3. Racism: An Overview from the Novels of Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta

3.1 African Literature – Impact of Racism

Psychiatrist and political theorist, Frantz Fanon quotes

*I am black; I am in total fusion with the world, in sympathetic affinity with the earth, losing my id in the heart of the cosmos and the white man, however intelligent he may be, is incapable of understanding Louis Armstrong or songs from the Congo. I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth. (Fanon 1986:27)*

The relevant quote in Jean-Paul Sartre’s introduction to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* states that the condition of the native is a nervous condition, reveals how a racist culture and the conflicting attitudes between the colonizer and the colonized prohibit psychological health in the African people and consequently, as literature very often reflects life, it is transmitted into African characters in literature. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett in the introduction to the book, *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation and African American Culture* expand on these conflicting attitudes by focusing on the term “culture politics”. They explain this as the politics pertaining to culture and how people acquire, understand, and apply power to their relationships with one
another. These power relations underwrite the formation of certain patterns of human values, discourses, attitudes, actions or artifacts.

Racial inequality caused the stereotyping and labeling of black African writers in numerous ways. White authors and publishers dominated the literary environment, presenting their stereotypical views, while black authors were seen as unimportant and inferior to their white counterparts. It was extremely difficult for black African writers to voice their views and experiences of living in a society riddled with oppression, prejudice and unequal economic and educational opportunities. The literature produced by authors during the era of inequality acted as one of the primary tools used by both white and black authors for representing their unique standpoint on the challenges they faced in the biased Southern African environment. Literature acted as a megaphone for authors to make their voices heard, and to persuade members of Southern Africa and the global society to observe their world from their distinct liberal outlook.

An example is white South African author, Alan Paton, founder and president of the Liberal Party which opposed apartheid and offered a non-racial alternative to government policy. His novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country* depicts friendship across racial prejudices in the story of a black South African rural pastor and a wealthy white businessman, by presenting his vision and hope for the people residing in apartheid society in South Africa to live in harmony. Unquestionably, white authors and black authors produced their works for many different purposes and with diverse aims in mind.

It is noticeable that the literature produced by authors of white culture often distorted the experience and realities, and insinuated the inferiority of black people. Thus, it is through literature that the white authors justified their actions and provided evidence of their superiority and power. Based on this, the whites
painted a dehumanizing picture of the blacks by portraying their behavior as
driven by the unconscious and primitive desires, in order to restrict their access to
power and supremacy in society. But what happens is that, in society, in most
societies, organizations are created to freeze the relations of power, hold those
relations in a state of symmetry, so that a certain number of persons get an
advantage, socially, economically, politically, institutionally. And this totally
freezes the situation. That’s what one calls power in the strict sense of the term;
it’s a specific type of power relation that has been institutionalized, frozen,
immobilized, to the profit of some and to the detriment of others. The intention of
African women writers, on the other hand, is to inform a society of readers about
the plight of African women. Toni Morrison is an African American novelist,
editor, and professor. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue,
and richly detailed characters. Toni Morrison is the first black woman to receive
Nobel Prize in Literature. She reinforces the purpose of women’s writing to find
and expose the truth about the interior life of people who couldn’t write it, using
the approach that’s most productive, the recollection that moves from the image to
the text.

In reading works by African female authors, the reader is confronted with
the similar struggles that the writer experienced as a black woman living in the
racially conflicted African environment. In The Bluest Eye and in Paradise Toni
Morrison has created two thoroughly racialized communities. Both communities
are crippled by racism but in different ways. In The Bluest Eye Morrison has
created a dualistic tale of the oppressors and the oppressed. The novel illustrates
how the racism which exists within the African American community can be seen
as an effect of the oppression and racism its members have been subjected to by
whites. The racism, oppression and marginalization have corroded the character’s
self-esteem and sense of self worth.
The works of Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta provide an exploration of the abuse and mistreatment of black African people and subjugation of women in pre-democratic societies, as evident in the texts. Thus, this chapter will investigate literary constructions by these authors and how they spotlight the oppression and inequality concomitant within the Southern African society during the era of unequal opportunities. More specifically, the aim of this chapter is to scrutinize the psychological fractures caused by the dual oppression of race and gender; and to investigate the inner conflict and emotional turmoil experienced by the white perpetrators and black victims, displayed in the texts. Buchi and Head’s works present incidents of life experiences in Southern Africa, from two contrasting viewpoints. They both examine the tensions that exist between white colored and African people who were forced to subsist in racially oppressive systems.

### 3.2 Literary Theories on Racism

Critical race theory developed in the 1960’s and early 1970’s in a period when fresh approaches were essential to deal with new types and subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground. It was also at a time when individuals were infuriated by the continually discussed race and racial discrimination issues, with improvement aimed action being crucial in order to carefully scrutinize increasing racism and its effect on the society at large. The Civil Rights Movement in America was at its peak when critical race theory originated. This movement had striven for basic civil rights for all Americans, regardless of race, thus empowering the people of color in society. The Civil Rights Movement echoed the objectives of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored people (NAACP), ensuring the political, social and economic equality of minority group citizens of the United States. Primarily they aimed to eliminate racial prejudice and eradicate all barriers of racial discrimination in society.
Derrick Bell is best known as the founding father of Critical Race Theory, an academic discipline which maintains that society is divided along racial lines into white oppressors and black victims, similar to the way Marxism frames the oppressor/victim dichotomy along class lines. Critical Race Theory contends that America is permanently racist to its core, and that consequently its legal structures are, by definition, racist and invalid. A logical derivative of this premise, according to Critical Race Theory, is that the members of “oppressed” racial groups are obligated to determine for themselves which laws and traditions have merit and are worth observing. Such a perspective’s implications for the ability of civil society to function at all are nothing short of monumental. Further, Critical Race Theory holds that because racism is so deeply ingrained in America’s national character, racial preferences favoring blacks in employment and higher education are not only permissible but necessary as a means of countering the permanent character flaws of white people who, as Bell put it, seek to achieve a measure of social stability through their unspoken pact to keep blacks on the bottom.

As Bell saw things, white malevolence knew no bounds. In one of his writings, he mused that if scientists were to someday develop a magical pill that could transform any black person who consumed it into a perfectly law-abiding individual, whites would undoubtedly conspire to destroy it so as to prevent such an effect. Why? Because black crime, he explained, benefits many whites such as those who profit from the manufacture of prison uniforms. Wholly disgusted by the white race, Bell predicted that eventually America would witness the rise of charismatic new black leaders who, in the interests of retribution, would “urge that instead of African Americans killing each other, they should go out in gangs and kill a whole lot of white people.” Bell endorsed a journal called Race Traitor, whose stated aim is “to abolish the white race, which means no more and no less than abolishing the privileges of the white skin.” Moreover, the publication’s
The critical race theory and theories of cultural studies as analytical tools provide a fresh and alternative angle in interrogating these concepts and themes. These theoretical frames enable the reader to interrogate these themes in a way that broadens his or her knowledge and understanding of the former era based on unequal opportunities as well as the evolution of gender inequality and racism in that society. Moreover, this analytical technique investigates the way in which racism is normalized in society through a pervasive and deeply rooted social racism. Secondly, with regard to female oppression, critical race theory provides an understanding as to the origin of gender inequality.

In this theory, unlike feminist theories, the focus is on the development and construction of gender inequality rather than specifically on the social differences between men and women. Therefore it can be said that critical race theory looks beyond the feminist approach to literature, provoking an important contribution to a new approach to gender disparity. Race is viewed as a social rather than a biological construction in this theory; it is even applicable to the society at present, since, despite the continuous efforts to eradicate race and gender subjugation in
society, these remain pressing issues, evidenced in the recent xenophobic attacks. Thus possible recommendations for improvement in race relations will be offered through a consideration of this ethnic literary theoretical framework. The exploration of African characters and the oppression of the female characters in the selected novels by Buchi and Head will be conducted based on critical race theory and cultural studies. Research indicates that there is greater genetic variation that exists within the populations typically labeled as black and white than between these different major populations. The data compiled by various scientists demonstrate, contrary to popular opinion, that intra-group differences exceed inter-group differences. That is, greater genetic variation that exists within the populations typically labeled as Black and White than between these populations. With this said, this theory can, therefore, offer a reader an explanation as to how racial inequality evolved and why it is a dominant theme in both Buchi and Head’s texts.

The exploitation and oppression of the African characters in Buchi and Heads’ works can further be analyzed according to the theory by Louis Althusser. At the heart of this theory is the notion of ideological state apparatuses, i.e., social institutions such as the media, family, the educational system, language and the political system produce the tendency in people to behave and think in socially acceptable ways. It is important to note that social norms are not neutral or objective; they have instead been developed in the interests of those with social power, and they work to maintain their sites of power by naturalizing them into common sense. Social norms are, therefore, ideologically slanted in favor of a particular class or group of people, but are accepted as natural by the other classes, even when the interests of those other classes are directly opposed to these norms. The infiltration of these social norms disturbs Buchi and Head’s African characters. Hence, an analysis of interactions between characters in Buchi’s texts
in comparison to those in Head’s selected texts will provide a clear illustration of this theory.

Another important architect of critical race theory is American law professor, Kimberle Crenshaw, as her studies were on a similar path to those of Bell. She began organizing a course on the issues discussed by Bell. The course brought together a critical mass of scholars and students, and focused on the need to develop an alternative of racial power and its relation to law and anti-discrimination reform. It was from this course that a distilled version of the concept of critical race theory emerged. This theory alters the preconceived thoughts of racism by providing a fresh angle in addressing the “ordinariness” of racism, and racial differentiation within a society. What is meant by “ordinariness” is the fact that racism is often regarded as a very ordinary and normal issue in society, demonstrating the usual, accepted way of life and representing the common experience of individuals in society, whether they are of color or not. In addition, it is also commonplace for people to be both governed and divided by race creating racist members of society who detest people from diverse races.

Critical race theory also examines how society has constructed and stereotyped the black individual in society. It, therefore, focuses on how racist attitudes and behaviors are societal instilled and investigates how this problem can in fact be changed. The core principle of critical race theory is the notion of the social construction of race. To elucidate, the emphasis is on the fact that race and differential racism are considered to be products of social thought, eliminating in the conception that races result from biological or genetic differences. Instead, these disparities can be explained as being created by the individuals in society that rank others in accordance with 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. Assigning people to specific economic strata or labor enterprise is an example of this. As an empirical study of the social consciousness of the White mineworkers it is characterized by an extraordinary selectivity of data and, worse, by simple obfuscation of the most vital elements in the ideology of White labor. There is no doubt that race is a central category in that ideology, but racism is not an ‘attitude’ that exists in a vacuum. It exists within and derives from a particular set of social relations, those relations governing men in the process of production. With this said, the dominant group in society constructs the differentiation in race in order to produce a suitable workforce from the less powerful and racially different people in society. This particular way of organizing society then results in racial discrimination, and benefits the power 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.

Every individual sees his/her culture as the best and the most appropriate way of living. Hence, it can be offered that people view cultures as hierarchical. This cultural bias provides a basis for inequality, as it promotes the domination of one class/group over another, and also acts as a means of acquiring oppositional points of view to those in dominance. With this in mind, cultural study, as a form of analysis, is concerned with the generation and circulation of meanings in industrial societies. They start with the belief that meanings and the making of them are indivisibly linked to social structure and can only be explained in terms of that structure and its history. It focuses on the relationship between social practices commonly separated so that culture is seen as a whole way of life, a social totality exploring and aiming to understand the maintenance and formation of inequalities within and between social groups.
Unlike the black African people who were of a race and an ethnicity of their own, the colored people 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 color whereas the black community considered their skin color to be too white; thus they acquired the label of half-breed. Bessie Head is a prime example of the complex position faced by the colored people in the social order, as she resided in a few homes to find her correct place in society. After birth she was first given to a white family for adoption.

However, after realizing that she was not white, the family returned her where she was placed in the home of the Heathcoat family, a colored couple who were devout Catholics. Thereafter she was sent to St. Monica’s home, a school for colored girls situated near Durban. Consequently, Head, as a colored, had no sense of belonging and felt as though she lacked an identity in society, a problem which resulted from continuous social ridicule. Several theories have emphasized this fact. For example, Lopez argues that race is a social construct rather than a biological reality. He illustrates his point by focusing on two distinct races, blacks and whites, and how these two groups are in fact formed by the strength of social beliefs in a society rather than by natural differentiation or biological factors. In addition, research indicates that diverse races are not genetically distinct branches of humankind, therefore reinforcing the social nature of race.

In order to nullify the belief in the biological construction of race, Lopez illustrates how genes and genetics are not responsible for racism and race issues in society. He emphasizes that there are no genetic characteristics possessed either by all Blacks, or by non-Blacks; similarly, there is no gene or cluster of genes common to all Whites, or to non-Whites. Interestingly, the data compiled by various scientists demonstrate, contrary to popular opinion, that intra-group differences exceed inter-group differences; therefore, greater genetic variation
exists within the populations typically labeled as Black and White than between these populations.

As a consequence, intra-group conflict between members of the same race should exceed the conflict between members of different races. With this in mind, in the racially afflicted literary context in question, the differences between the white characters and the black characters should actually be minimal compared to the differences between the members of the same group. In the Buchi and Head texts under examination, gender inequality, rather than inherent biological differences, can be argued to be the result of the intra-group conflict resulting from the differences in the beliefs of the female and male characters pertaining to patriarchy and the treatment of the female characters in their society. Lopez maintains that humans and human interaction must be seen as the source and continued basis for racial categorization also paying particular attention to racial formation, the process in which racial meanings arise. Race is not a determinant or a residue of some other social phenomenon, but rather stands on its own as an amalgamation of competing societal forces. Hence, it is the people in society who are to blame for racism as they construct and extenuate the differences in races.

Thus, he concludes that the key element in racism and racial conflicts is the people within that particular society. Lopez expands on his theory by arguing that races, differentiated through human constructs, constitute an integral part of the whole social fabric that includes gender and class relations. Based on this, the source of the problem of race can be identified by the fact that races are constructed relationally, against one another, rather than in isolation to one another. This then results in further conflict with unnecessary and superfluous competition between the people of different race.
Louis Althusser states that ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. Althusser rejects the idea that the economic base of society determines the entire cultural superstructure. Unlike Marxist theorists, who suggest that the more economically stable group seizes all the power, Althusser argues that the economic situation of individuals does not result in distinct cultures or groups. According to him, ideology is a dynamic process constantly reproduced and reconstituted in practice. Therefore, the ways in which people think, act and understand themselves and their relationship to society is vital to ideologies. Althusser replaces the Marxist theory with his theory of over-determination. As the core of this theory he lays emphasis on state apparatus such as the social institutions of media, family, the educational system, language and the political system as crucial in the reproduction of ideology. These state apparatus are part of every individual’s life, and these institutions are continually conveying messages, or are “speaking” to individuals about societal expectations whereby individuals must be represented in certain ways. In addition, he maintains that these institutions produce the tendency for people to think and behave in socially acceptable forms. An important point made by Althusser is the fact that social norms are not neutral or objective; they are, in fact, biased and influenced by personal feelings and opinions. Hence, the social norms have developed in the interests of those who hold social power, and they work to maintain their sites of power by naturalizing them into commonsense.

It is pertinent to note that the social norms are ideologically slanted in favor of a particular class or group of people in society, but are accepted as natural by other classes, even when the interests of those other classes are directly opposed by the ideology reproduced by living one’s life according to these norms. Althusser also emphasizes the role played by social institutions and language in the construction of the individual. In order to explain these influences, he uses the terms “interpellation” and “hailing”. These terms derive from the notion that when
an individual communicates with another individual, he or she is reproducing social relationships with people in society.

Based on this, the first progress we make in communicating with another person is to shout or call loudly to them in greeting, or to attract their attention. In answering the “hailing”, the respondent has to recognize and acknowledge that the person is in fact communicating with him or her, and is not talking to someone else. Essentially, the fact that a person recognizes that he or she is being communicated to derives from signs carried in the language we use, that determines who we think they are. Fundamental to this concept is that people “hail” each other differently, according to who they are, and their age and status in society.

As a consequence, the way a person is spoken to and addressed is often determinant upon his/her social standing in society? This is apparent in the selected texts by Emecheta and Head, especially because the authoritative characters address and communicate with the subjugated black or colored people in a demeaning and disrespectful way, thus using language as a carrier of the belief that the Africans of a designated color are worthless and unimportant in society. Althusser subsequently shifts his focus to the response of the addressee. He claims that the addressee recognizes the social position that the language has constructed when responding to the initial “hail”. Furthermore, if the addressee’s response is supportive of the means of communication, he or she accepts this same position.

Focusing on the texts of Buchi and Head, the Africans of color accept and to a certain degree, agree with their inferior position in society when they respond to the hailing of the characters enjoying superior social status. Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of linguistic signs can further highlight these
ideologies based on inequality. He pays particular attention to the sign, the signifier and the signified. According to Saussure, a sign is a term given to a word or sound, which acquires its meaning only in relation to or in contrast with other signs in a system of signs. The sign is further constituted of two segments, the signifier and the signified. Firstly, the signifier simply refers to the actual object or image represented by the sign. The signifier is just the spoken or written word, whereas the signified refers to the thought or concept that is created in a person’s brain or mind when reading or hearing the signifier, it is rather the idea, the mental object, which you have and which you succeed in communicating when you get your message across. The processing of the signifier by the mind in constructing a product is termed signification.

In applying this theory to The Joys of Motherhood, Maru, and A Question of Power, the black and colored characters in the literary societies act are identified as by virtue of their color; for example “black” or “colored”. However, for each individual that perceives this, a mental concept is created in the minds of other characters in viewing these black and colored characters in a discriminatory manner, termed the “signified”. Hence, the signified are the black. Additionally these black and colored characters when considering their identity have been similarly conditioned to associate the idea of blackness with inferiority. The racial oppression projected in the novels of Buchi and Head can be examined according to this theory, as it suggests that the black or colored characters had no choice but to accept the unfair social norms conveyed to them through socio-political institutions in the racially biased society. With the social norms constructed in favor of the hegemonic group, the black or colored people had to incorporate these radicalized norms into their lifestyles, and continue living life as if racism was natural and normal.
Frantz Fanon was interested in racial differences, and his thinking brings together insights into psychology and a concern for the effects of domination on subjugated peoples. He examines the effects of white authority on the subjugated black people of society by incorporating his knowledge of psychology and the working of the human brain into the argument. Fanon affirms that there are close connections between the structure of the family and the structure of the nation. It is for this reason that the characteristics and qualities of the family are projected onto the social environment in which they reside. Fanon begins his argument by considering the difference between the childhoods of a white person compared to the childhood of a person of color.

He maintains that a normal child that has been raised and has grown up in a normal family will be a normal man. However, he notes the opposite in the childhood of a person of color, a normal black child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world. Fanon explains this phenomenon by emphasizing the racial differences between the white and the black child. He argues that the white family is the agent of a certain system, and acts as the workshop in which a person is shaped and trained for life in society. Thus, this family structure is internalized in the superego, and projected into political and social behavior. Fanon further argues that when the child of color makes contact with the white world, a certain synthesizing action takes place. The white population in Africa, in the racist regimes of Rhodesia and Botswana, were known to portray aggressive and violent characteristics towards the black individuals in society, abusing them physically and emotionally. The black African people had contact and relations with the white world as they provided domestic labor and labor forces for these cruel people.
As a result of this, the blacks were subjected to the vindictive attitudes of the whites, thus, reinforcing this behavior in the psyche of the blacks. It is for this reason that the blacks adopted the hostile attitude of their superior counterparts. The intimidating and brutal attitude of “The Other” is then incorporated into each facet of the black’s life, as it is through the disguise of a white person that offers the black person a feeling of importance and worth. A black male’s attitude and power, in the imitation of a white man, is then reinforced in his conduct towards the black women in his society where he portrays his mimicked violent and aggressive attitude. This results in the mistreatment, oppression and abuse of the black women by the black men in their lives, mirroring the poor manner in which the black men themselves were treated by the white citizens in society.

The psychological stress experienced by Southern African citizens during the imbalanced society rife with power and discrimination issues, can also be scrutinized by investigating the emotional trauma experienced by both powerless victims and authorial perpetrators of the cruel African society. With this in mind, it is possible to understand the troubled characters of the selected Buchi and Head texts. The fact that the black characters are discriminated against by the racist characters of power, causes them to be exposed to extreme stress and trauma. However, some black characters develop a more adequate coping mechanism in dealing with trauma than others; therefore, these characters can effectively deal with and adapt to the appalling way in which they are treated. In other instances, the black and colored characters in the texts are unable to deal with the traumatic events experienced. These psychologically damaged characters are thus portrayed as being mad or irrational, illustrating their inability to deal with the trauma endured. In a closer examination of the ordered Southern African society, attention also needs to be paid to the repressive roles thrust on women in society. Well known theorist of power, gender, sexuality and identity, Judith Butler, shows particular interest in the notion of acquiring a specific gender in a society. In
exploring this, it is vital to differentiate between the similar concepts of sex and gender.

According to Butler, the sex of a person is determined by their chromosomal constitution; thus it is their biological form that is significant in determining their sex. Conversely, the term gender refers to the cultural interpretation or signification of the person’s sex. More specifically it is the display of masculine and feminine behavior associated with the notion of the sex. In her theory, Butler pays specific attention to the construction of gender identity in a society. She utilizes the idea presented by Simone de Beauvoir which claims that one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes a woman. This means that when a child is born, it will be of a specific sex determined by whether the child has an X or a Y chromosome; however, the child will not have a specific gender at this stage of his or her life. It is only when the child is developing that he or she will be habituated to behave in a way that is pertinent to his or her gender.

Consequently, a person’s gender is entirely imitative as he or she will mimic the behavior of a person with the same gender and perform this gender in a similar manner to the original. Butler views the body as an active process of symbolizing certain cultural and historical possibilities. She focuses on the construction of the female gender in society and argues that to become a woman is to allow the body to conform to a historical idea of women and to persuade the body to become a cultural sign of women. Gender performance orientation is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today. Therefore, Butler hypothesizes that the body of a woman becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time. A woman, therefore, gains her femininity by repeating the acts that she is expected to mimic from other women in society, which represents a gender identity that is accepted by the hegemonic
gender, men. However, this process of performing a gender can also transform the expected behavior of a gender in a given society.

Thus Butler argues that the ideas concerned with masculine and feminine behavior can be altered. It is the women in society that can change their expected gender roles and social order by performing roles equating them to men, instead of performing the expectations of the men in society. In order to elaborate on her theory, Butler compares the process of acquiring a gender to a drama executed on stage where the actors and actresses have to perform certain character roles. In the play, the actors follow a script which ought to be enacted in specified ways; likewise, society resembles the play in the sense that the gendered body is obliged to act out the “script” of how that particular gender is portrayed in society. Additionally, as a play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives. Butlers’ focus on the relationship between society and gender can be reinforced by the ideas presented by social constructionists.

A major focus of social constructionism is to examine the ways in which social phenomena are created, institutionalized and traditionally lived by humans. These theorists argue that all knowledge is culturally and historically specific; thus, the way a person understands the world, and the concepts and categories that he or she uses is based on his or her construction of the world. Similar to Butler’s theory where gender identity is constructed and differentiated by means of different performances by men and women fulfilling their specific gender roles, social constructionists hypothesize that knowledge is sustained by social processes. For example, it is through daily interactions between people in their everyday lives that social knowledge or shared versions of knowledge are constructed. Thus, gender roles in society are products of the culture and the history prevalent at that specific time. This is apparent in the Buchi and Head texts
that are of significance to this study. In the era that their African characters were created, great importance was placed on the gendered and racially differentiated distinction between human beings, to such a degree that these categories of personhood influenced every character's economic, social and psychological well-being. With this said, the characters’ understanding of the African world and their knowledge of society is understood in terms of racial and gendered categories where each character’s identity is determined by these pertinent societal issues.

Barbara Risman acknowledges the theory of gender as a social construction where a person’s gender is embedded in the individual, and in the interactional and institutional dimensions of society. She maintains that the creation of difference between men and women in society provides the foundation of gender inequality. As a consequence, the differences in gendered behavior justify the construction of women as a group which is forced to be subordinate to men as a group. The interlinked theory of Butler and Risman can be applied to analyze the female characters created in the novels of Buchi and Head. The white woman, like the black African woman, must be a good wife and homemaker. In contrast to the women, it is the males in both societies who were the heads of the household, holding responsibility for the family’s subsistence and functioning. Therefore, it is these gender roles that emphasize the distinctions between the males and females in society, and substantiate each group’s gender identity.

Women who are placed in this group have little or no value to men and exist primarily to be used by both married and unmarried men, simply for their sexual gratification. The female characters in *A Question of Power* exemplify the labels discussed by Irigaray. In her state of madness, Elizabeth is haunted by Dan and Sello, characters who have no respect for women. These hallucinations provide insight into how the male characters objectify the female characters, treating them as their sexual property. Head’s character Elizabeth states that all the
men were like that, and they had prostitutes in the background. A long story was to unfold about the women, half of which group belonged to Dan.

Head’s interesting choice of names for the women in her character’s hallucinations also substantiates Irigaray’s theory. To recapitulate, a close examination of critical race theory and a thorough analysis of the literary texts by Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head allow for the careful scrutiny of the racial and gender stratification in their literary worlds. Within this perspective the subsequent theories presented by the influential theorists provide the issue of gender discrimination and racial prejudice to be examined through various lenses.

3.3 Exploitation of Black African Characters

The injustices and struggles of Nigerian and Botswana society are mirrored in the fictional lives and communities created by Buchi and Head in their literary constructions. Racial oppression, hatred, prejudice, detestation, intolerance, cruelty, subjugation, and brutality are a few terms that reflect the callous and cruel characteristics of these racially divided societies. Racism is the primary doctrine blamed for the weaknesses and severe suffering in Southern Africa’s disordered societies. Researcher and theorist Mark Halstead focuses his attention on race, the origin of racial divisions in society and identifies various categories of racism. The first type he terms Pre-reflective Gut Racism, based on the intense hatred of people who are of a different race or culture which results in dominance, superiority and aggression against certain members of society. Halstead advances his argument by claiming that the root of this racism stems from emotional origins rather than rational origins; hence it pertains to the psychological problems of the individual rather than on his/her logic and reasoning. Halstead suggests that racism is based on the psyche; the racist person tends to be frightened, anxious and even
fearful of an individual from a diverse race, which creates suspicion and distrust toward citizens from a different culture. Even though the dominant group has limited knowledge of the other racial group, they create in their minds broad, exaggerated stereotypes.

In Southern Africa women constitute the category of the population most seriously affected by inequality as both white and black women are subject to double oppression. White women face oppression because of their gender and their class, while similarly the black women experience oppression because of their gender, race and class. In the African society women did not have equal rights to the men in society. Furthermore, the women of all races were often subject to men for financial support and for the release to secure employment; therefore it was very difficult for them to alter their position.

American feminist theorist, Gloria Jean Watkins, better known by her pen name Bell Hooks, is an American author, feminist, and social activist. She argues that black women as a group find themselves in an unusual position in their society as their overall status is lower than other social groups, resulting in sexist, racist and classist oppression. She also notes how white women and black men can have dual roles as both oppressor and oppressed in society. Black men are victims of racism; however, their sexist behavioral attitude allows them to have power over the women in society. Similarly, white women face oppression by the males in their society while racism allows these white females to hold power over both black men and women in society.

It was not only the black characters who were silenced and ill-treated by the white characters; Bessie Head depicts this in the world of her colored characters facing a more traumatic existence and struggle than the black characters. A section of the poem, *God* by D.H. Lawrence is quoted at the beginning of *A Question of*
Power by Bessie Head:“ Only man can fall from God Only man. That awful and
sickening endless, sinking through the slow, corruptive Levels of disintegrative
knowledge . . . the awful katabolism into the abyss” (Head 1974: 2). Head includes
this stanza from the poem in order to encapsulate the dysfunctional fictional
society of her novel and the immoral and brutal world in which she, as an author,
actually resided. Head frequently felt like an outcast in Southern African society,
which influenced the psychological viewpoint from which she examined the racist
society.

Head’s exile in 1964 did not allow her to leave her racial prejudice behind
her, for in Botswana, she came to feel as marginal as the Masarwa under class and
identify with them. Her colored looks made the Batswana believe that she and her
son, Howard, were, indeed Basarwa. As a result, they were treated like outcasts.
Head felt ostracized by her colored looks and gender; thus, her careful scrutiny of
living in a society riddled with both biased black and male characters is illustrated
through the character of Elizabeth in A Question of Power. “It was much worse
from her side, she wasn’t a genuine African; she was a half breed” (Head
1974:104) Elizabeth, Head’s fictional self, feels as if she has been brutalized,
dealing with the constant social ridicule and derision. “Elizabeth listened to the
words alertly. How they fitted her own circumstances! Maybe Dolly had been to
hell and back” (Head 1974:111).

Head provides an alternative perspective into the lives of the characters and
their inner turmoil. Instead of focusing on the mental effect on the black characters
in society, she focuses on a character, like herself, of mixed descent, who is
depicted as even worse off than the subjugated black people. “You are inferior as a
colored” (Head 1974:127). 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. Illustrative of this is Elizabeth’s childhood when she is sent from one foster home to the next in order to try and find her the most suitable place in society. It was deemed unacceptable for her to continue living with the white family with which she was initially placed as she was not regarded as a white person. However, she was also not regarded as a black person, and so she felt no sense of belonging in the apartheid society.

First they received you from the mental hospital and sent you to a nursing home. A day later you were returned because you did not look white. They sent you to a Boer family. A week later you were returned. The women on the committee said, ‘What do we do with this child? Its mother is white.

(Head 1974: 17)

Head’s examination of oppression and racial prejudice is based on Elizabeth’s exiled position in the Southern African world. With regard to power, Head does not just portray the battle for power between the races; she pays attention to the power battle between people of similar ethnicity. Interestingly, the black characters in A Question of Power resent and ridicule other characters of the same race that hold more power, or those who are deemed more powerful than them. Theorist, Ian Lopez, argues that the conflict between groups or intra-group conflict is more widespread than the conflict between groups, or inter-group conflict. This mindset of the black characters is evident in the statement: “People there had an unwritten law. They hated any black person among them who was ‘important’. They would say behind a person’s back: ‘Oh, he thinks he’s important’, with awful scorn” (Head 1974:26). This is reiterated in the quote: “The reasoning, the viciousness was the same, but this time the faces were black and it
was not local people. It was large, looming soul personalities” (Head 1974:57) . As already mentioned, Lopez maintains that it is the competition between the people in society from which racism evolves. Instead of individuals identifying races in isolation to one another, races are pitted against one another, resulting in intergroup conflict supporting the notion of racism being socially constructed.

In *A Question of Power*, white characters as a race compare and compete with the black characters as a racial entity. These white characters are responsible for the creation of this racism as it has been found that there are no genetic differences between white and black people, the only differences between the two groups are in fact physical, the color of their skin. This proves how the white characters always make sure that they are in a better position than the black characters, which ultimately directs them to the success and triumph of their own race. Education is also a key factor to ensure the success of the white characters in Head’s fictional world. The white characters prefer the black characters to be uneducated, thus guaranteeing minimal opportunities for the blacks.

However, if some black characters are fortunate enough to attend school and receive an education, they had teachers who were not as qualified as the teachers in the white schools. An example of this is Elizabeth’s son’s teacher who cannot even spell properly. “Tom shook his head: ‘you must have made a mistake, Shorty. It’s wrong.’ ‘It’s right,’ insisted the small demon. ‘My teacher spells it like that’ (Head 1974:125). Teun van Dijk’s theory of racism and ideology can be used to further explain the relationships between characters in the novel as the white characters’ deliberate hatred for the black characters validates them to strategically place them in a powerful position in society. Thus, it was this intense hatred that they used as a tool in order to oppress them economically and socially. Interestingly, the Botswana also despise the Masarwa characters, but this did not provide them with an elevated position as they are not as economically and
politically advanced as the white characters. The organized attitude of the white characters then helps them with the furtherance of their own goals and interests in their fictional world; as soon as the white characters have the black characters in the position that they want them to be in, they make certain that it is here where they remain. The whites, therefore, have it in their minds that the black characters are repulsive, and do everything in their power to substantiate this warped view of the black characters. Furthermore, the black characters are constantly reminded of this intense hatred by the white characters as this was explicitly displayed at every possible opportunity.

The racist attitude that oppressed her from youth is evident when Elizabeth feels as if she has a record playing in her mind, constantly reminding her of her inferior status: “Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death. Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death” (Head 1974:46). To elaborate on van Dijk’s argument and his discussion of cognitive frameworks, when a white child is born into this society; he/she is conditioned to conform to the white people’s social identity and their social position. Thus, prior to the acquisition of knowledge and subsequent development of the child, the mere fact of his/her skin color is essential to his/her attitude and overall advantage in life. Consequently, a white child is expected to detest blacks and to treat them in a derogatory way. Elizabeth emphasizes this particular point when she exclaims:

In spite of her inability to like or to understand political ideologies, she had also lived the back-breaking life of all black people in South Africa. It was like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you. They were just born that way, hating
people, and a black man or Woman was just born to be hated. (Head 1974: 19)

This illustrates how the preconceived roles for the different people in society are determined prior to their birth – the only influencing factor here essentially is ethnicity.

3.4 Elizabeth in A Question of Power

Frantz Fanon in his theory of “The Negro and Psychopathology” showed interest in racial differences, and how these differences affect a person of color and his/her view of the world. In his investigation of the effects of oppression on the subjugated people of society, he places importance on the families in society, which he argues subsequently constitute the nation as a whole. Moreover, he claims that the white family structure is the agent of a certain system and acts as a workshop in which a person is shaped and trained for life in society. This socialization process is then transferred into the nation as a whole. As a result, a white child growing up in this society is to benefit economically, socially and politically; however, Elizabeth, who is not regarded as either white or black, finds herself in quite a complex situation in this regard.

Homi Bhabha expands on Fanon’s theory by arguing:

In order to understand the productivity of colonial power it is crucial to construct its regime of truth, not to subject its representations as a normalizing judgment. Only then does it become possible to understand the productive ambivalence of the
object of colonial discourse that ‘otherness’ which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity. (Bhabha 1994: 96)

In A Question of Power it is this theory of Fanon that can be used to explain why Elizabeth felt ostracized in her fictional world. While living with the white family, she lived like a white person, conforming to the behavior of white people during the apartheid era. However, this had negative consequences for Elizabeth as she also had black genes in her makeup which placed her in a predicament as she could not scorn black characters when they too are a part of her genetic makeup.

In addition it is not just the whites that loathed the black characters; the relationship is shown to be reciprocal as the black characters also resent the white characters for placing them in a hopeless situation in the world. “You must have suffered a lot in South Africa, he said, by way of introduction. ‘But you are not to hate white people’. ‘Why?’ she asked. Most of the Gods are born among them, he replied calmly” (Head 1974:29). This quote also supports the idea that even the black characters elevated the whites as they viewed the white characters as God, a supreme being capable of controlling the entire universe, as they are seen as capable of achieving anything they desire.

Elizabeth, while living with the white family was encouraged to discriminate against black characters; however she also felt a sense of hatred towards the white people because of their actions and of her having a black father. This attitude is apparent when she compares Dan’s oppressive manner of living to the terrible ways of the white people: “Once you stared the important power-maniac in the face you saw people, humanity, compassion, tenderness. It was as
though he had a total blank spot and only saw his power, his influence, his self” (Head 1974:19). Therefore, Elizabeth was not comfortable living as neither a white character nor a black character. Head likens the white characters to animals in A Question of Power. She compares the white characters to carrion-feeders. “What did they gain, the power people, while they lived off other people’s souls like vultures” (Head 1974:19). By using this comparison, Head is illustrating how, like vultures who feed off their prey, the white people live off the black characters, negatively instilling them with their fuelled aggression.

Elizabeth is portrayed as a character that is not mentally sound. Throughout the novel Elizabeth struggles, trying to distinguish between stark reality and the nightmarish vision of her inner world, eventually confusing the difference between the two: “She was not sure if she was awake or asleep, and often after that the dividing line between dream perception, and waking reality was to become confused”. (Head 1974:22).Elizabeth’s strange behavior results from her unsuccessful coping mechanisms, and inability to deal with racial issues in her world. Elizabeth continuously experiences trauma as a colored, and feels like an outcast. In South Africa, she had been rigidly classified “Colored”. There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality. There wasn’t any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. There were races, not people. Not all people are the same in their reactions when faced with difficulties pertaining to emotions and trauma. Some people have developed healthier coping mechanisms and can handle stressful situations more effectively than others.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth is a character that cannot cope with the traumatic events of abandonment and rejection she experiences; instead, she becomes fixated on the actual trauma experienced. This is evident when she cites: “In fact, I’m astonished to see the blue sky today. And you know what sort of world I live in? It’s midnight all the time” (Head 1974:58). For Elizabeth, this trauma
becomes inescapable and the centre of her world, as she obsesses on her racially based suffering. The fact that Elizabeth’s life is based on her disconnection to the other characters and her inner turmoil is evident in Head’s portrayal of Elizabeth as psychologically unstable, and her display of madness in the novel. According to Jacqueline Rose it was widely believed by colonialists in Africa that African women did not go mad as they were said to have not reached the level of self-awareness required to go mad. Thus, Head’s portrayal of the psychological effects on Elizabeth in the novel is meant to be seen as a reaction against the stereotypes prevalent in the society at that time, and challenges the stereotypes reinforcing the psychological trauma experienced by women of color.

The fact that Elizabeth hears voices inside her head, and lives in a world governed by these internal voices illustrates her inability to effectively navigate the circumstances in which she lives. Therefore, the continuous rules, instructions and racial slurs recited to her on a daily basis incite the paranoia she depicts. Theorists have now identified this as post-traumatic stress disorder resultant from the racial war, and the victim’s sheer helplessness in dealing with colonialism.

Another effective tool the white characters use in order to keep the black characters in their desired place in society is the way the white characters use language and speak to these characters. It is important to note that language varies according to the context in which it is used. The term “register” is used by linguists to describe the fact that the kind of language we use is affected by the context in which we use it to such an extent, that certain kinds of language usage becomes conventionally associated with similar situations. Thus, the register used by both the white and black characters in A Question of Power is influenced by the social relationships of the participants in that specific situation.
3.5 Buchi Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood

Buchi Emecheta’s feminist orientation panders more to the African position which many ordinary Africans will subscribe to, and this she does in *The Joys of Motherhood*. It is the story of Nnu Ego whose inability to give birth to a child after her first marriage leads to the various conflicts in the novel. The story is not only that of Nnu Ego but by extension that of the problems all women encounter when they experience delays in giving birth to children, the real joys of motherhood. When this happens, the African man is quick to involve himself in the practice of polygamy in his bid to procreate and prove to the world that he is a man. This is where the problems of women begin. The problem of having to hold one’s own when the sustaining interest of the husband is divided not only among his wives, those he personally married properly and those he inherited, but also among his relatives and friends.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta articulates the positive sides of African tradition as it reflects what feminism to her should be, a feminism that cherishes the invaluable contributions of both men and women in upholding the family as the nucleus of the larger society. Her own feminism does not see men as enemies. For her, a woman should not only submit to the wishes of a man as a father, she owes the obligation to do so to him as a husband. In her adulation of the African man, she says:

*How can a woman hate a husband chosen for her by her people? You are to give her children and food, she is to cook and bear the children and look after you and them. So what is there to hate? A*
woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old. He matures with age and is dignified. (Emecheta 1979: 71)

One other thing decipherable from this response which Nnaife gets following his complaint that Nnu Ego does not like his appearance, is that a woman does not always have a choice on who becomes her husband, because of the belief that the choice of elders is always a choice of wisdom. Though this may not always be the case, incidents of divorce resulting from modern marriages in which parents have little or no control have proved it to be true. In traditional African society, parents often trace the history of their in-laws families to determine whether or not they are suited for their children. However, the freedom which mainstream feminism seeks for women deprives them of this very important advantage.

In Emecheta’s view, the ideal happy marriage’ is the one in which a woman bears children and looks after them and in which the man looks after the welfare of both mother and children. But if the man, for reasons beyond his control, is unable to provide for his family the way he should, the woman comes in to play a supportive role. However, Emecheta does not really support matriarchy. She believes it is the father’s primary duty to provide for his family only that the woman could come in once in a while to fill the vacuum usually created by the man’s inability. Unfortunately, feminism with its metropolitan civilization has changed things in which men had to be the sole providers; this new setting robbed woman of her useful role.

In The Joys of Motherhood, almost all the characters at one time or another become Emecheta’s mouthpiece as she oscillates between her professed Afro-feminist ideals and the subconscious intrusion of Euro-feminist dialectics. The
voice lurking behind Nnu Ego sometimes is sophisticated and restive. At other times, it allows itself to be led by the submissive spirit of the local traditions. If Nnu ego could say, without feeling any sense of guilt, then we know that she has lost all consciousness as an African woman. But we will forgive her because she is a victim of a tactful camouflaging who maulders by fits and starts in the new image Emecheta has given her. We will only leave it to Emecheta to admit that the difficult but exhilarating socio-political challenge facing Afro-feminists today is to come out from behind the mask of ideological bondage created by the West and sustained by the rest. Being neither here nor there is not commitment as far as ideology is concerned. Yet, every writer must be committed, fully and unequivocally.

3.6 Trauma and Post-trauma

Dr Bessel van der Kolk offers an account of how traumatic experiences can damage a person’s mind, occasionally causing permanent damage to the psyche. He is an ardent pioneer and world leader in the research and treatment of trauma. He aims to inform and up skill attendees with new and effective ways of treating clients suffering multiple psychological traumas (complex trauma). With this in mind, the troubled characters of the selected Head and Buchi texts can easily be analyzed and understood. His work integrates developmental, biological, psychodynamic and interpersonal aspects of the impact of trauma and its treatment. His book *Psychological Trauma* was the first integrative text on the subject, painting the far ranging impact of trauma on the entire person and the range of therapeutic issues which need to be addressed for recovery.

The fact that black and colored characters were discriminated against by the xenophobic characters caused them to be exposed to extreme stress and trauma.
Thus, it is apparent that it is not solely the victims of apartheid who are subjected to trauma and extreme suffering; the perpetrators also exhibit symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and psychosis. Head focuses on the psychological effects on the male characters the perpetrators of gender inequality. The male characters lose perspective on their lives and families in their pursuit to make the female colored character’s lives as oppressed as possible. In the era that their African characters were created, great importance was placed on the gendered and racially differentiated distinction between human beings, to such a degree that these categories of personhood influenced every character’s economic, social and psychological well-being. Accordingly, the characters’ understanding of the African world and their knowledge of society is understood in terms of racial and gendered categories where each character’s identity is determined by these pertinent societal issues.

The black or colored person faces a difficult life with many hardships plainly because he or she is of a darker skin color. The fact that a person is of a different skin color also subjects him or her to various stereotypes created by the xenophobic characters in the text. The first common stereotype is that he or she is savage and is a danger to society; next, the black person is also placed on the primal level where they are considered to be animal-like. Another misfortune experienced by the black person is that he or she is denied an education and, if educated, it is believed that he/she will gain power and create a disturbance in the ordered society.

The xenophobic characters are also very suspicious of the black or colored characters; it is irrelevant how decent or honest a person is, he or she is always the main suspect in the event of a crime. Furthermore, even though the xenophobic characters depend entirely on the black characters for labor in their homes and in their businesses, the xenophobic characters are still inclined to view blacks or
coloreds as a burden to themselves and their society. The oppressed characters find themselves in a hopeless situation, as no matter what effort they make to obey and impress the xenophobic characters, they are always viewed as an annoyance to their “bosses”. In addition, it is important to note that it was not just the racists that loathed the oppressed characters; the relationship was reciprocal, as the oppressed characters also resented the xenophobic characters for placing them in a hopeless situation in the world. The white characters have many economic, political and social opportunities available for them to utilize, in order to better themselves in society. The black characters, on the other hand, have no such opportunities as the white characters place restrictions on them in all spheres of their lives in order to retain their own social power and wealth in the fictional societies.

Due to their diminished and politically powerless status, the black characters have no option but to accept this as a norm; it was impossible for them to resist the white characters. If they did resist, the white characters were determined to inflict further psychological and physical retribution for the insubordination. The psychological effects on the black characters are also of importance to this study. With regard to suffering and trauma, some people have developed healthier coping mechanisms and can handle stressful situations more effectively than others. Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* becomes consumed by this trauma leading to it becoming an inescapable part of her life. As a result she centers her world on the effects of the injustices of her situation in the fictional society.

It is important to reiterate that it is not only the black characters that are ill-treated and discriminated against by the white characters; Bessie Head illustrates this in the world of her colored characters that face more struggles and identity issues than the black characters. In contrast to Buchi, Head provides a different angle into the lives of the characters and their emotional and psychological issues.
Instead of focusing on the mental effect on the black characters in society, she focuses on a character, like herself, of mixed descent. In Head’s *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth, a character of mixed descent, is more adversely affected than the black characters as she cannot find her place in society. The theory of Frantz Fanon is applicable in order to explain the psychological impact on characters of mixed descent and how contact with the white world affects their identity. Head, like Buchi, also examines power issues between characters. However, she does not just portray the battle for power between the races; she goes further and pays attention to the power battle between people of similar ethnicity. The characters of mixed descent in *A Question of Power* reinforce the notion of intra-group conflict as there is conflict between those colored characters that seem to have more power than the others. She also pays attention to inter-group conflict between the races and how they are in constant competition with one another.

The women in the fictional societies of Buchi and Head place themselves in an inferior position as they perform their roles as women in a way that they are expected to act, determined by the male characters. The literature of Southern Africa underwent many changes in a period of transformation. As opposed to the previous silencing of most black Southern African writers, this period allowed these authors, especially black female authors, to narrate their experiences. Prior to this era of opportunities for black writers, the black Southern African women’s writings of the sixties to the nineties dealt with different facets of a displaced people. It was a struggle for these writers to display their texts to readers as well as to gain recognition as African writers.

At present many black writers have more freedom in their writing; however, some are still dealing with their personal struggle against the inequalities of that era. The change in literature in Southern Africa is underlined by the fact that fiction has been written in all of Africa’s official languages depicting various
African cultures. This illustrates how writers are creating texts in their mother-tongue languages in order to carry their tradition and culture through their work. In conclusion, the texts and theories discussed in this study still remain of significance today. A careful reading and scrutiny of these texts by Buchi and Head allows the reader to gain knowledge of, and experience the lives lived by these authors, and the significant impact their experiences have on their writings. Furthermore, one can actually observe the extent to which society affected writers and impacted on the creation of their texts. Engagement with the Buchi and Head texts also adds to the reader’s knowledge of the issues prevalent in an era of racial oppression, and, thereby increases the reader’s literary understanding and knowledge. The theories examined are also of importance as these encourage readers to analyze the issues faced by all Africans in the pre-democratic and post democratic society and to demonstrate how life in Southern Africa has changed. Consequently, these theories underline how individuals are the ones responsible for change in society’s attitudes. It was the people of Southern Africa that were responsible for the racism and racist ideologies in African society, thus, critical race theory and cultural studies allow individuals to reflect on how they have the power to rectify and change a racist and patriarchal society with the hope of an improved future.