Introduction

In Western societies, mainstream women writers of the twentieth century emerged alongside the idea of feminism. The great impact of their works representing the voice of the middle-class white women is undeniable. Nevertheless, closer investigations into the literary traditions in Western societies have confirmed that not only had the voices of other classes been neglected in the works of mainstream women writers, but also the voices of ethnic minorities in white societies. As a matter of fact, ethnic minorities, women among them in particular, are often relegated to an inferior position in Western societies. Worse still, their moral and cultural beliefs are customarily dismissed or misrepresented. Such unfairness is especially evident in the United States. Mainstream American literature has often relegated the coloured as ‘the inferior’. Interestingly, the African American women characters are rarely portrayed in American literature. From Jim of Huckleberry Finn to Queequeg of Moby Dick, the black characters are always on the ‘periphery’. Many of them are also liminal in appearance. The manner of portraying degraded images of women of colour seems to serve the claim of assumed purity and virtue of Euro-American women. In addition, the portrayal of coloured women leaves an impression of them as unassertive and submissive creatures. Afro-American women in American popular fiction are often portrayed as morally and sexually permissive. All things considered, the stereotypes of African American women are generally negative and discriminatory.

African American women writers attempt to ‘re-construct’ through their creative writing such a pre-conceived stereotype of the black American women. This is a logical corollary of the phenomenon of feminism, which as a theory emerged alongside the postmodern developments. The task in favour of the writers is two-fold – one, to subvert this negative ‘stereotype’ and second, to create an image of the women
in all its entirety. This is not to deny the centuries of denigration the African American women have been subjected to but to mirror the inner aspirations and the ‘nobility’ of the human endeavour encapsulated in them. Alice Melsenior Walker (born February 9, 1944) is an African American novelist, short-story writer, poet, essayist, and activist who in her literary and activist career attempts to challenge such stereotypes in her fiction. Walker’s creative vision is rooted in the economic hardship, racial terror, and folk wisdom of African American life and culture, particularly in the rural South. Her writing explores multidimensional kinships among women and embraces the redemptive power of social and political revolution. Walker began publishing her fiction and poetry during the latter years of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s. Her work, along with that of such writers as Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, however, is commonly associated with the post-1970s surge in African American women’s literature.

The case is no different from that of the women in South Africa (and Botswana). On the one hand, black women, as distinguished from the women of the ruling white elite, occupy the abysmal bottom of the social hierarchy and, ironically, the Coloured (like Bessie Head herself) and the Bushmen are even below them all. Black women, especially the Coloured and the Bushmen, took the brunt of oppression both from the white colonizers and the African natives. Women in South Africa and Botswana are disregarded first for being “women”; the Coloured for being “impure”; and the Bushmen for their way of life. South Africa and its apartheid regime is the continual symbol of oppressive colonial systems, and this makes the country of special interest to the student of colonial and post-colonial literature. Bessie Head comes from South Africa, even though she chose exile to direct oppression when she procured an exit visa for Botswana. Exit permits given often and generously by the apartheid
government to dissidents makes a return to South Africa not only impossible but illegal. Her writings are certainly a detailed account of the problems faced by a person exiled from the country of her nativity and living in the country of her chosen banishment. The problems almost invariably become curiously interesting when the exile finds herself in a country socially and culturally indistinguishable from the one she has left behind. For Head, Botswana was just such a country, very similar to the one she had left, but unaffected by the nightmare of apartheid. However, the very nature of exile forces upon the characters of her novels an apprehension and uncertainty which often determine the way the new place of domicile is viewed.

To subvert unjust stereotypes of all sorts, ethnic-minority women writers gradually started appearing, challenging the one-sidedness of mainstream American writers and reclaiming their ignored racial identity in the melting-pot society of the United States. Similarly, though to a lesser degree, the voices of the subordinated African women began to be heard in the writings of some writers such as Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ, and others. Although this research does not claim that black women's writing creates a fully new world *per se*, the works of Alice Walker and Bessie Head do interweave past and present in order to imagine a place for themselves in their respective societies. These two writers have been chosen because both of them appear to write out of their awareness of the pressing need that women of colour deserve to be “relocated” in a place better than the one they are relegated to by traditional and man-made hierarchies, in their respective societies.

Generally speaking, the writings of women of colour arises out of the creative void, using the colonizer's own language as a weapon, in an attempt to shake the white world out of its complacency and draw attention to 'some' stratum of society that 'exists' and has the right to exist according to its own terms. Alongside gender issues,
their works shed light on the essential experience of non-Western modes of consciousness that is misrepresented in the works of mainstream American and European women writers. The essential experience is closely associated with their ethnic heritages. Accordingly, ideas of both race and gender are frequently employed in their works. In that respect, this dissertation examines fictional works of Alice Walker, who represents the voice of Afro-American women, and by Bessie Head, who represents the African parallel. By representing the misrepresented or ‘missing-represented’, and by giving voice to the voiceless, the revolutionary works of Walker and Head help reclaim Afro-Americans’ sense of lost history and identity, particularly women’s, and African women’s self-esteem. Both intercultural and intra-cultural conflicts are revealed through the study of their family histories written in a fairly autobiographical mode.

Literary scholars have been relating the works of black women writers to contemporary feminist critical theories in (re-)defining women’s status in both African and white patriarchal societies. Alice Walker’s works are closely related to issues of race and gender. As a political activist, Walker worked for the Civil Rights Movement in Liberty County, Georgia and a number of the Civil Rights Movement projects in Mississippi. It is in Georgia that Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* is based. Many of her works do focus directly or indirectly on black women’s lives and survival mentalities in the Old South, as well as the complex social network of oppression they encounter. While her portrayal of these forces in black women’s lives reveals the patriarchal politics that are inherent in black (masculinist) praxis of resistance, her works also interrogate the class and racial myopia of early feminist analyses of women’s oppression.
The aim of this introduction is not to provide biographical details of Alice Walker and Bessie Head, but it is inevitable to refer to certain events and activities in their lives which are echoed in their novels and which prove how both writers were aware of the entrapment of black women in the American and South African societies. This awareness spurred them to endeavour to effect changes and ameliorate the status of women in their respective societies. Some of their novels unmistakably carry autobiographical touches, indicating that both writers suffered one way or another from the same oppressive forces suppressing all women of colour and both attempted to offer ways of subverting the oppressive mechanisms through their literary endeavours.

Alice Walker and Bessie Head have been chosen for this study because they are among the few English-language South African and Afro-American writers whose works best depict the female character and her sense of self. Most scholars of English literature have lived more with Shakespeare, Austen and Brontë sisters, but two women writers are fascinating due to the fact that their perceptions of what it is to be a woman is so disparate and their complex depiction of woman’s location is worth researching.

The origin of most of the pain and suffering the novels of Walker and Head reflect can be traced to the social circumstances that women have to endure. Depression, hopelessness, exhaustion and fear grow out of hunger and overwork, domestic violence, racist and sexist stereotyping, entrapment, and economic and social dependence. The novels of Walker and Head integrate the fundamental aspects of society and show that racial and sexist oppression can cause tremendous pressure on women and can sometimes drive them to taking extreme measures. Despite their diverse cultural and historical perspectives, Alice Walker and Bessie Head portray minority women striving to create new possibilities for themselves by confronting the ways in which racial and sexual oppression has shaped their personal and ethnic
histories. It is evidenced through the novels of both writers that African society and Western colonialism combined to enslave African women; similarly, black males along with white Americans combined to enslave African American woman. Therefore, the novels of both the writers focus on non-white women struggling to relocate themselves in the context of their history as women and as colonized and oppressed people.

The study of American women writers has in some ways been linked to and/or influenced firstly by the progress made by African American feminists within the Civil Rights Movement, and secondly the reactions towards black women writers within the academy, given that African women writers have had to endure these same exclusions and the contempt of a predominantly racist and sexist literary context. In South Africa, on the other hand, the Pretoria Government, through repressive laws, police and informants, reduced blacks to the state of animals as they tried to break them and coerce them into accepting an inferior status/identity based on skin colour.

If feminism, in its Western flavour, was unable to fully account for the experiences of black women, it would have been necessary, then, to find other terminologies that could carry the weight of those experiences. It is in this regard that Alice Walker’s “womanism” intervenes to make an important contribution. Walker with her construction of the concept of womanism and its varied meanings made an attempt to situate the black woman in history and culture and at the same time rescue her from the negative and inaccurate stereotypes that mask her in the American society. Walker inscribes the black woman as knowing/thinking subject who is always in pursuit of knowledge. She highlights the black woman’s agency, strength, capability and independence. Bessie Head too depicts these aspects in her novels. Opposed to the gender separation that bedevils feminism, womanism presents an alternative for black
women by framing their survival in the context of the survival of their community where the fate of women and men are inextricably linked.

As a novelist, Walker has published seven novels, all of which place more emphasis on the inner workings of African American life than on the relationships between blacks and whites; yet, she also stresses that the impact of the white man’s hegemony on the lives of the blacks is of a detrimental effect. Her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), details the sorrows and redemption of a rural black family trapped in a multigenerational cycle of violence and economic dependency. This novel traces three generations of a Southern sharecropping family, the Copelands. Spanning from the 1920’s to the 1950’s, the novel concentrates on the tension between systematic societal oppression which attempts to destroy the individual will, and the possibility that an individual can uphold personal responsibility under such extreme social conditions. Walker demonstrates her theme through a graphic portrayal of the effects of the Southern racist system and the false gender definitions on the black family. The Copeland men have no access to the definition of maleness in their society – that of power. They vent their anger and frustration on their wives, who have been socialized to conform to the definition of woman as compliant and subordinate wives and childbearers. The result is a family that almost destroys itself.

Walker’s second novel, *Meridian* (1976) is, in one sense, a continuation of her first. Here she fictionalizes a young Civil Rights Movement activist’s coming-of-age and her radical conceptualization of motherhood. The novel is set primarily during the period of the Civil Rights Movement, which is foreshadowed at the end of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Like her first novel, *Meridian* traces the generations of a black Southern family, but this time through the mothers rather than the fathers. Although *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is concerned with the way racism and
patriarchy affect black fathers and, then, mothers, *Meridian* explores the effects of these ideologies on black mothers in particular. *Meridian* is both a celebration of black mothers and a critique of the ideology of motherhood.

Walker’s masterpiece, *The Color Purple* (1982), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1983,¹ has generated the most public attention as a book and as a major motion picture directed by Steven Spielberg in 1985. Narrated through the voice of Celie, *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel — a work structured through a series of letters. Celie, the protagonist, writes about the misery of childhood incest, physical abuse, and loneliness in her “letters to God.” After being repeatedly raped by her stepfather, Celie is forced to marry a widowed farmer with three children. Yet her deepest hopes are finally realized with the help of a loving community of women, including her husband’s mistress, Shug Avery, and Celie’s sister, Nettie. Set in rural Georgia during segregation, *The Color Purple* brings components of nineteenth-century slave autobiography and sentimental fiction together with a confessional narrative of sexual awakening. Walker’s harshest critics have condemned her portrayal of black men in the novel as ‘male-bashing’, but others praise her forthright depiction of taboo subjects and her clear rendering of folk idiom and dialect.

Scholars often link *The Color Purple* with Walker’s next two novels to form a trilogy. Celie’s granddaughter, Fanny, is a major character in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), and one of the main characters of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) is Tashi, the African wife of Celie’s son. *The Temple of My Familiar* focuses on the development of four characters: Arveyda, Carlotta, Suwelo, and Fanny. These individuals are spiritually fragmented at the beginning of the novel; but by shedding the destructive aspects of their lives — anger, sexism, classism, and attachment to
unsatisfying careers – and by getting in touch with their past, they achieve some balance and peace by the end of the novel. In *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* (1998), strong sexual and religious themes intersect in a tale narrated from both sides of the grave. In this novel, nothing is a taboo, including sexuality. The novel features a family of African American anthropologists who journey to Mexico to study the lifestyle of a tribe that descended from former black slaves and Native Americans, the Mundo. The story brings to focus the complexities of the father-daughter relationship and delineates how society defines this relationship: Magdalena and Susannah, the daughters of black anthropologists who move their family to Mexico to study the Mundo tribe under the guise of preaching, undergo dramatic changes in terms of evolution of personality and expression of identity especially under the pressure imposed by the patriarchal Christian expectations of the father, Robinson.

Finally, in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004) the main character, Kate, who is a wealthy author and self-proclaimed seeker, embarks on a literal and spiritual journey to find a way to accept the aging process. She is dissatisfied with the state of the world, her life, and her relationship with her latest lover, Yolo. Walker says that Kate’s search is necessary because the territory is largely “unexplored,” and “[i]f we are lucky and are able to follow our inner directives, we find our fifties to be a perfect time to explore this previously unknown territory that is in fact the entry way to the next half of our lives.” During her journey through the Colorado River, Kate comes across a shaman’s retreat in the Amazon. Along the way, she samples the stories of her fellow seekers and helps them along the path to healing. The journey enables her to recollect her past and move on, inexorably, to the future.

The other writer chosen for this study is the South African-born Botswana writer Bessie Head (originally, Bessie Amelia Emery, July 6, 1937 - April 17, 1986),
who is widely acclaimed as one of Africa’s most renowned women writers. Being a child of an illicit union between a ‘white’ mother and a ‘black’ father (under apartheid classification), Head suffered rejection and alienation from an early age. When her mother was found to be pregnant, she was committed to a mental hospital and deemed insane. Head was born in the asylum but was sent to live with foster parents and, later, was placed in the care of white missionaries. Her mother committed suicide when Head was still a young girl. These circumstances, in particular, had precipitated a poignant effect on her life, and her fiction as well. Critically hailed as one of the brightest voices in African literature at the time of her death (from hepatitis) in Serowe, Botswana, Bessie Head and her oeuvre have remained the subject of ongoing scholarly discussion to this day. Head was not only a fine writer but she also came to literary prominence at a time and place of great significance in the history of southern Africa.

As her publications brought recognition and some long-sought relief from financial worry, Head’s perseverance, single-minded vision, and creativity allowed her to claim a stable, integrated personal and professional identity within a shifting and often hostile environment. Her work casts a distinctly feminine perspective on the ills of societal injustice and the psychological costs of alienation. However, the vicissitudes of life that Head had to pass through did not result in a downright pessimist: she, according to Virginia Uzoma Ola, “refuses to sacrifice optimism to dry cynicism” and simultaneously appears in her fiction as “an idealist and realist, a feminist and utopian writer, a historian, story-teller and ethnographer,” and, above all, “an insatiable and unshakeable optimist, who never wavered in her belief in the ability of human beings to create a better world than the one they live in” (qtd in Beard 2000: 194). Head’s vision “includes a keen search for human, social, sexual and political values within a
harmonious social order”: a major writing legacy created by a “crusader for sexual and social justice” who was rooted in a belief in transcendence (ibid.).

The writings of Head cover many aspects of her personal experiences as a racially mixed person growing up without a family in South Africa. Her works deal with issues of discrimination, refugees, racialism, African history, poverty, and interpersonal relationships. A hint of autobiography is present in much of Head’s writing, which often deals with poor and emotionally abused black women struggling against both racist and sexist discrimination. Head’s variety of characters includes young and old, male and female: this variety allows her to approach the same themes from different perspectives, but the focus is always on the struggles and hardships of life in postcolonial Africa and on the idea of what it is to be a woman there. A novelist, short story writer, and historian, Head’s major works are set in Serowe, a village in Botswana. In addition to her short stories and a book of history, Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind (1981), she wrote three novels: When Rain Clouds Gather, Maru, and A Question of Power.

When Rain Clouds Gather (1968), her first novel, is set in an arid part of northern Botswana, to which Makhaya Maseko, a Zulu and refugee from South Africa, has journeyed to find a more peaceful world in Golema Mmidi in Botswana. Although the protagonist is male, the story reveals a lot about how women are treated or looked at, and how African women play a central role in the economic set-up of the society, which is based mainly on agriculture. Apparently, Head in her novels still acknowledges the supremacy of male domination in Africa, but she also highlights that this androsupremacy is built upon gyno-suffering. In this novel, Head presents her female characters as they begin their journey of liberation. The story reveals that African women are more educated than their male counterparts; yet, their personal
growth does not keep pace with their learning; they “remained docile and inferior” (2). Male domination and male superiority stand at opposite ends of the spectrum that includes female inferiority and female liberation from subjugation. It is not surprising, then, that agriculture becomes a rallying point for female liberation in Head’s novels, *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power*.

Head’s second novel, *Maru*, published in 1971, depicts issues of slavery, racism and man-woman relationship. Though the novel is eponymous, with a male hero, it is in fact the story of a woman, Margaret Cadmore, who, though from an inferior tribe, asserts her right to exist on equal terms in a society which has no modus vivendi for her since she belongs to the Masarwa or Bushmen tribe. With its unmistakable romantic and utopian elements, the novel offers a narrative balance by exposing four main characters to whom the change of the whole system is attributed. *Maru* is therefore a story about racism against a particular social group and how racism is authorized by what it is possible to say about the group in the first instance, i.e. how the group is represented in discourse. It also provides insights into the problems faced by black women who are raised in a colonialist educational system as they, having obtained higher education, face various difficulties in adjusting to the demands of their indigenous traditions. Colonized peoples’ mental colonization through English language education, British values, and culture result in states of exclusion and alienation. Such alienations are experienced in conditions of mental exile within one’s own culture to which, given one’s education, one ‘un-belongs’, and the result is, to use Fanon’s ‘black-skin-white-masks’ concept, a “mask” hiding behind it a traumatic personality in the horns of the dilemma of whom/where to belong to.

In *A Question of Power* (1974), the heroine, Elizabeth, a refugee, suffers a mental and ‘spiritual’ breakdown; the evolving sanity of the heroine comes as a result
of destroying the concepts of power and religion in several ways. The heroine’s inflexible will and determination enable her to pass through her spiritual as well as material crises and she manages to overcome racist and sexist prejudices and achieves economic independence and psychological and spiritual “balance”. Being Head’s most personal and least political novel, this novel not only deals with the theme of power but also explores the universal themes of fear (indirectly as power struggle) and love. In this somewhat autobiographical novel, love and power are likened to commodities that are given or taken away at will. The person or group with the most power, or persistence, grants (exploits) either love or power or both. One purpose of the novel is to juxtapose love/power with sustainer/destroyer.

In this novel the narration overrides the attempt by the reader to subject the text to scrutiny. Madness is not only the protagonist Elizabeth’s weakness but also the narrator’s power. In fact, the narration embodies madness. Keeping the reader spellbound, the narration powerfully twists and turns back on itself and finally ends with a satisfactory resolution of the peaceful Elizabeth: “as she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging” (206). This novel questions and explores the ideas that “power-maniacs” abuse the “soft-shuffling, loosely-knit personalities” of the world (12); that the world is without “humility and equality” in matters of love (54); and that many women, like Elizabeth, are driven to madness by humanity’s destructiveness (especially from men).

With an aim of showing how both Alice Walker and Bessie Head attempted to relocate women in the social paradigm, the thesis is divided into five chapters. While each of the first four chapters looks at this point from a specific perspective, supported by views and opinions drawn from various schools of thought and works of several
scholars, the final chapter encompasses the summary of and the conclusions drawn from each chapter. The layout of the dissertation is as follows:

Chapter I: Gendered Stereotypes of Women in the Novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head

This chapter reveals how both Alice Walker and Bessie Head regard stereotyping of women in terms of gender roles as a means for the suppression of women, and how the female characters in these writers’ fiction struggle to form their identities despite the many-sided oppression. Two novels by Alice Walker (The Color Purple and Meridian) and a novel by Bessie Head (A Question of Power) are studied in detail showing that the impact of gender stereotypes on women dictates on them how to behave/act in certain predetermined ways and how any deviation from the norms results in hazardous consequences, thus depriving black women from establishing a subject position and circumscribing their growth. Such stereotypical norms are seen as contrived means to exploit black women in both the US and the South African contexts.

Taking into consideration the many interfering threads of converging ideas to substantiate the argument, this chapter draws mainly on feminism, black feminism, womanism, post-colonialism and political theory. The argument traces the evolution of womanism and black feminism as a reaction to the ignorance of Western feminism (due to stereotypical forms of overgeneralization, not innocent of racism) to the problems and particularities of women of colour. Concepts such as racism and sexism are also discussed here. Moreover, this chapter holds a major part of the theoretical foundation that sustains the whole study.

Chapter II: The Politics of Motherhood in the Novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head
Referring to the controversy pertaining to the rationale of the concept of mothering in women’s lives and formation of female identities, this chapter deals at length with how Alice Walker and Bessie Head picture the mother-figure in their novels, namely *The Color Purple*, *The Third Life of Grange Copland* and *Meridian* by the former and *A Question of Power*, *Maru* and *When the Rain Clouds Gather* by the latter. Mothering and motherhood are investigated in these novels with reference to feminist, womanist and psychoanalytic perspectives. The mother-daughter relation is seen here as a major factor in the formation of the subjectivity of the female character. In addition, this chapter also throws light on the idea of “good enough mothering” with reference to the aforementioned novels. The concept of Mythical Black Mother, though relevant here, is discussed in the next chapter with reference to *Meridian* since this concept has a direct link to the psychological trauma of the heroine.

**Chapter III: The Psychological Impact of Race and Gender on Black Women: Walker’s *Meridian* and Head’s *A Question of Power***

This chapter draws extensively on psychoanalysis, feminism, postcolonialism and theories of race and gender. It shows how racial and sexist and colonialist oppression of women of colour can bring about indelible impact on their psyches, thus severely affecting their relation not only with other members of the society but also with their psychological integrity and whole being. The focus is placed on two protagonists, Walker’s Meridian (in *Meridian*) and Head’s Elizabeth (in *A Question of Power*). The causes of the psychological trauma of both the characters are investigated with regard to the socio-political and historical circumstances which the protagonists
have to tackle in order for them to restore their mental health and psychological balance.

Chapter IV: The Body as a Site of Oppression in the Novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head

Out of the awareness of the importance of the body for any investigation of the (re)formation of the female subjectivity, this chapter begins by briefly exposing different views regarding the female body in feminist theory. Special emphasis is laid on the treatment of this issue with regard to gender, sex and race. Although almost all the novels of both writers are considered here, the focus of discussion is drawn more towards specific novels of both writers: Walker’s *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and Head’s *A Question of Power* and *Maru*.

Chapter IV: Conclusion

This chapter is consolidates various issues interrogated in the study. A compare-and-contrast method of exposition is used here to highlight the conclusions drawn from the previous chapters. Based on the premise that both Walker and Head aimed mainly to liberate women of colour from racial, sexist, socio-political and cultural discrimination, and to show them various possible ways to restore the integrity of their own selves and identities and establish a subject position free of unjust prejudices, this chapter sums up the views of both the writers, taking into consideration the fact that each of them belongs to a different geographical location (but still have a common denominator).
The musical stage adaptation of *The Color Purple* premiered at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta in 2004 and opened on Broadway in 2005.


3 In her novel *A Question of Power*, the reader comes across so many similarities between the life of the protagonist and that of the author that one may think that this novel is purely autobiographical.