been an excruciating experience of inculcating the heroine's otherness and displacement. Her escape to Botswana does not make things any easier – she remained under the microscopic view of racial and sexist discrimination. The colour of her body and the fact that she is a lone mother have kept her under the derogatory and hedonic gaze of the society around her. Elizabeth's strange behaviour (and the subsequent two nervous breakdowns) results from her unsuccessful coping mechanism and inability to deal with racial and sexist issues in her world. With her continuous experience of trauma, abandonment and rejection as a coloured, Elizabeth feels like an outcast.

Again, in *Maru*, the identity of the heroine, Margaret Cadmore, as a Masarwa or bushman, puts her in the line of fire, a victim of racist, classist, and sexist prejudices. People around her have assumed that because of her complexion, she is a coloured, not realizing that she is in fact one of the despised Masarwa they have condemned to perpetual servitude and whom they consider the lowest of the low. Yet it is against this background that Margaret firmly declares her tribal identity: 'I am a Masarwa' (*Maru*:

5). Despite this confirmation of identity, such stereotyped view of the Masarwa, in addition to her birth circumstances by a Masarwa mother (who looked like a ‘goddess’, though) and her adoption by a white woman, whose ulterior motive of adoption appears purely ‘scientific’ and devoid of maternal affection, can account for the “big hole in the child’s mind between the time that she slowly became conscious of her life in the home of the missionaries and conscious of herself as a person” (*Maru* 15). Yet, education appears to have a vital role in building self-confidence in her and in shifting the attitudes of people around. Margaret is able to effect change not only in the personalities of the main characters in the novel, Dilekedi, Moleka and Maru, but is also able to turn the whole paradigm upside down by marrying the chief, Maru, and changing the people’s attitude towards the Masarwa people.

Just as Head indicates that education is a central tool for liberation from racial, sexist and classist restrictions (something which the colonialists attempted to deny the Africans in order to curb their growth), Walker also maintains the same view. In Walker’s novels, knowledge is the door for liberation (e.g. Meridian in *Meridian*, Ruth in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Nettie and Celie – through Shug Avery – in *The Color Purple*, etc.). As the subject of repeated rapes and beatings, Celie in *The Color Purple* tries alternately to ignore and to annihilate her body as a strategy for defence against the assaults of her ‘Pa’ and husband. She shows no desire to get to *know* her body until the arrival of her husband’s lover, Shug Avery. The process of discovering or developing desire begins with the reappropriation of her own body, which was taken from her by men – first by her brutal stepfather and then passed on to her husband, Albert. The repossession of her body encourages Celie to seek selfhood and later to assert that selfhood through spoken language and through independent decisions and actions. During this process Celie learns to love herself and others and to address even

her written language to a body, her sister Nettie, rather than to the disembodied God she has blindly inherited from white Christian mythology.

The character of Sofia in *The Color Purple* deserves a special mention as she stands as a clear representative of how racist and sexist hegemonies attempt to repress an attempt by a female to trespass the patriarchal and chauvinist boundaries set for her race and gender. Sophia's huge body and her 'masculinist' will appear to pose a threat to the status quo and thus have to be tamed and subdued – a situation that was attempted by her brothers and her husband but is ultimately actualised at the hands of the white people. The male gender performativity that Sofia adopts to resist sexual and racial oppression could not withstand the tide in her highly racialised and sexist society.

The victimization of black women is also manifest in the characters of Margaret and Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, which shows that black women suffer from double oppression first at the hands of the whites and secondly at the hands of the black males. The oppression exerted by the whites on the black male is reflected on the reaction of the black males towards their families, immensely affecting the lives of black women and children. Margaret Copeland's life of hard work and her husband's mistreatment affected her commitment to her son, Brownfield, and her husband, Grange. Her willing submission to Grange can be attributed to her recognition that both black men and women confront the powerful force of white society, and suggests that her understanding of overwhelming external constraints results in her desire for individual self-preservation. But, as Margaret realizes that her patience or silent suffering does not transform Grange, nor stop him from seeing another woman, she turns to a destructive life pattern as well. She wastes money on feminine products – "fragrances," "store-bought perfume" – and resorts to sexual promiscuity and alcoholism, ending up with pregnancy with an illegitimate child by a white man.

Immersed in debts, trapped by the dilemma of racist life, and knowing of his wife illegitimate pregnancy, Grange Copeland deserts his family. Knowing that she has no hope of sustaining a family without male support, Margaret poisons her newborn illegitimate child and commits suicide.

Mem, Brownfield's wife, stands as foil to Margaret. An educated school teacher, she attempts to ameliorate the living conditions of her family. But her husband falls in the same trap of debt for white folks (the impact of white capitalism) as did his father before; consequently, he starts abusing her. Brownfield's mistreatment of his wife is also caused by various sources: the image of his mother as a prostitute, and his mortified pride that his wife is in charge of the family's financial matters. Brownfield accuses his wife of infidelity and murders her. Walker describes a heart-rending image of Mem's body at her death: years of toil as a teacher and a domestic, beside two pregnancies (calculated by her husband to weaken her), have already left their mark on her weak dead body, which her crying daughter tries to rub and cover in a futile attempt to bring the dead body back to life.

Head and Walker in their novels show how the body of the "marked" female characters – the coloured in South Africa and Botswana and the African Americans in the US – has always been a locus of inscription by the dominant patriarchal and racist forces of the society. Because of their colour and gender, these characters suffer and when they challenge their atrocious circumstances, some even lose their lives. However, both the writers agree that education, love and commitment are necessary tools for a better and equal standing. Of course, some price has to be paid, and what their characters pay comes in terms of suffering that affects their minds, bodies and their sense of identity. In each of their novels under investigation, the female character that possesses the will and the necessary tools to transform the society, or at least her

status in the society, is able to 'relocate' herself in the social paradigm in spite of the challenges imposed by patriarchy, racism, gender bias.

The study of the women characters of Alice Walker and Bessie Head enables us to view things beyond colour and sex. Male students will benefit from examining the identity crises of female characters. They will be able to ponder not only on the choices that women must make but also their own role in shaping and affecting those choices. A re-examination of what it means to be a woman invites a redefinition of what it means to be a man. Men must become aware of not only the possible destinies women may have in society but also the possibility for themselves if they encourage women to assert their individuality. Undoubtedly, women readers would have much to gain from a study of the black woman and her quest for identity. Through watching other women engaged in determining the possibilities for their growth, women may be encouraged to take a more active role in determining their own lives. Through the protagonists in the novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head there is a message for women to learn from their struggle.