CHAPTER I

GENDERED STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN
IN THE NOVELS OF

ALICE WALKER AND BESSIE HEAD
CHAPTER I
Gendered Stereotypes of Women

in the Novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head

“A woman is a female to the extent she feels herself as such”. 

This chapter explores how both Alice Walker and Bessie Head problematize the suppression of women through stereotyping them in terms of gender roles, and how the female characters in their fiction struggle to reformulate and relocate their identities despite the multi-faceted oppression they endure. For centuries, the impact of gender stereotypes on women is that they have been expected to behave/act in certain ways in order to rise up to the standards of stereotypes. When a woman consciously or unconsciously tries to deviate from these unattainable standards she ends up with physical and emotional harm inflicted on her. Often she does not realize or acknowledge this because she tends to mould herself to fit these stereotypes as a matter of course. Stereotypes were devised to justify the manifold exploitation of women in general, and black women in particular. Unlike the white women, who were viewed as pious, prudish and domestic, black women were considered sensual and promiscuous, an idea used to sanction the rape of African American women. The conditions under which these slave women lived only confirm these stereotypes.

The twentieth century has seen an unprecedented upsurge in women’s resistance to collective male authority both in theory and praxis. The concerted efforts of women to change their situation and their enquiry into the rationale of gendered identities have been strengthened immensely by the formulations of women writers. The twentieth century provided a fertile ground for women writers to redefine the nature, role and status of women in society. To explore this purpose in this chapter, three novels by
Alice Walker and Bessie Head are selected: *The Color Purple* and *Meridian* by Alice Walker, and *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head. The fact that this theme is central to almost all the novels by these writers is crystal-clear, and the selection of these novels is based on the fact that these novels deal with this theme in a much wider perspective than the others.

This chapter opens with a brief glance at the evolution and tenets of black feminism, and since the theme hinges on the comparison between two cultural contexts – the United States and southern Africa – the research resorts to some postcolonial feminist concepts, particularly with reference to Bessie Head’s novels in order to support the argument. The novels are then discussed, each in the light and idiom of its respective theory, meanwhile indicating the points of convergence and the areas of divergence. In other words, the discussion of Alice Walker’s works relies heavily on black feminism and activism, and how the female characters reformulate the social paradigm from this perspective; Bessie Head’s novel is best interpreted if viewed from a black feminist perspective with reference to postcolonialist studies. This chapter highlights how both the writers enable their female characters to realize their potential, and how this attempt by Walker and Head can be seen as a source of inspiration for readers as well as writers.

**The Evolution and Tenets of Black Feminism**

In much of the early literature on feminist ethics and theology there was a tendency to use the term ‘woman’ in a generic or universal sense. Rita Felski defines feminist literature in a broad sense as “encompass[ing] all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women’s subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category, however this is expressed” (*Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 14; my emphasis) and suggests that the political roots of feminism lie in the struggle for equal and
political rights for women (12). The implication of this is that whenever feminists spoke or wrote of women’s experience they meant the experiences of all women, and that all women essentially had the same experiences. Part of the problem here was the implication that since all women’s experiences were the same there was no need to attempt at establishing justice between women’s groups. As far as the US is concerned, however, Afro-Americans have suffered the consequences of almost four hundred years of marginalization and struggled with various forms of oppression.

Apparently, for Afro-Americans the most insidious form of oppression has been racism (and more recently attention has also been focused on classism and sexism). Solomos and Back state that:

unitary or simplistic definitions of racism become hard to sustain. However, it seems clear that contemporary racisms share some central features. They attempt to fix human social groups in terms of natural properties of belonging within particular political and geographical contexts. (23)

That is to say, the genetic features of a specific group of people is seen to carry with it cultural differences and social significance, often leading to a “… claim of the natural superiority of one identifiable human population, group or race over another.” (Steven Rose: qtd in Rattansi 94), which in turn gives rise to prejudice and discrimination towards those races considered inferior. According to George M. Fredrickson (5), “The word ‘racism’ first came into common usage in the 1930s when a new word was required to describe the theories on which the Nazis based their persecution of the Jews”. To him (6), “racism … is not merely an attitude or set of beliefs; it also expresses itself in the practices, institutions, and structures that a sense of deep difference justifies or validates”.
Further, for purposes of this dissertation, rather than focusing only on the forces of production and reproduction (Marxist approach), the term *class* is used in its sociological sense and is concerned with such issues as under or unemployment, lack of education and associated problems which have combined to place large numbers of blacks in poverty. In this regard, Afro-American women have, in unison with their *brothers*, initiated and participated in a variety of social change movements in efforts to seek redress to the problems of racism and classism. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent to many black women that while these movements have been significant (although obviously not totally successful) in the struggle to overcome racism and to a lesser extent classism, they have not adequately addressed the peculiar forms of oppression that are of intimate concern to them.\(^1\)

In addition to the problems of race and class, Afro-American women have also found themselves the victims of a third form of oppression, that of sexism, i.e. in Vetterling-Braggin’s words “the practices whereby someone foregrounds gender when it is not the most salient feature” (qtd in Sara Mills 2003: 1). “Sexism”, says Sara Mills, “is a particular case where in interaction or in texts gender is drawn attention to and where it makes a difference for participants” (2003: 25). Patricia Hill Collins opines that “if racism and sexism are deeply intertwined, racism can *never* be solved without seeing and challenging sexism. African American men and women both are affected by racism, but in gender-specific ways” (2004: 5).\(^2\)

The current chapter investigates these three forms of oppression which stand as hindrances for Afro-American women in their way to assert themselves and voice their dissent. As black women have become more aware of the insidious and complex nature of triple oppression, many have searched for serious analyses of their concerns especially in the literature that purports to seek change or transformation of societies
Activist women have also made serious efforts to have their specific concerns addressed by the various social change organizations and movements through incorporation into their goals and programmes. Because they have largely been unsuccessful in the above endeavours, many black women felt the need to develop a new perspective and even a new movement that is sympathetic to their concerns. This perspective – later came to be known as black feminism – evolved, especially through the latter part of the 1960s till the present day, out of black women’s developing consciousness of the triple oppression they endured. It is also a reflection and an extension of their commitment to the eradication of oppression and ultimately to the establishment of a just society. It is, additionally, a protest against their marginalization not only by the larger society but also in the literature and the practices of movements and organizations that purport to seek the transformation of societies. In reaction to such marginalization, black feminism evinces an active commitment to struggle against the multiple oppressions that black women face and this is articulated through the perspectives of an African American woman’s cultural heritage. It serves to highlight the deficiencies of most of the literature that has hitherto conspicuously ignored both the problems of black women and their critical role in the effort to establish just societies.

The Black Feminist Movement grew out of, and in response to, the Black Liberation Movement (an umbrella term covering several movements, i.e. the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, the Black Panthers, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and others) and the Women’s Movement. The Black Liberation Movement, though ostensibly for the liberation of the black race, was in word and deed for the liberation of the black male. “Race was extremely sexualized in
the rhetoric of the movement. Freedom was equated with manhood and the freedom of blacks with the redemption of black masculinity” ("But Some of Us Are Brave: A History of Black Feminism in the United States").

3 Thus, black women faced constant sexism in the Black Liberation Movement. In an effort to meet the needs of black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the Women’s Movement and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement, the Black Feminist Movement was formed. Though it had been gathering momentum for some time, Black Feminist Movement marks its “birth” with the 1973 founding of the National Black Feminist Organization in New York. The purpose of the movement was to develop theory which could adequately address the way race, gender, and class were interconnected in their lives and to act against racist, sexist, and classist discrimination.

The idea that coloured women have been shown to play second fiddle to their male counterpart is persistent even in the revolutionary literature of authors such as Franz Fanon. In his books, The Wretched of the Earth and Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon concentrated on the role of revolutionary violence in the transformation of the victims of colonisation into men. Although he praised the role of women in the Algerian revolution in his book, Studies in a Dying Colonialism, the analysis of their role was imbued with a subtle sexism. In essence, he was concerned with the creation of the black macho man who would take his ‘rightful’ place as both head of his family and head of his nation.

Moreover, the feminist literature concentrated on the issue of patriarchy and sexism in the development of their theories. Although Western feminists recognized that patriarchy was a world-wide phenomenon that had a negative impact on the lives of women, the residue of ‘the personal is political’ (Hanisch 1969) slogan continued to permeate their work. Perhaps because of their failure to recognize, in many cases, their
own racism and classism, they were unable or unwilling to admit that women of colour
and poor women had a different conceptualization of the problem and, therefore, a
different agenda for change. While patriarchy has certainly had an impact on the lives
of black women, it was only one of at least three intricately interwoven oppressions that
needed to be eradicated. Once again, the marginalization process continued to operate
as women of colour and poor women were generally informed about theories and
strategies rather than being made to their development. They failed to comprehend the
reality of their lives, and were thus ineffective in bringing about the much needed
transformation of societies.

The Marxist feminist literature grew out of a different tradition from the
American liberal feminist perspective and often sought to analyze the role of women in
terms of production and reproduction. These feminists’ use of class theory to analyze
sexism was a welcome addition to feminist literature because it recognized that gender
was not the sole factor that had an impact on the lives of women. However, they also
suffered from the problem of either ignoring racism or subsuming it as a sub-heading
under class, thereby failing to capture the essence of the triple oppression experienced
by women of colour. Not only do black women (or women of colour) and poor women
appear to be marginalized in the various bodies of literature, including those by
Western feminists, but their incorporation into what would normally be considered as
the appropriate social movements also appears to suffer, in different respects, from
marginalization as well. For example, the American Civil Rights Movement of the
1950s and 60s was conspicuous in its lack of women as national leaders or
spokespersons. The practice within these movements was to relegate women to
relatively invisible positions as the ‘foot soldiers’ in the war against racism and
discrimination. Belinda Robnett (205) argues that
Perhaps the answer lies in our willingness as Black women to want Black men to have the out-front positions. Perhaps it lies in our willingness to work in the “free spaces.” Perhaps it lies in our willingness to wait while we focus on racism in society. Perhaps it lies in our willingness not to rock the boat. While the civil rights movement could not have succeeded without our willingness to put gender concerns aside, it has not served us well to continue this pattern.

As such, they were most often responsible for running the offices, typing, making coffee, and providing food and bodies for mass demonstrations. As the movement became more radical in the latter part of the 1960s and 70s and cries of Black Power and Black Nationalism became more resonant, black women were encouraged by black men to play an even more secondary role in these organizations as they moved to consolidate an incipient black patriarchy. Black women were exhorted to have babies for the revolution and to be submissive to black males so that they could retrieve their ‘lost manhood’ – i.e. become the leaders of the community, the family and indeed the ‘revolution.’ This was similar to the way Fanon had perceived the role of African men in their revolutionary struggles. In fact, many Afro-American men were attracted to the Fanon doctrine of revolutionary activity.  

Broadly speaking, the history of black women in the United States dates back to the time of the forced migration of millions of African women from the interiors of the west coast of Africa. They were transported as human cargo across the Atlantic Ocean to plantations in the West Indies. The enslaved Africans were then sold in the European colonies. In this context, the plight of black women was terrible. “Despite their common bondage”, say Shahida and Chakranarayan (21), “men and women did not experience slavery the same way. Slave women experienced sexual exploitation, childbearing, motherhood, and slaveholder’s sexism. Slave women were exploited for their reproduction as well as productive capacities.”
In Africa, this process of marginalization took an interesting turn, particularly in the violent revolutionary struggles that were waged to overturn colonialism. There, the revolutionaries were forced to address the issue of women's rights in order to be successful in their efforts to mobilize the entire population for warfare. Marxist theory had established precedence for the analysis of the role of women in society and for the goal of securing their full and equal participation in all institutions and aspects of society. Thus, Amilcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau, Nelson and Winnie Mandela and Oliver Tambo in South Africa, as well as revolutionaries in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Angola have all felt it necessary to at least make some attempt to analyze the problems of women and to incorporate equality of the sexes to ensure the success of their revolutionary efforts.

It was becoming increasingly apparent that neither the ‘appropriate’ social change literature nor movements were seriously concerned about the complex of problems so devastating to black women. Dependency and socialist theorists concentrated on class-based analyses while feminist literature focused on patriarchy, or class and patriarchy. The primary concern of the Civil Rights movement was the eradication of race-based discrimination, and even the African ‘socialist’ revolutionary literature and activism were primarily concerned with the eradication of colonialism, although some mention was made of women’s problems. Because of this lack of attention of black women's needs, many Afro-American and African women began speaking out and writing about issues of specific concern to themselves. They attempted to retrieve the concerns of black women from the margin and bring them into the centre of academic debate by calling for the development of a new black feminist theory.
The term ‘Black Feminism’ has been used often throughout the earlier part of this chapter in an effort to provide background information and to indicate the growing debate surrounding the subject. Black feminist literary criticism offers a framework for identifying the common social and aesthetic problems of authors who attempt to fashion a literature of cultural identity in the midst of racial/sexual oppression. It incorporates political analysis that makes it easy to comprehend and appreciate the achievements black women like Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Jenny Sharpe and others have made in establishing artistic and literary traditions of any sort, and to understand their qualities and sensibilities. Such understanding requires a consciousness of the oppression these artists faced daily in a society infested with institutionalized and violent hatred for both their black skins and their female bodies. Developing and maintaining this consciousness is a basic tenet of black feminism.

At this point, it may be helpful to first show what black feminism is not and then provide a working definition of the concept. Black feminism is not short-sighted in either thinking or planning: it is not purely “feminist” in either the Western or the socialist sense of the word. Because it does not limit itself to issues that concern only women, many of its proponents hesitate to define themselves as feminists or even “black feminists” and do, in fact, prefer to be called Womanists. Class is an issue of concern to black feminism, but it does not espouse a strictly Marxist or Socialist ideology. In other words, it does not limit itself to economic issues of production and reproduction nor does it attempt to explain and/or understand the world purely through class analysis. While racism is considered by black feminism to be a critical social problem, it does not view the alleviation of racism as a panacea. There is a sense that, although important, the Civil Rights Movement did not alleviate all the major problems
that black women encountered and that more social changes in the areas of class and
gender relations must occur in order to transform societies.

Developing out of the unique conditions created by oppression, black feminism
should first and foremost be viewed as a complex mechanism adapted by black women
to resist oppression and to survive in hostile environments. Its complexity is derived
from the necessity of devising tactics which best respond to the intricacies of triple or
multiple oppression in which – depending upon the circumstances – race, gender, class
oppression, or any combination of the three, can assume paramount importance in the
lives of black women. Thus, black feminism is characterized by its flexibility in that
black women ultimately define the injustices most injurious to themselves within their
specific environments which, in turn, determine how they will choose to respond to the
problems they encounter. Black feminism seeks to acknowledge and praise the sexual
power of black women while recognizing a history of sexual violence. This perspective
is often used as a means for analysing black women’s literature, as it marks the place
where race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect.  

As the name implies, black feminism is decidedly pro-woman; that is, it views
women as strong, creative, active, intelligent, independent, productive, and sexual
beings who have the unquestioned right to self-determination and self-development.
What makes black feminism (and womanism) unique and serves to differentiate it from
other more well publicized forms of feminism (i.e. white, Western liberal feminism or
socialist feminism), is that it is also equally vested in the quest for empowerment of all
people. Alice Walker in her book, In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, emphasizes this
point in her definition of ‘Womanist’, a term which incorporates the concept of black
feminism. She characterizes the ‘Womanist’ in part as: “Committed to survival and
This commitment to survival and wholeness of all people develops out of a traditional African worldview which, while recognizing the right to individuality, acknowledges and emphasizes the interdependence and connectedness of all people (including those who have moved into the realm of the ancestors and those yet to be born). Thus, black feminists or Womanists are not only characterized by an immense sense of responsibility to fully develop their own potentials as human beings, but to seeing that their children, their extended families and, indeed, their communities and nations are also afforded the requisite opportunities to fully develop their own human potentialities. Womanism’s uniqueness hinges on the idea that it does not necessarily imply any political position or value system other than the honouring of black women’s strength and experiences. Because it recognizes that women are survivors in a world that is oppressive on multiple platforms, womanism seeks to celebrate the ways in which women negotiate these oppressions in their individual lives.

A womanist is someone who loves women and appreciates women’s culture and power as something that is incorporated into the world as a whole. Womanism addresses the racist and classist aspects of white feminism and actively opposes separatist ideologies. It includes the word man, recognizing that men are an integral part of women’s lives as their children, lovers, fathers, brothers, and other family members. Womanism accounts for the ways in which black women support and empower black men, and serves as a tool for understanding the black women’s relationship to men as different from the white women.

Black feminism has been defined within an American context, although brief references have been made to an African connection. While Afro-American women
have been struggling with the conceptualization of black feminism, some African women including Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Filomina Chioma Steady, and Buchi Emechta, for example, have also been persistent in their efforts to define an African version of feminism. African women as well as many Afro-American women appear to be quite comfortable with the term ‘womanist’. It places more emphasis on the exploration of past and present connections between Africa and the black diaspora, and on the social and political activities of black women seeking to fight oppression and bring about meaningful social changes in the lives of all black people.

In support of the first point, Ogunyemi (2006), in a review of literature written by contemporary black women, has expanded upon Walker’s definition of the term ‘womanist.’ She views womanism as a “widespread and distinctive praxis” and argues that the difference between the feminist and womanist perspective is that the feminist is specifically concerned with eradicating patriarchy and/or establishing utopia away from the patriarchy. African and Afro-American women, “as a group, are distinct from white feminists because of their race, because they have experienced the past and present subjugation of the black population along with present day subtle (and not so subtle) control exercised over them by the alien, Western culture” (Ogunyemi 22). Thus, the womanist must not only be conscious of and concerned about sexual issues; she must also “incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy” (21). Ogunyemi (25) goes on to argue that:

Black women are not limited to issues defined by their femaleness but attempt to tackle questions raised by their humanity. Thus, the womanist vision is racially conscious in its underscoring of the positive aspects of Black life. The politics of the womanist is unique in its racial-sexual ramifications; it is more complex than white sexual politics, for it
addresses more directly the ultimate question relating to power: how do we share equitably the world’s wealth and concomitant power among the races and between the sexes?

Generally speaking, black feminism is a phenomenon that has developed out of multiple jeopardy, which seeks to provide black women with avenues of protest as they struggle to gain control over their own (and their families’ and communities’) destinies and to fulfil their potentials. Black feminism, in both its Afro-American and African contexts, seems to be imbued with a sense of pragmatism, however. That is to say, many black women have immersed themselves in social activism that seeks to identify their problems and their needs, and then to devise and implement strategies to provide relief from these conditions that they have defined as injurious. In this struggle to eradicate oppression, the activities black women will choose either to initiate or to participate in will to a large extent be determined by their perceptions of their environments. It can be suggested that, wherever it is found, black feminism is distinguished by certain recognizable characteristics which include but are not limited to: firstly, recognition of the intrinsic worth of black women as human beings, and, thus, their right and ability to define themselves and to choose the ways they deem best suitable to develop their potentials; and secondly, recognition of interdependence and connectedness and, thus, its emphasis on black women’s acceptance of responsibility for their children, their families and their communities.

To summarise, then, black feminist literature and theory can be said to revolve around the following tenets: (1) redefining/revising/reversing and resisting (stereotypes, beauty standards, motherhood, family, womanhood, art, education, epistemology); (2) subjectivity and voice (self-discovery, self-actualization, protagonist narrating her own story, self-identity, agency); (3) intersectionality of race, class and gender (e.g. raising
issues concerning the multiple oppression of race, class, and gender); (4) importance of relationships and family (friends, men, mother-daughter, community, family); (5) sexuality (in its various forms); (6) political action/awareness (social action, politics, historical events going on in society); and (7) Confirming Africa’s influence (folk culture, oral tradition).

**Postcolonialist Feminism**

For the purpose of discussing the gendered stereotypes of women, the study focuses on the concepts of identity, agency, and performativity in order to show how both Alice Walker and Bessie Head attempt to “relocate” and uplift women in the social paradigm. As a matter of fact, there is no single and unified narrative of western literary theory that can be applied to the constructions of identity and agency that this chapter explores, and therefore it is necessary to be selective in choosing the theorists whose works are found to be germane and who engender the debates in ways that are considered productive. The theoretical framework is constructed here using ideas from the writings of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Chandra Mohanty, Luce Irigaray, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, to name but the primary influences on my thinking: these writers view identity, agency, hybridity and performativity as inseparable from political struggle, and each also examines, or is relevant to, what Butler calls “the difficult … terrain of community” (*Bodies That Matter* 242).

In an attempt to lend greater specificity to the primary material under investigation here, the theoretical traditions that are outlined below within Afro-American and southern African contexts are situated. The concepts of identity that are distinctly Afro-American and/or South African are minutely examined; for example, the study looks at the construction of ‘coloured’ identities and the way certain individuals
are conceived by slavery and its aftermaths on the one hand, and the apartheid state’s classification of black, white and coloured, on the other. The current study also pays specific attention to the fictional works under discussion as they relate to other local influences, such as the Civil Rights Movement in the US (1955–1968) and the BCM (Black Consciousness Movement, of the 1960s and 1970s) in southern Africa. Thus, this chapter outlines and addresses questions pertinent to the theoretical framework of the dissertation before going on to discuss gendered stereotypes in three novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head – *The Color Purple* and *Meridian* by the former and *A Question of Power* by the latter. The study begins by investigating various conceptualizations of identity, hybridity, agency, and performativity prevalent in contemporary postcolonial and feminist theory. These theories are then situated within specifically Afro-American and southern African milieus, examining both their productive capacities and their limitations in this context.

For example, Luce Irigaray is correct in her assertion in her book *This Sex Which Is Not One*\(^1\) that in western theoretical discourses the subject is always already masculine. Not only that, but from a postcolonialist perspective the subject is always already white. How do universal theories of patriarchy need to be rethought in order to avoid the consequences of a western feminist epistemology or, extrapolating from Said, a feminist cultural imperialism? If, as the rhetoric of deconstructionist practice often suggests, the subject is a fiction, alienated rather than constructed, what happens to the political goal of elaborating a set of positions in which black women can recognize themselves? What happens to agency? What happens to the political, moral, and social responsibilities of the subject, reader, and author?\(^1\) In this dissertation, the analysis examines how the works of Walker and Head may be deployed to reformulate forms of feminism that do not account for racialised subjectivities.
It is generally accepted in feminist theory that American, British, and French feminisms are markedly different from one another. Anglo-American feminists are concerned with the equality of women and men; French feminists are concerned with the celebration of difference; and British feminists arguably remain more materialist in their approach to social change. Yet, the disjunction between Western feminisms and third world, black or postcolonial feminisms is even greater. Gayatri Spivak points out that Western feminism has an investment, at least historically, in the marginalization of colonised women, at times instrumentalizing them as the Other in order to consolidate the white, feminine self. Spivak contends that imperialism plays a key role in the cultural representation of European identities and that literature contributes to this. She asserts that “‘if these ‘facts’ were remembered, not only in the study of British literature but in the study of the literatures of the European colonising cultures of the great age of Imperialism, we would produce a narrative, in literary history, of the ‘worlding’ of what is now called ‘the Third World’” (“Three Women’s Texts” 262). To support this claim, Spivak emphasizes that the western feminist valuation of a British text such as *Jane Eyre* fails to situate Charlotte Bronte’s feminist project in its historical context. Jane’s emergence as a proto-feminist and autonomous individual neglects, Spivak argues, the role of Bertha Mason in the constitution of the metropolitan woman’s identity (270).

Similarly, she argues that ‘international feminism’ is a discourse more about the west than the third world, for western feminists who study third world women fulfil, according to Spivak, an often patronizing mission of intervention on behalf of their disadvantaged sisters: western feminists are caught “in a web of information retrieval inspired at best by: ‘what can I do for them?’” (*In Other Worlds* 135). Spivak’s point is taken here to mean that, in relation to third world women, “[t]he academic feminist
must learn to learn from them, to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be corrected by our superior theory and enlightened compassion” (In Other Worlds 135). Here, the aim of this dissertation is to show how the voices of black women whether in the US or in southern Africa struggle to be heard in feminist and postcolonial discourses, from which they have been elided for so long. As Spivak summarises, the question is “not merely who am I? But who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?” (In Other Worlds 112).

In recognizing the intersecting discourses of patriarchy, feminism, and imperialism, Spivak reveals the necessity of a complex analysis of the many, and often conflicting, subject positions that women negotiate. The historical links between imperialism and patriarchy that Jenny Sharpe documents in relation to England and India suggest that gender complicates the positioning of a range of colonised subjects. Sharpe (1997:12) points out that gender is only “one category of difference for designating the relation between coloniser and colonised”: this entails the necessity to examine the simultaneous effects of race and gender on black women in southern Africa.

Similarly, there is a tendency in western feminism to group various women from various developing or third world countries in a way that ignores their differences and produces a kind of false homogeneity, a tendency that the focus here on black women in the US and southern Africa specifically seeks to avoid. That is to say, in contesting the use of terms such as ‘women of Africa’ or ‘third world women,’ Chandra Mohanty argues that such overdetermined phrases assume broadly collective identities. She writes:
What is problematical about this kind of use of “women” as a group, as a stable category of analysis, is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socioeconomic political groups within particular local contexts, this analytical move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities. Power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men) and people who do not (read: women). Men exploit, women are exploited. Such simplistic formulations are both historically reductive; they are also ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppressions. All they do is reinforce binary divisions between men and women. (2003/2006: 31)

Western feminism’s historic blindness, or what Chandra Mohanty calls “marginalization or ghettoization” (qtd in Rendell 67), to how race inflects women’s identities compromises its all-inclusive representativeness and limits its usefulness in terms of political coalition:

[I]t seems evident that Western feminists alone become the true “subjects”.... Third world women, on the other hand, never rise above their generality and their “object” status … the application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category to women in the third world colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks. (Mohanty 1984: 351)
Consequently, it is no wonder that many African and Afro-American women writers and academics express ambivalence, if not outright hostility, towards western conceptions of feminism that they feel have little to do with their cultural, social, and political goals.

Moreover, the multiple subjectivities that black women inhabit in southern Africa must be critically repositioned in order to prevent the subsuming of one category of difference or identity to another. Both race and gender are visual markers of identity that are distinct, if intersecting and overlapping; they cannot be collapsed under the conceptual umbrella of marginalization. Similarly, both racial and gender categories are constructed, and the challenge is to articulate a subjectivity that is inflected by race and gender while still acknowledging that these ideologies are construed by virtue of the body through representation. In order to highlight how black women construct subject positions, it is necessary to pay attention to the body, because imperialist discourse has been both insidious and persuasive in its construction of the colonised subject as an inscribed object of knowledge. Elizabeth Grosz argues that the body is never a passive object on which various discourses and regimes of power are played out: if the body is the site of knowledge-power, it is also a site of resistance, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways.

The problem that arises is how to avoid essentialist constructions of race and gender while recognizing their impact on subject formation. Spivak accepts, in relation to the Subaltern Studies group’s attempt to reclaim a subaltern subjectivity, “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (In Other Worlds, 205). Yet, unlike the Subaltern Studies group, Spivak argues for a strategy that moves from retrieving subaltern consciousness to charting subject positions, what she
calls “‘I’-spots,” arguing for a recognition of a multiplicity of intersecting political, gender, and economic discursive pressures (243). It is obvious that Spivak contends that “we must of course remind ourselves, our positivist feminist colleagues in charge of creating the discipline of women’s studies, and our anxious students, that essentialism is a trap” (89). Yet, she argues that in particular historical situations, for specific moments, the concept of strategic essentialism may be invoked as a mobilizing force to effect material change, even if this results in what she characterizes as a loss of “theoretical purity” (1990: 12). She attempts to explain the distinction between a belief in essentialism and the theoretical invocation of strategic essentialism in relation to the term ‘third world’:

If the ‘third world’ is used as a mobilizing slogan for the developing nations, that’s fine, but that is rather different from essentialism. That is in response to specific policies of exploitation. In the arenas where this language is seriously used, each country comes asserting its difference. They really do know it’s strategic. That is a strategy that changes moment to moment, and they in fact come asserting their differences as they use the mobilized unity to do some specific thing. (1993: 13)

As it appears, Spivak nowhere articulates a belief in the humanist subject; indeed she has a conception of the subject as decentred as a way of preventing fundamentalist politics. The self or subject is not, for Spivak, innate, but constructed discursively:

A subject-effect can be briefly plotted as follows: that which seems to operate as a subject may be part of an immense discontinuous network (‘text’ in the general sense) of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, language, and so on ... Different knottings
and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous
determinations which are themselves dependent upon myriad
circumstances, produce the effect of an operating subject. (1988: 204)

Spivak rejects all definitions of identity which are fixed in essentialist conceptions of
origin or belonging, partially because any notion of a pure or original form of
postcolonial identity neglects to account for the role of neo-colonialism in the
formation of these subjectivities. But she suggests that the idea of a subaltern or
postcolonial consciousness is a necessary “theoretical fiction” that enables a critique of
dominant models of colonial historiography (1990: 148). More to the point here, the
conception of a subject position that black women may occupy enables a consideration
of agency. Although Spivak warns of the dangers of constructing “a monolithic
collectivity of ‘women’ in the list of the oppressed whose unfractured subjectivity
allows them to speak for themselves,” it seems equally dangerous to view, in this case,
Afro-American and black southern African women as incapable of articulating a voice
or achieving self-representation (1993: 73). To do so would be to ignore the very
writing of this dissertation itself.

With reference to southern Africa, subject positions which are strategic, rather
than reducible to biological factors such as race or sex, may be deployed in order to
overcome the objectification of both the exotic African primitive – such as the
Khoikhoi, more typically known by the denigrating epithet of ‘bushmen’ – and of black
women, whose subjectivities are either elided completely or overwhelmingly
sexualised. Somehow similar circumstances engulfed black women in the US, where
they suffered from slavery and objectification for hundreds of years. Spivak’s concept
of strategic essentialism can be used theoretically in order to foreground difference for
political purposes, in this case the establishment of subject positions that women of
colour in America and southern Africa may inhabit, even if only temporarily, in order to effect agency and overcome their degrading representation by others.

The reinscription and self-representation of the body is a performative strategy in the fictional texts discussed here. In *The Color Purple*, for example, Celie’s body (as well as sense of individuality) passes through ordeals first at the hands of her stepfather and then her force-wedded husband, and she reclaims her self-expression only after coming in close contact with Shug Avery. In a climactic revelation, particularly when asked why she had started addressing her sister Nettie in her letters instead of God, Celie explains her decision to Nettie in this letter (173):

Dear Nettie,

I don’t write to God no more, I write to you. What happen to God, ast Shug?... What God do for me? I ast.... Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown. She say, Miss Celie, You better hush. God might hear you. Let ‘im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you.

Here is an implication that Celie’s self-esteem and her reaction to the oppressive forces have gone to such a limit that she has not only rejected male dominance but also the form of “god” imposed on her by white/male oppressors. Likewise, in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*, for instance, Elizabeth’s body is invaded to detrimental effect first by Dan and then by Sello. In addition, the Medusa figure attempts to denigrate Elizabeth by demonstrating the “bliss” that she could have but does not (44):

Medusa was smiling. She had some top secret information to impart to Elizabeth. It was about her vagina. Without any bother for decencies she sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation
travelled out of her towards Elizabeth. It enveloped Elizabeth from head to toe like a slow, deep, sensuous bomb. It was like falling into deep, warm waters, lazily raising one hand and resting in a heaven of bliss. Then she looked at Elizabeth and smiled, a mocking, superior smile: ‘You haven’t got anything near that, have you?’

The identity issue for the blacks, whether in the United States or South Africa, is very significant, for identities in these countries are often hybridised and slip in and out of traditional categories used to define identity such as racial, political, and economic affiliation. In other words, the validity of whether the parameters of the identities of non-Western women should be defined by skin colour, by language, by geography, by nation, or by political affinity is therefore questionable. Theorists, such as Homi Bhabha, conceptualize ‘hybrid realities’ as empowering and subversive, both positive and negative, offering both positive and negative readings of the ramifications of hybridised identities, a factor that alerts readers to some of the questions that merit redress in contemporary postcolonial theory.

The most influential theoretical analysis of the hybrid subject as occupying a ‘liminal space’ between the cultures of the coloniser and the colonised may currently be found in Bhabha’s work, although his reading of hybridity is not left unchallenged by theorists such as Benita Parry: it is a concept that is under dispute in postcolonial studies. Unlike Frantz Fanon, who emphasizes that mimics are dislocated subjects who fluctuate between the subject positions of the coloniser and colonised, identifying fully with neither of them, Bhabha stresses the empowering aspects of hybridity, its ability to disrupt authority. Yet it is important to remember that Bhabha’s theoretical project is in part to work against what he, along with innumerable other critics, perceives to be Edward Said’s omission of the colonised’s potential agency and
resistance in his overemphasis on the all-encompassing and totalising aspects of
Orientalism. Bhabha contests what he conceptualizes as Orientalism’s emphasis on
“the intentionality and unidirectionality of colonial power” (Location of Culture 72) in
its unifying assumption that “power and discourse are possessed entirely by the
coloniser” (qtd in Huddart 27). Instead, he attempts to save the liberating
counterhegemonic potential of the colonised subject from its “indeterminacy”, so the
subject “can be deeply engaged in the postcolonial struggle against dominant relations
of power and knowledge” (33). Bhabha’s analysis of relations between coloniser and
colonised stresses the mutual construction of their subjectivities: the resulting mimicry
and ambivalence that this interaction produces, he argues, become strategies of
resistance.

Although Bhabha emphasizes that hybridity is an effect of colonial discourse
rather than a strategy of resistance developed autonomously by those attempting to
reject their colonial subjugation – and that it is a function of reading or a discursive
rather than material action – he celebrates its potential to reverse the structures of
domination in the colonial context. He (1994: 112) asserts that

[hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity
through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the
necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination
and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of
colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of
subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of
power.

Bhabha’s hybridity can be interpreted as a reading strategy rather than a material
analysis of the coloniser/colonised relationship because of the implicit placement of the
reader in the above passage: it is the reader who watches how things go in the text. In this sense, hybridity as a strategy of resistance is produced not only by the colonised’s potential agency, but also by the reader, who is the viewer of this relationship. Bhabha offers a strategy of reading that produces resistance. This is reinforced in the essay from which this passage is taken, for “Signs Taken for Wonders” begins with an analysis of the reception of the Bible, a text that Bhabha defines as “an insignia of colonial authority,” in early nineteenth-century India (102). Bhabha’s exposition of hybridity as subversive, then, emphasizes discursive rather than material relationships.

Bhabha contends that the hybridity inherent in enunciation produces two strategies of resistance: ambivalence and mimicry. He suggests that the “ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention” (112). For Bhabha, the ambivalence between what the colonised subject is and what the coloniser desires him/her to be (“almost the same but not quite”) points to the crucial space that colonial discourse opens for the formation of the colonised subject (86). The colonial stereotype of the colonised, for example, is ambivalent in its betrayal of an insecurity and vulnerability even as it objectifies and dominates: it is a complex rather than simple representation.

Similarly, mimicry is “constructed around an ambivalence,” that, in order to work as an effective strategy of resistance, “must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (86). Mimicry is a strategy of colonial power and knowledge that is emblematic of a desire for an approved, revised Other, but it is ambivalent because it requires both a similarity and dissimilarity: it relies on resemblance, on the colonised becoming the coloniser, but always remaining different and below. Yet it is unclear from where the pressure of resistance emanates in Bhabha’s work. If, as in hybridity,
the resistance purportedly engendered by mimicry and ambivalence is a reading strategy – and, as such, resistance is read into the encounter between the coloniser and the colonised – then it seems that the colonised subject may not be exerting agency.\textsuperscript{20} The coloniser’s “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, \textit{as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite}” (86) allows the colonised to disturb and disrupt the authority of colonial discourse through mimicry, because a sudden awareness of inauthenticity, of authority’s constructed and assumed guise, is the menace of mimicry (86).

Bhabha continues to argue that mimicry will inevitably become mockery as it can appear to parody what it mimics, and the “excess or slippage produced by the \textit{ambivalence} of mimicry (almost the same, \textit{but not quite}) does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence” (86). The effects of ambivalence and mimicry, both engendered by the hybridised subject, on the coloniser are paranoia and a feeling of persecution.\textsuperscript{21} Bhabha suggests that “hybridity represents that ambivalent ‘turn’ of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority” (113). Resistance, in the shape of an anxiety spread throughout authority, is, for Bhabha, built into the application of colonial power. As a strategy of resistance, mimicry challenges the authority of the coloniser by emphasizing the inevitable agency of the colonised that the ambivalence of colonial discourse produces. Significantly, Bhabha recognizes this agency only as a discursive, rather than material, form of resistance, for again the ‘turn’ of the subject into an object of classification occurs in the mind of the reader.

Bhabha focuses on an autonomous position for the colonised subject within the confines of colonial discourse, which is his stated project. He allows that mimicry “is
the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (86). This statement acknowledges how hybridity may be enforced on the colonised subject at the expense of his/her own coherent subjectivity. This ‘double articulation’ recognizes the potential for hybridity to be a sign of colonial power, rather than a sign of the colonised’s resistance to it. Yet Bhabha focuses on the subversive aspects of mimicry and hybridity. He emphasizes the autonomy of hybridity, as an effect of discursive enunciation, to challenge and resist the purportedly hegemonic discourse of colonialism. Bhabha’s assertions – that neither the coloniser nor the colonised exists independently of one another, and that colonial identities are unstable, agonistic, and constantly in flux – are politically useful because they challenge colonialist claims to a unified self, and highlight the nuances inherent in the construction of hybridised subjectivities. Yet, he underscores their ability to reverse the “structures of domination in the colonial situation” (Young 23) at the potential expense of emphasizing the agency of the hybridised subject too readily.22

In contrast to Bhabha, other theorists attempt to stress the specificities that need to be recognized and addressed when examining the subjectivities of colonised subjects. Some of the primary challenges to Bhabha’s conceptualization of hybridity come from critics such as Chandra Mohanty, Benita Parry, and Aijaz Ahmad, each of whom criticises the idealist structure of the colonial encounter that Bhabha emphasizes at the expense of materialist historical inquiry.23 Generally, there is a very real difference that must be acknowledged in postcolonial criticism between a conscious and politically motivated concern with the deliberate disruption of homogeneity and domination, and the unconscious or forced process by which hybridised subjectivities come into being.24 We must recognize the intricacies of colonial contact with all of its
nuances, disjunctions, and inherent violence. In other words, it is essential to recognize the differences between those hybridised identities that are imposed and those that are adopted, for if we venerate all hybrid identities we risk assuming that all hybrid subjects are able to exercise agency, which is emphatically not the case. It is to be noted, however, that the universalisation (of Bhabha) of the potentially subversive aspects of mimicry and ambivalence as strategies of resistance has limitations despite their political utility to the hybridised subject.\(^{25}\)

In that respect, Luce Irigaray’s conception of mimicry and masquerade is useful to an examination of texts such as the novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head because she accounts for how subjectivities are formed within unequal power relationships. Although Irigaray addresses mimicry and masquerade primarily to conceptualize a theoretical basis for “speaking (as) woman,” (qtd in Stone 22) in her monumental work, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), her tackling of the problems inherent in female articulation is relevant here. Irigaray usefully distinguishes between mimicry and masquerade; masquerade is the non-parodic assumption of a role that engenders an alienated or false subjectivity: She asserts that “the masquerade … is what women do ... in order to participate in man’s desire, but at the price of renouncing their own” (qtd in Butler *Gender Trouble*: 60). In contrast, mimicry allows for a deliberate assumption of a role.\(^{26}\) Irigaray’s characterization of feminine mimicry risks the same universalisms and overemphasis on agency as Bhabha’s notion of colonial mimicry does. Yet the tension that arises from the interplay between masquerade and mimicry, in *This Sex Which is Not One* in particular, offers a useful starting point for a theoretical examination of the nuances of, and power relations inherent to, the formation of hybridised subjectivities. Irigaray emphasizes that mimicry is an interim strategy for dealing with the realm of discourse in which the male speaking subject posited is
granted an unconditional selfhood against which all else is defined as in some way lacking; it enables women to uncover the mechanisms by which discourse exploits them.

Judith Butler underscores the parodic elements of mimicry. For Butler, mimicry potentially stages the parodic performance of an identity, which exposes the constructedness of the self. In terms of gender theory, Butler takes issue with the notion that a feminist politics requires an essential feminine identity, or features that women share as women and which give them common interests and goals. In contrast, for Butler the fundamental categories of identity are cultural and social productions, the result of political cooperation rather than a condition of its possibility. Butler proposes that we consider gender as performative, in the sense that it is not what one is, but rather what one does. However, Butler recognizes that gender is not a choice; rather, to be a subject at all is to be gendered. One cannot be a person without being gendered: “Subjected to gender but subjectivated by gender, the ‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves” (Bodies 7). The performativity of gender is not a singular act, but rather what Butler calls the “reiterative and citational practice,” or the compulsory repetition of gender norms that animate and constrain the gendered subject, but which are also the resources from which resistance, subversions, and displacements are forged (Bodies 2).

To be a subject at all is to be given the assignment of repeating gender norms, but, as Butler contends, it is an assignment that we never cease to carry out according to expectation so that we never cease to inhabit the gender norms or ideals we are compelled to approximate. In that gap, in the different ways of carrying out gender’s assignment, lie possibilities for resistance and change. Yet, Butler is careful to
emphasize that “parody by itself is not subversive,” (Gender Trouble 176) and recognizes that “there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (176-7). In this context, it is such cultural hegemony that inhibits the female characters in the novels of Head and Walker from achieving a subject position, and it is only through putting up resistance that these characters evolve.

For example, Walker’s novel The Color Purple focuses mainly on the ways and methods female characters struggle and search for self-definition. It is a novel in which instead of simply portraying a stereotyped image of a poor, illiterate young black girl, Walker gives voice to the ones who have been silenced, either by racism or by sexism. The reception of novel created diverse reactions amongst critics ranging from high admiration to stark rejection: “Although the novel won public and critical acclaim, the book seemed heretical to some African American male critics who resented its depiction of African American men in the novel…. Many reviewers condemn her portrayals of African American men as unnecessarily negative” (Su-lin Yu 584). Seodial Deena regards this novel as Walker’s “first major and full attack on patriarchal domination within the black community itself, and her revolution has emerged as a unique decolonization of traditional love” where “traditional sources of love [are replaced] with liberal sources and [Walker] still communicates the idea that love is the redeeming factor” (107-8). Here, Walker introduces her readers to an alternative to the patriarchal familial structure, and in so doing, she not only assigns new roles for women in the social paradigm but also provides another definition of the term community through her development of women’s relationships, artistry, spirituality, and the connection to ancestral past.
Walker deftly depicts the vicissitudes of the life of the heroine, Celie, (and, within that, some other female characters as well) in a language befitting the social, intellectual, emotional and psychological circumstances surrounding Celie’s intense suffering and eventual evolutionary emancipation. Most of the female characters Walker has chosen are oppressed, uneducated and completely deprived and abused by their families. Although these women characters are first portrayed as unable to control the oppressive circumstances around them, Walker gives them opportunities to explore growth and change. Celie, her sister Nettie, her lover Shug Avery, and her step-daughter-in-law Sofia represent a very good example of this kind of exploration.

Through Celie, Walker offers a social critique of the harsh treatment of women inside the African American patriarchy by illustrating the predicament of a defenceless black woman. At the beginning of the novel, Celie appears deadened with sexual violence committed by her step-father and seems to have accepted her worthlessness as a matter of fact. She has been victimized by her stepfather who repeatedly raped her and later gave away the two children she had given birth to. Later, her step-father (Alfonso) marries her off (in what appears similar to cattle or slave purchase deal) to a man (Mr.____, or Albert), a powerful male figure whose “unarticulated name suggests a fearful effacement of personality too dangerous to reveal” (Sinha 49) and who assigns her the status of no more than a slave and sex object.

The opening lines of *The Color Purple* effectively introduce the importance of language (inscription), or that of silence, in fourteen-year-old Celie’s family. Understanding the dialect used by Celie in her private letters to God can help to comprehend not only the limits that define her boundaries but also Celie’s progression from speechlessness towards articulation as she fulfils her need for self-expression, a fulfilment which ultimately leads to her revolt against Mr.____ (last symbolic barrack of
male domination in her life) and her courageous establishment of a new family. Alternating in content, in length, in function, and in time of composition, the letters in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, provide a personal outlook and a flexible method of narration that – despite her step-father’s prohibition “You better not tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (3) – produce a triumph of storytelling. He has constantly told Celie it was the love he had not been given by her mother, so she had to do what he told her. Celie proclaims: “He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say you gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t” (1). To Celie, God is her first audience; Nettie, Celie’s younger sister, is her second. Thus, Celie begins her story in her letters to God, using a dialect that creates multiple impressions at the same time, of a girl who is typically southerner (thus adding to the credibility of the character in terms of place, age and intellectual level) and of the oral nature of her story. Although she remained silent about the repeated rape by her ‘Pa’ to protect her mother (who is getting “sicker and sicker”) and, later, her younger sister Nettie, Celie cannot share her trauma of rape with her mother. Even when her children are taken away from her, she watches helplessly. After her marriage to Albert, a widower with four children, Celie remains abused as a slave and is mistreated by her husband and step-children: “I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve…. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts” (14). At this stage of Celie’s life, one can observe that her innocence to perceive the nature of the aggressive male politics and her inability to figure a way out have contributed to her silence and suffering.

Right from the beginning, although Celie may appear to the reader at this stage to completely succumb to her ‘fate’, it is certain that the potential for rebellion is dormant inside her: the fact that she starts to write letters stands as a symbol of resistance to the silencing policy imposed on her by her step-father. Besides, Celie
seems too burdened with her trauma that she wants to share the heavy secret, but since she cannot tell anyone, she resorts to God. It is through these letters that we come to know of Celie’s story, and it is also through them and the evolution of their language that the progress of Celie appears to the reader gradually. Again, these letters reveal all that readers need to know about other characters and about the socio-political circumstances in the South of the US. Later on, Celie’s refusal to change her accent and insistence on using it – “What I care? I ast. I’m happy” (194) – not only enables the reader to track the development of the character’s consciousness, but the reader can now see it clearly as a strategy of resistance, a proof of subjectivity and agency, and a gesture to indicate her self-esteem as evident in the final parts of the novel. According to Fanon, “[t]o speak . . . means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (Black Skins, White Masks 17-18), and here one can interpret Celie’s rejection to accept the white culture as a strategy of resistance to the colonising hegemonies of patriarchy and/or white domination. One can also view Celie’s writing – in the viewpoint of de Beauvoir and Kristeva – as a strategy of inscribing the female “I” and as a message to all oppressed women to document their lives and break the shackles of suppression.

As seen in her letters, Celie’s development of self passes through several stages and under the influence of some other women characters. Initially, Celie’s letters to God indicate her influence by the traditional view of Christianity, from which she revolts under the influence of Shug and later develops a pantheist attitude towards the end of the novel. The second stage of Celie’s evolution of self is the stage of recognition of oppression, engendered by observing Sofia’s defensive attitude towards men and life in such racist, sexist society. Additionally, the Celie-Nettie correspondence, right before the third stage (that of rebellion or declaration of
resistance), forms a sort of alliance and attachment that leads finally to a family reunion. Barbara Christian explains this accomplishment: “Through act, word, or dream, they naturally seek to be spontaneously themselves. In order to defend the selves they know they are, they must hold to what is difficult, often wishing, however, that they were not so compelled. Like all natural things, they must have themselves – even in conflict” (34). Under the influence of Shug Avery, Celie reaches the third stage of her development of self by revolting against Albert’s oppression, accusing him of hiding her sister’s letters and deciding to desert him. This stage is later followed by a transformed self where Celie is free of male influence, economically as well as sexually, and has an independent house and business – this transformation is marked by her last letter where she addresses God, stars, trees, sky, peoples: “Dear Everything. Dear God” (259).

Using the epistolary form as the method of narration adds depth to what might otherwise become a melodramatic plot. The letters skilfully re-invent and re-envision the events by shuffling their chronological order (an order unlike the nonlinear structure of Meridian) and assembling different conversations which seem to have happened simultaneously. The letters themselves encompass and interconnect the characters in alternating voices. Celie and Nettie shape themselves before our eyes, helping us to understand a grief that stretches over thirty years. The cause of Celie’s grief lies in her need for her sister and her inability to reach her or her children. Although this grief burdens Celie, she is still able to show her spiritual strength throughout her struggle. For instance, as she yearns to see her long-lost sister and children, she indirectly gains strength to keep striving. By reading Celie’s letters, one understands her battle for intellectual, economic, and artistic self-fulfilment. Here, the dialect Celie uses is a kind of mask and a revelation of her attempts to intellectual self-definition.
Celie feels that she has always had the knowledge that she has a guardian whom she calls God to protect her, ever since her stepfather’s prohibition, “You better not never tell nobody” (3). Her spiritual guardian is similar to Meridian’s spiritual guardian which she finds in the church. This guardian helps Celie set morals for herself because she keeps all of her problems inside herself. Celie talks with God, i.e. an implied receiver of the letters and listener to her ordeal helping her to understand that she is important and that at least God can listen and give her a sense of hope. Celie reveals this hope in reference to her children: “She ast me bout the first one whose it is? I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say” (3). This hope helps Celie morally and gives her a better perspective on her life in that she can at least give her children a heavenly father. Moreover, Celie’s spirituality seems to serve yet another dimension, i.e. strengthening her identity. Carolyn Shaw (349) maintains: “African American spiritualism can be marked as an origin story that reinforces the identity of this oppressed group within the racist United States”.

Although Celie can talk with God in her own intellectual language, she also receives moral support as her letters become emotively personal when she gains a human response from Nettie. Celie learns through the letters that the man who had raped and beaten her for several years and sired her two illegitimate children is only a stepfather and not her biological father: that these children are the same ones who have been adopted by Nettie’s new family and taken to Africa (168). This knowledge from Nettie’s letters helps relieve tension and frustration for Celie as she tells her stepfather: “She wrote me that you ain’t our real Pa. Well, he say. So now you know” (164). With this information, Celie looks back at the rapings and beatings from her stepfather, Alphonso, and recognizes them as mere sex, thus alleviating the traumatic effect of incest. This assists her endeavour for self-definition. For, had it been otherwise, Celie
would have carried the burden of incest throughout her lifetime, which consequently
would have remained a stumbling block in her growth to self-actualisation.

Furthermore, Celie is better able to implement her search for intellectual expression when she moves from passively addressing a benign God to addressing a human being directly. The letters give Celie more knowledge about Nettie and what she has faced in Africa during the years of their separation. She also learns about herself and understands how she appears to others, even what she can become. Without the letters, Celie’s physical femininity and her intellectual humility would have made her both invisible and silent: “You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman ... you nothing at all” (187). The letters from Nettie have also conveyed Celie’s emotions so well, and have shown such warmth and support that Celie can at last say defiantly to Albert, “Nettie and my children coming soon ... all of us together gonna whip your ass” (180). These emotions that Celie has striven to express give her the power to affirm her own existence and to announce to herself and the world: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly ... a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here” (187). Thus, Celie’s strong will and determination to appreciate her emotions which she can now direct outwardly (like Mem did when she bought her home in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*) enable her to keep striving to improve herself economically and artistically.

In fact, Celie’s artistic abilities appear early in the novel, i.e. while making the quilt, a symbol used very often by Walker to indicate several meanings, such as African heritage, women’s unity, the social network of society, women’s artistry, etc. Another creative knack Celie demonstrates is her gift for homemaking (similar to that of Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*). She always keeps a nice house especially when company comes. Celie’s sisters-in-law tell her: “Celine, they say. One thing for sure. You keep a clean house” (20). Celie also shows this love for order in church, for she
cleans and keeps everything tidy for the preacher. These creative instances again allow Celie to demonstrate her desire to develop an artistic self.

The endeavour for survival and achievement of agency is illustrated when Celie stops being subservient to Albert and begins to make, to wear, and finally to sell pants, hence achieving economic independence and exercising her artistic skills. She becomes able to ‘perform’ for herself – in a Judith Butler’s sense – and to be what she desires to be irrespective of other’s ‘gaze’ – in the Foucauldian sense. The fact that she has something to do and can overshadow her husband, both economically and artistically, strengthens her quest even more. The great demand for Celie’s products (191-193) helps develop her creative powers and secures her financially. Thus, through the interrelationship between women in the novel, Celie is able to break away from the male domination, even reconcile with her abusive husband, realize her identity, and achieve oneness with the universe around her.

The struggle of women to attain selfhood and realize their identity in The Color Purple is also exemplified by Nettie, Celie’s younger sister, who keeps striving to survive intellectually and artistically. When she runs away from her father’s house (to escape from his sexual advances) she goes to stay with Celie and her husband, who also tries to exploit her sexually and, rejected, he evicts her out of his house and beats and humiliates Celie – through this episode gender bias and oppression of women emerges as a powerful theme of the novel as the powerless women are being suppressed by equally powerless men. Adopted later by a black missionary family, Nettie goes to Africa with them and has an opportunity to understand the African culture and her “own people”. Her experience with the Olinka people in Africa reveals that women in Africa too are treated as second rate humans. The Olinkas treat their wives like slaves, and refuse to educate their daughters because, to them, “[a] girl is nothing to herself;
only to her husband can she become something” (140). Through the Olinka representing African life, Walker throws light on the plantation system and colonial process. Nettie becomes a first-hand witness to the process of colonisation, a process in which she and the other black missionaries unwittingly participate. Nettie’s travel to Africa enables her also to trace the origins of Afro-Americans – a point considered a prerequisite by Walker for the African Americans in order to develop their identity: they should know their past in order to understand their present and ameliorate their future. Walker here is successful in establishing institutional, historical and ideological connections between philanthropy and colonialism.

According to Barbara Christian, the intelligence of Nettie helps the reader understand the two distinctly different backgrounds of the sisters: “In contrast to Celie’s letters, Nettie’s letters to Celie from Africa, where she is a missionary, are written in standard English. The letters not only provide a contrast in style, they expand the novel’s scope” (1993: 94). In this contrast in the different dialects of the two sisters, a search for realization in Nettie’s intellectual language unfolds. One can see that struggling in an intelligent as well as economical manner has helped Nettie to appreciate the happy life she has in Africa with her new family. She stays with Samuel’s family (the family that adopted her) who have secured her good life and education. Nettie learns the advantage of education from her new family who have taken her into their home to help with their other two adopted children and with teaching the Olinka people. Thus, she has obtained good education and is financially stable.

Since Nettie has been educated and is able to make her attempts at self-definition in an intelligent way, she leaves behind the dialectal English from her past – her ambivalence is in the terms of Bhabha’s hybridity a strategy of resistance to help in
liberating women. Nettie’s appetite for more knowledge comes as she continues to find information on her heritage. Nettie writes:

Well, I read and I read until I thought my eyes would fall out. I read where the Africans sold us because they loved money more than their own sisters and brothers. How we came to America in ships. How we were made to work. I hadn’t realized I was so ignorant, Celie. The little I know about my own self wouldn’t have filled a thimble! (119)

When Nettie’s letters are finally opened and read, many years after the sisters’ separation, it is the educated language of Nettie that must be translated to Celie, not the dialectal language that Celie has incorporated. Celie vividly recounts not only the joy of meeting Nettie again but also her astonishment at the new self Nettie has created with her new language. Celie recounts her reading of the letters: “What with being shock, crying and blowing my nose and trying to puzzle out words us don’t know, it took a long time to read just the first two or three letters” (129). When Nettie finally returns to her, Celie bridges the gap by allowing Nettie’s standard language to permeate her world: “Speak a little funny but us getting use to it” (261).

Besides, Nettie’s struggle for intellectual self is also vividly seen through her values and self-pride. For instance, she has had the determination to succeed in spite of her separation from her family. Visiting different lands and countries and learning about different kinds of people with her new family have all contributed to her knowledge of various cultures. Nettie’s acquaintance with other cultures, either through travel or education, contributes to her social advantages. Her social life has been broadened through the years because she has been able to travel and to appreciate the creative art of many lands, whereas Celie and her husband are bound to one specific town or area. In other words, Nettie invests her hybridity to the best interest of herself
and the black women as well. “In the case of cultural identities,” David Huddart maintains “hybridity refers to the fact that cultures are not discrete phenomena; instead, they are always in contact with one another, and this contact leads to cultural mixedness” (4). Had Nettie not had a chance to leave home and explore other possibilities she might have been bound for the excruciating experience Celie had. In this sense, the hybridity of Nettie has a positive effect on her battle for artistic realization as it has also broadened her experiences on account of her contact with many more personalities, cultures, and creative ways than Celie. Even though Nettie never visited India and China, she is still able to acquire knowledge about them because she talked and associated with other missionaries who had been there.

Generally, her avidity for learning, her ability to connect to her African heritage (and the African Americans’ heritage to Africa), her sensitivity, her sympathetic and empathetic feelings towards others, and her resistance to oppression: all these qualities assist Nettie in her intellectual, economic, and artistic endeavour as she continues to strive for self-realization and attainment of an independent identity.

Shug Avery (her real name is Lillie) is yet another woman character whose self-determination also plays an important intellectual, economic, and artistic role in the focus of the novel. Intellectually, Shug has always known who she is, where she has come from, and where she plans to go; such knowledge distinguishes her from the other women in the novel. She is a very verbal person: even in her sickness when she is weak and her speech fades in and out, she keeps her vital language and pride intact. As a result of her being “free and easy” with men in her past, especially other women’s husbands (like Albert), most characters in the novel (some readers may as well agree with this point) may think bad of her, except for Albert and Celie. Shug has never paid attention to opposition from other people. She describes her past: “I was so mean, and
so wild, Lord. I used to go round saying, I don’t care who he married to, I’m gonna ...

him” (127) – although the sexual relationship between Shug and Albert is known to
Celie, it never deters their (Shug’s and Celie’s) friendship. Despite these qualities, the
viewpoint of some characters (and readers as well) regarding Shug gets gradually
modified as the novel advances.

Shug is a singer, an artiste. Celie describes her own anticipation to see Shug
perform: “At last I git to see Shug Avery work. I git to watch her. I git to hear her.
Mr.___ didn’t want me to come. Wives don’t go to places like that, he say. Yeah, but
Celie going, say Shug, while I press her hair. Spose I git sick while I’m singing, she
say. Spose my dress come undone?” (69). Shug’s response to Albert inadvertently
enhances Celie’s pride, for Celie has never seen a woman take hold of herself as Shug
does. To her, Celie’s ‘Mr.___’ is just Albert, thus breaking the spell of intimidation he
exerts on Celie. In spite of her sexual habits, Shug holds on to her own moral code and
tries to improve her future, for she has always overshadowed men as well as other
women. However, although no one approves of her past, her attempts at self-definition
work, for unlike Meridian, she marries and makes a life for herself –like Meridian,
however, she leaves her children to be brought up by her mother.

Furthermore, Shug’s struggle for survival is manifest in her economic control.
She has always been able to outshine others in her clothing, cosmetics, and hair
accessories. Since Shug is widely travelled and has met so many people in expensive
clubs and restaurants, she knows different tastes in foods and relates them to Celie’s
inexperience. Thus, Shug’s economic status helps to show her control over her life. As
her career involves travelling and meeting people, this exposure improves her economic
status, and, in turn, influences Shug’s desire for control. In a twofold manner, Shug has
succeeded not only in her struggle for economic determination but also artistically. For
instance, her artistic control of her voice has moved much of her male audience into wanting to hear her even more. Thus, in a skilful and creative way, Shug is able to manoeuvre her way into the hearts of many men while securing her future financially. As an African-American women struggling for survival and for self-determination, Shug also shows an artistic aspect in her elegant and manipulating, yet affectionate, personality. Not only is she able to capture the hearts of many men, but her gift of developing relationships also allows her to make friends easily. Celie is excited about Shug noticing her: “Finally Shug really seem to notice me. She come over and hug me a long time” (100). The way she keeps connected to her friends – e.g. visiting during holidays, or through writing – is also a controlling social factor.

Through Shug, Walker asserts an empowered femininity, free, strong, generous and full of talent. Beside to all these qualities of Shug’s personality, she plays a vital role in the novel and can be seen as an agent of change and liberation. She also functions as a protector of Celie when she knows that Albert beats her. She also teaches Celie, showing her that the female body is not only a site of pain but also pleasure. It is through Shug that Celie starts to find love. It is Shug who practically opens Celie’s eyes to life, liberty, religion, independence, and to Nettie’s letters (hidden by Albert). The arrival of Shug, thus, serves as a turning point in the life of Celie and the novel in general.

Another important character in the novel is Sofia, Harpo’s wife, Celie’s eldest step-son. It is obviously through Celie’s acquaintance with Sofia that Celie’s sense of selfhood starts to materialise. Sofia is physically and psychologically strong and seems to appear as a reminder to Celie of what she always lacked in life. Celie’s initial jealousy of Sofia is transformed into a feeling of sisterhood, especially since Celie starts to find satisfaction and pleasure in Sofia’s resistance. After marriage, Harpo, who
was initially attracted to Sofia for her zeal and independence, wants her to fit in the traditionally adopted form of wifehood. For instance, in a conversation with his father Mr. ___, Harpo receives this advice: "'Well how you specs to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating.'" (35). But Sofia is not ready to tolerate any form of oppression and therefore steps out of her relationship with Harpo.

Through Sofia, Walker has created a strong character who serves as a foil to the suppressive culture of black women – cf. Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Unfortunately, Sofia’s confrontation with the white officers foregrounds issues of race and class and reflects the hegemony of the whites. Her refusal to work as a nanny for the mayor’s children and then her sharp reaction to the mayor puts her in trouble, for which she is sent to prison for twelve years. In jail she is mercilessly beaten and humiliated: "They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye [...]" (82). But the sentence is later commuted to twelve years labour as the mayor’s maid. The hardship Sofia endures serves as a reminder of the costs of resistance and the difficulties of combating cultural and institutional racism. Towards the end of the novel, Sofia is shown to still retain her will to live independently, but is absolutely unable to show love to any white person, male or female, child or adult.

Basically, self-determination is a key focus in this novel; it demonstrates the control each woman character has achieved economically, intellectually, and artistically. Female characters in this novel have successfully managed to achieve self-definition by breaking the stereotypes of gender, class and race. It is only through disturbing the status quo that these women have been able to reach an optimal level of self-realization. To debunk claims by some critics that Walker seems in this novel to be
anti-man, it is clear that not all the female characters share the same attitude about men in this novel. It is a corollary that Celie hates men as a result of her excruciating experiences with them; yet, she has motherly feelings for Harpo, Albert’s son; Nettie seems satisfied with her husband; and even Shug gets married and is fully aware of the importance of the family. What these women are looking for is to be noticed, equally on the same level as men, and to be given the rights and freedom they deserve.

In the same direction, but a different manner, Walker’s second novel *Meridian* (1976), revolves around the quest for self. *Meridian* is set during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s, depicting the life of a Southern African-American woman, Meridian Hill, and the choices she makes: marriage, motherhood, education, her role in the Civil Rights Movement, and her final resolve that her place is with poor Southern Afro-American women struggling to obtain self-determination. Walker prefaces her novel with a lengthy list of definitions and traditional usages of the word ‘meridian’. A total of twelve different meanings are included for both the word’s nominal and adjectival forms. This alone signifies the fact that Meridian resists easy definition or simple categorisation. She is a complex and capacious character whose presence and identity cannot be reduced to a simple phrase or formulation. The term also sets up a comparison between Meridian and the growing Civil Rights Movement: one of the most common definitions of the term is “zenith, the highest point of power, prosperity, splendor.” Not only does the novel trace the rise and growing power of social activism, united in the face of racist and segregationist policies, but it also tracks the ascent of Meridian from her spiritual and physical pain to a new whole being in full control of her capacities and inner wealth.

*Meridian* is a novel that affirms the Movement’s vision of freedom and non-violence, affirms blackness and African American heritage in a racist society that failed
to value and continued to destroy black lives, and focuses on black women and their participation in the Movement, refusing to make them less than they had been. *Meridian* is what Walker would later call a “womanist” novel: it combines the black consciousness and feminist consciousness that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement. Conforming partially to what Richard H. King describes as “political engagement in the civil rights movement … [giving] rise to a narrative pattern in black writing” (76), this novel—considered, along with Rosellen Brown’s *Civil Wars* (1984), as “closest thing we have to such fictional explorations of the psychology of failed radical hopes” (140)—shows how Walker used her experience in the Movement and the experience of others of her generation to deal with the social, political and philosophical issues raised by the Movement. Richard King states: “Both of these novels were written by women who had been involved in the movement to some degree and both are concerned with what it means to live a political life after the high point of politicization, in this case the civil rights movement, has passed” (242).

*Meridian* is in some respects autobiographical, but Walker and Meridian Hill, the protagonist, differ in many significant ways. However, Walker’s various aesthetic and social concerns are harmoniously combined in *Meridian*, which is in a sense an exploration of a young woman’s coming of age and her journey from loneliness, guilt, and self-doubt, to self-acceptance, empowerment, and love. Like Walker once was, *Meridian* is set on a path to greater self-realization and endures the hardships of firmly and irrevocably establishing her identity amid the chaos of social upheaval, sexual alienation, and people who are not always approving or supportive of either the woman or the cause. With its nonlinear structure, the novel necessitates a re-reading. The novel delves into Meridian’s dominant relationships with her mother, with an Afro-American man named Truman Held, and with a white Civil Rights activist, Lynne Rabinovitz, on
the one hand, and with her own self, her past and present, and her connection to the overall cultural heritage of the black people, on the other.

Though there are many characters in the story, the spotlight is always on Meridian and the relationship she forms with Truman, or her mother, or Lynne, each illuminating her own struggle for economic, artistic, and intellectual self-determination. Meridian’s mother, Mrs. Hill, enforces very strict and devout regulations in her home. As it appears, sometimes these rules conflict with Meridian’s own decisions. Truman also influences Meridian’s life as she falls in love with him before coming to know that he has married Lynne, a white woman: “Meridian watched them meet in her back yard. They did not smile or touch. Truman was frowning, Lynne’s face was tense. Meridian stood in the center of the living room and began doing exercises” (147).

However, Lynne, who knows that her husband is in love with her friend Meridian, who frequently sleeps with him, willingly lets Truman see Meridian whenever he insists: “Truman she had magnanimously sent back to Meridian, at his insistence” (167). This love affair is attributable to their (Truman’s, Lynne’s, and Meridian’s) friendship, for both Truman and Lynne depend on Meridian to fill gaps of their loneliness. In other words, although their needs may differ, Truman depends on Meridian just as much as or even more than does Lynne. Therefore, this relationship does not detract from their (Lynne’s and Meridian’s) comradeship. Lynne reminisces:

She remembered the last days especially as one of those silent movies with Meridian Hill the poor star, dashing in and out of subways, cooking meals, listening to monologues thickened with grief, being pulled into bed – by Lynne, who held on to her like a child afraid of the dark – and by Truman... (175)

This kind of dependency can also be seen in *The Color Purple* in the affairs among Shug, Albert, and Celie.
In *Meridian*, the economic problems of creating self-realization are somewhat muted; one sees only a few instances where Meridian has had to overcome obstacles because of her small income. For example, when Meridian needs money at college, her parents always send her small amounts to help. After her father loses his farm and is unable to send her anything, Meridian must continue her battle for an education by taking an office job for a retired professor. This economic scuffle for stability indirectly overshadows that of her white counterpart Lynne, who comes from a financially secure family. That is, since Lynne’s family can help her in school, Lynne does not learn the importance of striving and working hard for the necessities in life. Lynne and other white exchange students are in a world all by themselves and do not comprehend the many hardships that keep Meridian’s pride and strong will intact. Meridian thinks that “the exchange students were banished to a corner of the world she did not need to follow. She chased them there with an imaginary broom, invented special for that purpose” (111).

In Truman’s relationship with Meridian, Walker seems to be concerned with the notion of black Americans’ self-consciousness of being black, with its implication of self-hatred, dissatisfaction and accumulated hatred of the Other (the whites), even in relationships between black men and women – cf. Fanon. Truman calls attention to his blackness and Meridian’s: he dresses in an African robe, talks about reading Du Bois and tells Meridian: “I think I’m in love with you, African woman. Always have been.” (115) and “you’re beautiful.... Have my beautiful black babies’” (116). It is a bitter irony to Meridian that he says these words to her after he has stopped seeing her to date white exchange students and after she has had an abortion (it was his child) and has been sterilised. That Truman dated white women “– and so obviously because their color made them interesting – made her [Meridian] ashamed, as if she were less” (106).
Later in the novel Walker again emphasizes the irony of Truman’s conflicted feelings about black and white women. According to Richard King:

Knowledge of one’s condition itself foreshadows a kind of proto-political freedom, which raises individual and, by implication, collective life above the level of mere existence into the realm of self-awareness. It is a freedom tied closely both to a sense of the past (against “forgottenness”) and to a sense of futurity (against “hopelessness”) and thus reveals the possibility of political action for the first time. (89)

It seems that the main reason behind Truman’s failure resides in his loss in the gap between the past and futurity and his inability to connect them together.

Again, an important economic situation that dominates the relationship Meridian has with Truman, also a student, is her willingness to accept her financial difficulties. Meridian accepts these financial circumstances because of the strict and devout regulations from her mother. She is not a materialistic person and has been taught that one must desire only the necessities in life. Meridian often thinks about how seriously her mother has prayed for her in church: “She [Meridian] imagined her mother in church, in which she had invested all that was still energetic in her life, praying for her daughter’s soul” (92-93). When looking back at her upbringing, Meridian comes to terms with her financial condition. She is comfortable with her situation and does not desire expensive furnishings like Truman. For example, when Truman visits Meridian he observes for himself the fact that she is unable to buy nice furniture like his, yet she continues to seek for self-definition without letting her present predicament bother her. Truman exhibits his feelings about Meridian’s place:

It was Meridian’s house – the old sweeper had pointed it out to him – and this was Meridian’s room. But he felt as if he were in a cell. He
looked about for some means of making himself comfortable, but there was nothing. She owned no furniture, beyond the sleeping bag, which, on inspection, did not appear to be very clean. (10)

Meridian’s economic position is similar to Mem’s in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, for Mem also desires the necessities in life. However, Mem does want nice furnishings in her home to show her children that they, too, can have a better life if they work hard to obtain it.

Meridian’s acceptance of her situation is reinforced by the spiritual guidance she receives from the singing in church: “When she was transformed in church it was always by the purity of the singers’ souls, which she could actually hear, the purity that lifted their songs like a flight of doves above her music-drunkened head” (14-15). Meridian’s spiritual uplift comes only when she sits and concentrates on the church music. She forgets her present situation and centres her thoughts on the peace that the church choir brings. Walker writes: “It was the music that made her so tractable and willing she might have said anything, acknowledged anything, simply for peace from this pain that was rendered so exquisitely beautiful by the singers’ voices” (16). This spiritual guardianship Meridian experiences is on the order of the spiritual guidance Celie has in *The Color Purple* as she writes to God.

Another important aspect Meridian displays is her artistic need for self-determination. Her quest for artistic self-possession surpasses Truman’s own. An instance of this self-possession is her taste for reading: “She read *Sepia, Tan, True Confessions, Real Romances*, and *Jet*. According to these magazines, woman was a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on. Still, they helped her” (65). Truman’s knowledge of other artists, books, and magazines is more limited than Meridian’s, for she enjoys reading white authors as well as Afro-American
ones: “Meridian was reading F. Scott Fitzgerald then, though she never gave up any of the Dubois [sic] she already knew. It just seemed too deep for conversation with Truman, somehow” (102). Meridian’s endeavour for artistic self-possession through her desire to read is similar to that of Nettie in *The Color Purple* and Ruth in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Of course, Meridian lacks some academic skills because of the time she has lost during high school, but she continues against all odds to prove her intelligence, her self-pride, and her self-will, in her fatigue:

> Her teachers worked her hard, her first year at Saxon. She read night and day, making up for the lost time. But no matter how hard she labored she was always willing to tackle more, because she knew almost no one there, and because Saxon was a peaceful but strange, still place to her, and because she was grateful to be distracted. (88)

Moreover, Meridian’s attempt at artistic self-realization comes through her poetry. She tries hard to face racial problems by joining the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian writes with intensity and passion (219):

> i want to put an end to guilt
> i want to put an end to shame
> whatever you have done my sister (my brother)
> know i wish to forgive you
> love you
> it is not the crystal stone
> of our innocence
> that circles
> us not the tooth of our purity that
bites bloody our hearts.
She takes her artistry and need for self-expression over into the Movement, which helps her immensely. Meridian must be willing (if the moment persists) to give all that she owns, including her life, to join the revolution: to join this group she must make a declaration of her willingness to die for the revolution, which she had done (*Meridian*, 14). Unlike the other women in *The Color Purple*, Meridian can at least turn to politics to help endure some of the hardships she encounters as she continues to struggle for artistic self.\(^3\) The political event gives Meridian a better understanding of her own life and helps her to understand the problems of the world better. Meridian writes in her poetry (219):

> there is water in the world for us brought by our friends
> though the rock of mother and god vanishes into sand
> and we, cast alone to heal
> and to re-create ourselves.

The fact that Meridian agrees to this declaration to join the Movement in order to make use of other creative talents –

> From being a teacher who published small broadsides of poems, she had hired herself out as a gardener, as a waitress at middle-class black parties, and had occasionally worked as a dishwasher and cook, (19)

– separates her ambitions from those of Truman:

> She looked at him wondering if he had, as she had done, marched that day. “As a rule,” he said, he didn’t march anymore, because “what I believe cannot be placed on a placard.” And she had teased him about that and said, “How about just the words Freedom, Liberty, Equality? That would cover what you believe in, wouldn’t it?” (103).
Truman finally acknowledges (even though it is difficult for him to do so) that Meridian's taste in poetry and books does define her determination to keep fighting. He is reluctant to read and to show his admiration for her poems: “Truman turned, tears burning his face, and began, almost blindly, to read the poems she had left on the wall” (228).

Meridian's intellectual search for self-realization is revealed through her decision-making. For instance, during Meridian’s high school years, she has an affair which leads to pregnancy; therefore, she marries the father, Eddie. Although this pregnancy devastates her mother, Meridian lets neither her mistake nor her mother’s religious sanctions keep her from accepting a scholarship to attend college. She divorces her husband and puts the baby up for adoption in order to continue her education. Her mother refuses to accept Meridian’s choice: “Well it can’t be moral, that I know. It can’t be right to give away your own child…. If the good Lord gives you a child he means for you to take care of it” (83). Even though Meridian knows that her mother disagrees with her decision, she does not let this decision wreck her whole life. Meridian believes in her heart that she has saved her child’s life: “When she gave him [Meridian’s son] away she did so with a light heart. She did not look back, believing she had saved a small person’s life” (87).

Again, Meridian’s search for intellectual self-determination goes beyond the thinking of her mother, who does not understand why Meridian must continue in the Movement while attending school. Mrs. Hill knows the importance of school and the tedious studying required, for both Mrs. Hill and her husband were college graduates: “The man she [Mrs. Hill] married, Meridian’s father, was also a schoolteacher. He taught history classes in the room next door to hers [Meridian’s mother]” (40). Meridian’s mother shows her feelings about Meridian’s participation in the movement:
“As far as I’m concerned,” said Mrs. Hill, ‘you’ve wasted a year of your life fooling around with those people. The papers say they’re crazy. God separated the sheeps from the goats and the black folks from the white’” [sic.] (81). However, Meridian assures her mother that she must fight for equality and justice just as one of her white former teachers had fought for her to get a scholarship(82).

Finally, Meridian’s attempts at intellectual self-determination are shown through her desire to cultivate Lynne, a white Jewish woman who has crossed over into African American territory by marrying Truman. Lynne has decided to join the Movement in order to help in the struggle for equal rights. It is also vitally important for her to learn about the adversities as well as the culture of the African American people, even more so after her marriage to Truman since her family has completely disowned her: “I can’t go back home. I don’t even have a home. I wouldn’t go back if I could. I know white folks are evil ... I know they’re doomed. But where does that leave me? I know I have feelings, like any other human being” (179). Lynne sometimes feels that she has no source of acceptance but through her friend Meridian. As she and Meridian ponder over interracial dilemmas, they watch television, read poems by African-American writers, and practice combing African-American hair:

For them the madness was like a puzzle they had temporarily solved (Meridian would sometimes, in the afternoons, read poems to Lynne by Margaret Walker, and Lynne, in return, would attempt to cornrow Meridian’s patchy short hair), they hungered after more intricate and enduring patterns. (176)

Since Lynne’s decision to participate in the Movement will bring her in touch with many more African Americans, it is Meridian’s knowledge of her own people that helps Lynne. Lynne expresses her gratitude to Meridian since no other person has taken
the time to help her: “Thanks, Meridian, for everything. I honestly don’t know what I would have done without you” (178).

Meridian’s journey to attaining selfhood has been a hard one, indeed. Her decision to dedicate her life for activism for the black people’s cause, for the cause of the black children, in a non-violent manner helps reconcile with the guilt she feels for betraying her mother’s ideal of motherhood, the whole principle of Mythical Black Mother, for leaving her son. It also helps her overcome the pain of Truman’s betrayal for her love, of deciding to make an abortion and cut off every future possibility of motherhood, and of the Movement’s androcentric policy at the cost of marginalizing black women. This sense of reconciliation marks Meridian’s satisfaction with the decisions she made in her life, and with her life in its totality.

Like the novels by Walker discussed above, Bessie Head’s A Question of Power (1974) has a leitmotif which can be summed up in a simple, yet profound, invocation by the heroine, Elizabeth: “‘Oh God,’ she said softly. ‘May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new ones.’” Thus, the novel aims to “create” a new and lively world where women can have space and position – like that of Walker. Generally speaking, the narration of intersecting communal and individual identities by black women writers in southern Africa may be read as a challenge to fixed notions of identity and universal constructs of patriarchy that haunt privileged forms of feminism. Bessie Head’s novels are significant cultural markers of resistance, because black women are, for the first time, presented as agents. In effecting this representation, her novels emphatically contribute to the creation of new fictional and social worlds.

Head’s A Question of Power may probably be seen as a fictionalised autobiography of Head’s own mental breakdown, which was caused in part by a racialised self-hatred instilled by apartheid. The protagonist’s breakdown is, however,
also represented as an effect of exposure to the “extreme masculinity” and nationalist ambition of Dan who, in a thinly veiled reference to the patriarchal biases of the 1970s Black Nationalism, repeatedly and braggishly exhibits his male genitals to Elizabeth (128) – a phallocentric symbol of the movement. Head highlights the difficulty of maintaining an autonomous, unified identity for her protagonist Elizabeth, who remains torn between her identity as a woman and her feelings of being a refugee in Botswana in a society brimming with racism, male-chauvinism and classism on the one hand, and the apartheid and state oppression on the other. Head does not represent black women’s identities as essentially racial or gendered, but indicates that their identities are produced by and mediated through competing social spheres. A Question of Power, then, indicates the necessity of a theoretical paradigm that acknowledges the interrelation of various oppressions. In addition, this novel is pivotal in negotiating women’s communal and personal identities in Head’s groundbreaking departure from the male-dominated language and ideology of the otherwise empowering BCM (Black Consciousness Movement) of the 1960s and 1970s.  

Head’s documentation of the personal experiences of her heroine, a coloured women, remains significant, not only in light of the prior invisibility of writing opposing official versions of national narratives due to state censorship and adverse economic conditions, but also because the subject position she narrates for black women are both adopted and challenged by later writers such as Tsitsi Dangarembga and Zoe Wicomb.  

In “Border Country: Bessie Head’s Frontline States”, Rob Nixon relates an anecdote about the early childhood of Bessie Head. According to Nixon, “Head was named not by her parents but by the South African state,” and Head herself reveals that “[m]y mother’s name was Bessie Emery and I consider it the only honour South African officials ever did me – naming me after this unknown, lovely, and
unpredictable woman” (106-107). As Nixon explains, “at Head’s christening, the distinction between private and public had already begun to dissolve, foreshadowing her almost lifelong sense of the power that the nation state wielded over the conditions of her identity” (107).\textsuperscript{35} As a coloured woman, Head is not an autonomous subject, but is accorded or denied identity by the state. This anecdote emphasizes the dominant concern of the text in hand, which is the South African state’s role in defining and controlling the parameters of black and coloured women’s identities.

This chapter argues that Head, writing early in the 1970s, forges a new tradition of writing. The novel addresses black women’s historical inability to represent themselves within both literature and oral narratives, and it remains significant because it proffers one of the earliest fictional representations of a range of black women’s subjectivities under an apartheid state.\textsuperscript{36} Head narrates positions of subjectivity and highlights forms of agency previously denied to black\textbackslash{}coloured women in texts by black men and by the apartheid government that stereotyped them as not worthy of occupying an independent subject position. It is her role as a provider of fictional identities for black women that this chapter examines in detail.

Head is cognizant of the silencing of black women in the discourse of the BCM, for she feels dissatisfied with the absence and voicelessness of black women in this purportedly universally empowering ideology. A Question of Power chronicles the personal and social disintegration of Elizabeth and explores an insanity that manifests itself— and hence also typifies — in images from the wider social madness of South African racial prejudice and black patriarchal biases.\textsuperscript{37} The representative of Black Nationalism in the text is Dan, who “set himself up before Elizabeth as the epitome of the African male,” (137; my emphasis)\textsuperscript{38} a factor which reveals Head’s belief in the phallic nature of this ideology. Dan’s very introduction in the text occurs in phallic
terms: “One half of him seemed to come shooting in like a meteor from the furthest end of the universe, the other rose slowly from the depths of the earth in the shape of an atomic bomb of red fire .... All put together it took the shape of the man, Dan” (104). Dan’s masculine power in the text is confirmed by his position as “the ‘big-time’ guy from hell” and is further emphasized through the wealth and power he accrues as a cattle millionaire (126). In addition, Head’s representation of Dan as intimately connected with violence and hatred is reinforced by his misplaced belief in himself as king of and deity to an as-yet-undefined African nation: “He raised a plain steel crown of a dull hue to his head.... He was looking at a point beyond [Elizabeth], too, into the future. He was full of confidence. The African grin said so much. It was hatred. It was control of a situation” (108).

Dan is an amalgamated stereotype of black power and the BCM in the novel, for the text indicates that he is an “African nationalist in a country where people were only concerned about tribal affairs” (104). In connecting the BCM with the phallic power black men wield, Head exposes its reliance on and perpetuation of a male ideal inimical to women. The BCM is, as Elizabeth points out to Tom, one of the ideology’s other proponents in the text, a discourse rooted in violence espoused primarily by men. Elizabeth rejects the rhetorical and symbolic violence of the BCM, for in response to Tom, who “sprang to his feet, thrust one fist high into the air and said: ‘Black Power’, she retorts: ‘I don’t like exclusive brotherhoods for black people only’” (132). Elizabeth elaborates: “I’ve got my concentration elsewhere.... It’s on mankind in general, and black people fit in there, not as special freaks and oddities outside the scheme of things, with labels like Black Power or any other rubbish of that kind” (133). Elizabeth rejects the divisiveness of the BCM in favour of a political philosophy available to and inclusive of humanity in general, for any political goal grounded in exclusion remains,
in the words of Elizabeth, “pointless and useless” (133).

Rather than merely rejecting the ideology of the BCM, however, Elizabeth seeks to redefine this philosophy in universalist rather than separatist terms. She points out that any community based on racial identification necessarily perpetuates and ultimately reinforces the divisiveness of apartheid in South Africa: “Black people learnt that lesson brutally because they were the living victims of the greed inspired by I and mine and to hell with you, dog” (134). In contrast to the “overwhelming lust for dominance and prestige” implicit in the rhetoric of the BCM, Elizabeth “look[s] at things quite differently” and supports a communal Africanist philosophy: “Africa isn’t rising. It’s up already. It depends on where one places the stress. I place it on the soul. If it’s basically right there, then other things fall into place. That’s my struggle and that’s black power, but it’s a power that belongs to all of mankind and in which all of mankind can share” (135). For Elizabeth, then, it is not only apartheid that is objectionable; rather, any philosophy based on exclusion is criticised throughout the text.

The critique of the BCM as an exclusionary and androcentric ideology in *A Question of Power* reveals a desire to narrate a nuanced and gendered tradition of thinking in southern Africa. The new tradition that Head initiates reflects the quotidian experiences of women as well as men and provides fictional representation of black women within both public and private realms. *A Question of Power* may be read in juxtaposition to the narrative modes of political fiction in Africa that emphasizes national struggles for liberation over gender or class emancipation. Head’s ambivalence towards the BCM signifies a gendered response to an ideology that is ultimately exclusive of women as active political agents. The spectre of national liberation does not, as this novel reveals, hold the same symbolic resonance for women that it clearly
bears for men, for Head shows women to be more concerned with establishing mutually empowering communities. Elizabeth adamantly refuses to submit to the artificial divides imposed by both apartheid and the BCM. Head emphasizes the importance of women to black communal life by providing other black women with what literature by black men and the BCM alike deny: she offers representations of empowered women exercising political agency and capable of decisive action.

Head attempts to give fictional representation to the full complexity of her gendered world: *A Question of Power* begins to construct a platform upon which other writers rely. Although she attempts to narrate a tradition that other women may access, Head wrote without the sustenance of both a tradition of women’s writing and a black literary heritage. She reveals an inability to locate a literary history. In addition, Head’s position is complicated by her racial designation as ‘coloured’, because her identity is inextricable from issues of iconographic female sexuality and shame. The Nationalist Government’s determination to suppress opposition to apartheid prevented her from grounding herself within a literary tradition.

Head’s forced confrontation with the glaring absence of a gendered literary tradition is exacerbated by her status in a society that denigrates her both racially and sexually. Yet in response to a society that refuses to allocate any agency to black and coloured women, Head attempts to narrate textual positions of empowered female identity for black women in South Africa who do not have access to the conditions or materials of self-representation. In *A Question of Power* Head reverses a prevailing trend by portraying a woman who leaves the city for a village in another country – a situation normally ‘heroed’ by male characters in the prevailing fiction of black male writers. In addition, the novel exposes the gender bias of this theme by indicating that it may not always be the male character who makes his way to someplace in order to
exercise ‘his’ earning power in the increasingly industrialised city. A Question of Power reclaims black women’s experiences and identities from patriarchal, apartheid, and literary objectification. The novel may be read as formulating literary resistance against the state and as an attempt to establish and authorise a space for black women in which they may construct their own identities.

A Question of Power narrates not only resistance to the state, but also reveals the power of fiction to exemplify the relationship between narration and the creation of various identities: the text negotiates the identity of Elizabeth to contest the deleterious effects of apartheid on the black women’s subjectivities. In initiating subject positions for other black women in South Africa, the text provides an antidote to black male subjects and the objectification of women. Like Walker, Head attempts to retrieve for women the status of a subject position, which they have been denied by patriarchal frameworks. Head chronicles Elizabeth’s “[j]ourneys into the soul” – a theme recurrent in Walker’s fiction as well– and ability to overcome alienation and silence through establishing a community of women in Motabeng; in doing so she provides a fictional community with which other black women may identify. She associates the gendered subordination to which black women are subject, to the texts’ devastating critique of racial oppression in order to reflect the complex matrix of identities that women must negotiate. The narration of the gendered and racial identity of Elizabeth allows Head to shed light on women’s status and struggles in communities with racial legislation as well as androcentric bias. The protagonist recognizes that she is not fully autonomous in that she is a member of a community and bound by moral and ethical responsibility to others. The text suggests, then, that what is required to combat apartheid is subjects’ ability to dictate, at least in part, their own futures. Head narrates the gendered experiences and identity of her protagonist as a subject of writing for other black
women, who may rely on these established subject positions to sustain their own imaginative self-conception as authors of their own existence and arbiters of their own futures. In constructing subject positions for black women as distinct from those established in the works of black men, Head attempts to engender the conceptions of identity and subjectivity upon which black male authors rely to compose their androcentric narratives.

In 1994 Nelson Mandela, perhaps the world’s most famous South African, published his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. The book opens with Mandela’s relation of how he was given the name Rolihlahla, which carries with it the colloquial meaning of “troublemaker,” by his father (1). Mandela indicates: “I do not believe that names are destiny or that my father somehow divined my future, but in later years, friends and relatives would ascribe to my birth name the many storms I have both caused and weathered” (1). The text then begins to follow a more familiar autobiographical pattern: it begins with “I was born on the eighteenth of July, 1918, at Mvezo ...” (1). The purpose of discussion is not to offer a critique of *Long Walk to Freedom*, but to point out that the book contains the story of one man’s connection and contribution to the political development of a postcolonial nation. The royal Xhosa family to which Mandela belongs also plays a role in the establishment of his autonomous identity, for Mandela matured under the protection of the relatively privileged ruling family of the Xhosa nation. Mandela’s usage of the first-person pronoun reveals, however, an immediate positioning of himself as subject: he is the ‘I’ of an individual, if embattled, black male identity.

The allusion to *Long Walk to Freedom* is not only because Mandela is an international statesman and political megastar, but also because the text’s immediate and unequivocal narration of a male black identity offers a marked contrast to the
tenuousness of black women’s identities and subject positions delineated by Head. Unlike Mandela, Head does not evince a similar degree of familiarity and subconscious recognition of subjectivities that are both black and female. Rather, the text highlights how black women are denied access to subjectivity in a society in which they are considered both racial and gendered minors. In *A Question of Power*, Head demonstrates how the denial of personal, political, and communal identities can lead to madness, which she represents paradoxically as both causing and being caused by Elizabeth’s complete loss of identity. However, rather than allowing the lack of identity generally accorded to black women to remain unchallenged, Head attempts to create positions of empowered female identity in her novels to contest their reification as Other by both the apartheid government and male literary tradition. She explores the formation and parameters of the Self/Other binary in institutionalised power relationships and examines questions of women’s identity within systems of domination.44

Although poststructuralist theory enables a deconstruction of the philosophical and ideological bases of identity, *A Question of Power* takes as its very subject the problems of constructing a space for identities that do not – in fact, cannot yet – exist. Head is interested in the provision of possible identities, but there is tension in the text between identities possible in ideal conditions and what is accomplishable in the current situation. The difficulty Head confronts is that of presenting a notion of identity while simultaneously writing herself into subjectivity. She also demonstrates and confronts, on both symbolic and surface levels, the interrelationships among racism, sexism, and political, economic, and cultural colonisation. The essential question that the text explores is how to establish identities and communities in a world that forcibly denies presence to black women. In addition to highlighting the deleterious effects of a
legislated and codified lack of identity faced by the protagonist, then, the text accentuates the proactive ability of black women to construct and contextualise their identities: she invests black women with the ability to overcome their victimization as Other in systems of power and oppression.

*A Question of Power* provides a graphic representation of what transpires when a woman is denied access to subjectivity and is forced to exist within the parameters of denigrated objectification. Head dramatizes this objectification through Dan’s and Sello’s attempts to appropriate Elizabeth’s soul and body. Their rejection and refusal of an autonomous identity for Elizabeth results in her madness and ultimate confinement in an asylum six hundred miles from Motabeng, a “[l]oony-bin case confirmed” (181). Elizabeth has become, according to Caroline Rooney, a borderless amalgamation of mind and body forced physically and mentally to go through the ideological and dogmatic dictates of others:

This paranoia also plays itself out in authoritarian and fundamentalist politics and racist conflicts as regards what is basically an attempt to colonise the sources of being or life in the name of an ideal. It would seem to be for this reason that idealised selfhood has to be maintained as empty and ghostly, as not really a living reality. (*Decolonising Gender* 210)

In Head’s account … [instead] of the mind or consciousness losing sensory awareness of or contact with the world, withdrawing from the affective, moving, touch of the world, in Head’s text the dividing line between the mind and the physical world dissolves, which produces the sense or sensation of being absolutely co-extensive with
the being of the world, not transcendentally detached from it. (*African Literature, Animism and Politics* 4)

Interestingly, this suggests that what is required is not the absence of distinctions marking various identities, but rather resistance to essentialising identity in either race or gender.

Sello’s and Dan’s denial of Elizabeth’s subjectivity is facilitated by her classification as Coloured in a society obsessed with racial binaries. As the narrator relates, Elizabeth learns of her disenfranchised position as Coloured at the age of thirteen from the principal of her school, who warns her that “[w]e have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you’re not careful you’ll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native” (16). Elizabeth bears the legacy of this identity; she reveals that “[i]n South Africa she had been rigidly classified as Coloured” (44). Medusa, a powerful and threatening avatar of Sello, points out the disadvantages of this position, for she accuses Elizabeth of being without a definable community within which she can attain an identity: “You’re not linked up to the people. You don’t know any African languages” (44). Dan reiterates a “persistent theme ... that she was not genuinely African,” which he seizes as an opportunity to “give her the real African insight” (159). Elizabeth herself realizes that she “wasn’t a genuine African; she was a half-breed,” but she is not nostalgic for a naturalised African identity: in the asylum she shouts that “I’m not an African. Don’t you see? I never want to be an African. You bloody well, damn well leave me alone!” (104,181).

Elizabeth’s consignment to a position of racial limbo leaves her ostracised by both the black and the white communities and fosters a concomitant hatred of both, as the comments of a nurse at the asylum reveal: “You are mad, aren’t you? You hate
black people. You hate white people. You hate everyone” (182). This hatred is a result of her position “in-between” the polarised identities accorded by the South African state; she is denied access to a subjectivity that encompasses her racial ancestry and gender (Spivak, “Subaltern” 79; Bhabha, Nation and Narration 295).46 In A Question of Power this is also the initial reaction of the Motabeng villagers to Elizabeth: “[p]eople often looked at Elizabeth with a cheated air. She had been taught the greeting in Setswana up to the first five lines and had no delicious titbits of gossip to offer” (20). According to Elizabeth, “Motabeng was a village of relatives who married relatives, and nearly everyone had about six hundred relatives” (20); in marked contrast, however, Elizabeth remains initially alone with her young son in the village. She is, in Homi Bhabha’s terms, the “subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite,” (1994: 86) forced to exist as tangential to the recognized communities of South African and Botswana society.

A Question of Power clearly indicates that both Sello and Dan attempt to deny Elizabeth access to subjectivity. Head’s choice of third-person rather than first-person narration emphasizes that Elizabeth, who is both Coloured and a refugee, has no recourse to an ‘I’ of a unified identity. Rather, the text offers a detached and dispassionate chronicle of her life:

For a few years she quietly lived on the edge of South Africa’s life. It was interesting. She spent some time living with Asian families, where she learnt about India and its philosophies.... A year before her marriage she tentatively joined a political party. It was banned two days later, and in the state of emergency which was declared she was searched along with thousands of other people, briefly arrested for having a letter about the banned party in her handbag. (18)
Elizabeth’s inability to occupy a speaking subject position is inherent in her classification as Other to both Sello and Dan, and also represents the concomitant difficulty of determining the boundaries of her own identity: “But who was she?” remains a dominant question (14). Both men offer competing constructions of an imposed identity: Elizabeth reveals that with Sello “it was as though he had thought out the whole story ahead of meeting her” (29) and that Dan similarly “had everything arranged in advance” (103). The space of Elizabeth’s subjectivity is invaded metaphorically and physically by both men, for each seeks to “remould her in his own image” (200). Elizabeth is the site of a “fierce struggle over her nearly dead body,” and as such is rendered the “pivot” on which Sello’s and Dan’s contestation of authority over her subjectivity balances (12,187).

As the object of this contest, Elizabeth’s selfhood is annihilated. She becomes “so broken, so shattered,” that she comments further that “[h]er so-called analytical mind was being shattered to pieces.... A darkness of immense dimensions had fallen upon her life” (14, 52). She ultimately becomes a “total blank”: Sello and Dan effect a complete erasure of any autonomous identity (193). The narrator relates that “she seemed to have no distinct face of her own, her face was always turned towards Sello, whom she had adored.... She seemed to have only been a side attachment to Sello” (25). Elizabeth reflects that she “had no distinct personality, apart from Sello” and that she is “dependent on Sello for direction and equally helpless” (32, 35). She is “just the receiver of horror” and has been “set up,” as she explains, as “the queen of passive observation of hell” (131, 148). Elizabeth is not the agent but rather the receiver of omnipotent thought, and her subjectivity is merely a conduit for malevolent spiritual forces: “They just move in, carry on, mess around .... They just walk in and smash everything up and then they grin” (192). The occupation and consumption of
Elizabeth’s soul and body, with its concomitant denial of subjectivity, is relentless. Elizabeth is forced to endure repeated denigration by listening to a record that plays “on and on in the same struck groove: ‘Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death’” (45). In the drama that comprises Elizabeth’s existence, then, men like Sello occupy the lofty position of “[d]ominating and directing” (29).

Although Sello may direct, Dan similarly prevents Elizabeth from formulating a subjectivity independent of his own. Dan gives Elizabeth a “small white card ... [that] said simply ‘Directorship since 1910’” (25, 115). This connects Dan’s masculinized power with the violence of the South African apartheid state. Unlike the philosophical strategies that Sello deploys to make Elizabeth Other to his male self, in her hallucinations Dan relies primarily on physical violence to deprive her of an autonomous subjectivity:

She hadn’t seen Dan’s form just then, but shortly before she awoke she had seen two large, familiar black hands move towards her head. They had opened her skull. He’d bent his mouth towards the cavity and talked right into the exposed area. His harsh, grating voice was unintelligible. It just said: ‘RRRRRRRRRRRRRRR’. It shot through her body with the pain of knife wounds. (177)

This physical violence is intimately connected with Dan’s desire for sexual control over Elizabeth’s body. Dan’s sadistic infliction of physical and sexual abuse on Elizabeth is evident in her description of the almost unbearable violence she endures at the apex of this struggle:

she did not want to fall asleep. Dan was bashing in her head the moment she blacked out. He was right there beside her bed, wild, excited into a frenzy at her helplessness. He hacked her to death between blackouts.
She had no defence. She simply lay there falling into death. The joy and ecstasy for him was the piecemeal job he was doing. He left a little part of her alive each time.... He had a way of conveying hideous, silent, concealed laughter through monstrous images of women being raped.

(180)

This connection of physical and sexual violence is most apparent in Dan’s ruthless desire to erase Elizabeth’s access to subjectivity; yet it is also evident in his conjuring and treatment of the seventy-one “nice-time girls” (128, 180). The nice-time girls, whom Elizabeth refers to as Dan’s “harem” (128), variously represent dissected female body as parts and pieces of machinery. Each woman is premised not on a unified subjectivity but is rather an iconographic representation of fragmented female identity: Miss Glamour, Miss Beauty Queen, Miss Legs, Miss Buttocks, Miss Pelican-Beak, Miss Chopper, Miss Pink Sugar Icing, Madame-Make-Love-on-the-Floor, Miss Body Beautiful, The Womb, The Sugar-Plum Fairy, Madame Squelch-Squelch, Madame Loose Bottom, Miss Wriggly Bottom, Miss Sewing Machine represent disparate sexual aspects and domestic skills of women.

Like Elizabeth, the fragmented nice-time girls become the site at which male violence and female sexuality are connected. Dan’s treatment of Miss Pelican-Beak confirms this: “Pelican-Beak too pushy for the world. He began fixing her up. He broke her legs, he broke her jutting spindly elbows, he decorated her with tiny, pretty, pink roses for a new image of tender love.... He’d re-design her pelvis area along the lines of Elizabeth’s which was extraordinarily passive and caused no trouble in the world” (167-168). Dan violently reifies women as tangential to male sexuality and to a masculine identity whose very formation is dependent on their fragmentation and degradation. In delineating specifically how the attainment of a unified subjectivity is
compromised by black women’s status as minors in South Africa, it is not to maintain that Head denies or belittles the degradation of black men. Indeed, her sympathetic representation of black workers and agricultural students at the cooperative indicates otherwise. The results of a reliance on stereotype and concomitant denial of subjectivity to blacks are readily apparent in the manner they are treated by some of their white bosses.

In contrast to Walker’s establishment of Celie in *The Color Purple* as the muted ‘I’ which ultimately achieves the potential by detaching herself from male influence, Head assimilates Elizabeth’s subjectivity into a universalised communal subjectivity in *A Question of Power*. The text reveals that a productive and emotionally stable subject position for black women is not attainable outside of the community within which she exists. Elizabeth is forced to sustain Sello’s and Dan’s masculine identities at the expense of her own soul and subject reality. She becomes a site of destruction and reconstruction in the hands of Dan and Sello. Dan repeatedly tortures and silences Elizabeth by projecting debased images of women in scenes of obscenity, pornography, and violence before her: he classifies them according to stereotype (woman as womb and woman as whore are both fixed within his narrative in order to buttress his own image of sexual power. Dan and Sello represent two competing attempts to construct Elizabeth’s identity; however, neither is ultimately successful at gaining permanent control of her subjectivity. Even though Dan’s relentless physical violence causes Elizabeth’s head to “explode into a thousand fragments of fiery darkness” (141), she ultimately resists the denial of identity that he attempts to effect. She reclaims her experience and identity from patriarchal and colonial apartheid objectification, and breaks the nightmarish cycle of violence by denying Dan the opportunity to use her as a conduit for conjuring the nice-girls.
Unlike *The Color Purple* or *Meridian*, however, *A Question of Power* does not reveal a unified subjectivity for Elizabeth. Head demonstrates the utter impossibility of maintaining fixed identities for black women, and the text also points out that any identity outside of a community is void of social, spiritual, and emotional purpose. Yet the text does, in a way that is similar to *The Color Purple*, reveal the inextricable connection of women’s identities to their communities: Elizabeth’s ultimate reliance on her participation in the Motabeng Farm Project illuminates the impossibility of establishing or maintaining an identity external to a discernible community based on a shared foundation of female experience.

Elizabeth’s identity is, as discussed previously, fragmented. She is in Botswana as an exile from apartheid South Africa, which allows her access only to the derogatory identity of “Kaffir” (21). In Motabeng, both Dan and Sello similarly attempt to deny her an autonomous identity by treating her as a palimpsest for their own competing desires. Elizabeth’s tenuous position within the community of Motabeng contributes to the ambiguity and fragility of her identity, for she is viewed by the Batswana as external rather than integral to their community. Unlike the people of Motabeng village, “nearly everyone had about six hundred relatives” (20), the exiled Elizabeth has no relatives in the community, and she has trouble becoming a member of this society. This inability to belong is revealed in her inability to respond as expected to the Batswana greetings others offer her: “People often looked at Elizabeth with a cheated air” (20). Her ostracism is further emphasized when she asks to accompany Thoko to the lands to plough: Thoko “had looked at her with wide, shocked eyes” and protests that “A foreigner like you would die in one day, it’s so dangerous” (60). In addition, although Elizabeth’s initial employment in Motabeng is as a teacher, a “purposeful, expanding and hopeful activity” (68), she is terminated because, as a letter from the
principal informs her, “We are doubtful of your sanity” (66). At a “moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double-edge which like the colored South African subject represents a hybridity, a difference ‘within,’ a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality”, Elizabeth’s sense of ostracism by this community increases with the progression of her madness in the text until the two eventually collide violently in the novel’s climax: “I’m not the dog of these bloody bastard Batswana”, she shouts, just before posting her accusations that ‘SELO IS A FILTHY PERVERT WHO SLEEPS WITH HIS DAUGHTER’ for the citizens of Motabeng to read (175). Elizabeth heaps abuse on a community in retaliation for its refusal to allow her to belong to it as an active and integral member, yet there remains something in her actions that is inexplicable. Head implies that we cannot completely comprehend the motivations of Elizabeth’s actions, for her insanity, by its very definition, resists the application of logic.

Elizabeth does not, however, remain an outsider to this rural community. She learns from the example of Eugene, an Afrikaner man from South Africa and the founder of the Motabeng Secondary School (52), whose belief that “[e]ducation was for all.... For everyone” causes Elizabeth to comment: “In this respect, he was an African, not a white man” (72). Eugene attempts to forge a community in Motabeng by establishing various local projects such as gardening, brick making, sewing, pottery, and beer brewing. Elizabeth’s participation in one of these projects becomes a form of political commitment; her cultivation of a garden with Kenosi, a woman of about Elizabeth’s own age, as part of the Motabeng Farm Project allows her to become a productive member of her local community (87). Elizabeth views this opportunity to participate as “the greatest adventure she was ever to undertake,” and elaborates specifically on the connection of gardening to the community:
It is impossible to become a vegetable gardener without at the same time coming into contact with the wonderful strangeness of human nature. Every man and woman is, in some way, an amateur gardener at heart and vegetables are really the central part of the daily diet.... Everyone also knows something about vegetables they are over-eager to impart to a harassed gardener – if their grandfather didn’t grow a vegetable, then their aunt did. (72)

The establishment of a garden in the desert community of Motabeng represents a desire for growth in inclement circumstances. This ability to coax growth from the barren land ultimately combines with the text’s dependence on organic metaphors of rootlessness and rootedness to represent Elizabeth’s journey from exclusion to eventual inclusion in the Motabeng community. Significantly, Kenosi and other Motabeng women begin to refer to Elizabeth affectionately as “Cape Gooseberry” in honour of the small green bushes that she cultivates for making jam: just as the plant has been successfully transplanted from South Africa to Botswana, so too might Elizabeth thrive and be fortuitously transplanted into the Motabeng community (153).

Head constructs Elizabeth’s participation in the cultivation of a desert garden as not only symbolic of her inclusion in community, but also as revealing this community to be responsible for her partial salvation at the end of the narrative. Elizabeth confesses that her friendship with Kenosi, established while weeding, watering, and nurturing the garden, allows her to resist the obliteration of her identity by Dan and Sello: “As far as Elizabeth was concerned she was to look back on this strange week and the Kenosi woman’s sudden appearance as one of the miracles or accidents that saved her life” (89). Her relationship with Kenosi is complemented by her relationship with Birgitte, a young woman sent by the Danish government to teach the Batswana
how to farm. Unlike the offensively ostentatious Camilla, who threatens the self-
knowledge and creative and political capacities of Elizabeth and the other agricultural
students by continually shouting at them and accusing them of “playing dice” rather
than working, Birgitte is “so unobtrusive, so hidden, so silent as not to be noticed at all”
(74, 79). Like Elizabeth, Birgitte searches for philosophical meaning in the world, and
confesses that the racism and suffering she witnesses in Motabeng greatly distresses
her: “I am disturbed. I always sit up every night reading before I go to bed, but I
haven’t been able to do so for the past few nights. My emotional disturbance prevents
me from concentrating. I sit for hours with a book on my lap. My heart is crying, and I
don’t know why ...” (84). Elizabeth feels an affinity for Birgitte, for each is “so lonely,
so self-contained, so wrapped up in her own isolation” (85). Through the forging of
friendship between the two women, however, Elizabeth reveals that they begin to share
a “deep, hidden symphony”: in this relationship Elizabeth attains not only validation
but also a “secure” place in which to form her own subject position (86).

In addition to the relationships that she establishes with women, Elizabeth forms
friendship with Tom, a young American with a “deep expression of wisdom in his
eyes” (112) and a “heart so generous it could feed a billion people” (195). Despite the
numerous philosophical and ideological disagreements between Elizabeth and Tom,
their relationship is infused with mutual respect. Elizabeth, in an increasingly rare
moment of lucidity, allocates some responsibility for her salvation to Tom in asking
“Will you take care of me the way you care for others?” (136), to which he responds
affirmatively. Apart from a visit he paid her in the asylum, Tom visited her later on in
her house at a very critical moment of sickness, allowing her to glimpse a way out of
the nightmare journey to which Dan and Sello subject her. “Her soul-death was really
over in that instant ... [Tom] seemed to have, in an intangible way, seen her sitting
inside that coffin, reached down and pulled her out. The rest she did herself. She was poised from that moment to make the great leap out of hell” (188).

The transnational Danish, American, Batswana, and South African community established in the desert garden in Motabeng refuses the tribal or apartheid division of communities so pervasive in South Africa. After Elizabeth’s return from the asylum, Kenosi admonishes her: “You must never leave the garden” and further elaborates on her importance to this fledgling community: “I cannot work without you.... People have never seen a garden like our garden” (142). Rather than exist within a society rent with divisions, the members of the Motabeng Farm Project establish a revolutionary cross-cultural community built on non-sexual love and mutual respect. Although this implies that all sexual love is too ridden with power to be positive, it is clear that this platonic philosophy is a reaction to Elizabeth’s sexual degradation by Dan, Sello, and Medusa. Head emphasizes that one need not be, as Elizabeth at first is, alone and denied an identity in the world; rather, individuals have a mutual responsibility to ensure the survival of others in their social worlds. Elizabeth’s relationships with Kenosi, Birgitte, and Tom allow her security in the knowledge that all three will help her overcome the “darkness of the soul,” (85) thereby beginning a process of partial salvation.

The establishment of this multiethnic cooperative, within which Elizabeth is able to locate a subject position for herself as a Coloured woman, fulfils her desire to become a member of a community in which individuals attempt to assert neither dominance nor authority over one another. Rather than subscribing to a religious authority based on hierarchy and authority, Elizabeth believes that in her community the “title” of God should be ‘shared’: “There are several hundred thousand people who are God” (31). For Elizabeth, God exists in everything, and the absolute power of both God and Satan, which Dan and Sello attempt to emulate, is ultimately denied within the
text. Elizabeth realizes that “the title of God, in its absolute all-powerful form, is a disaster to its holder” (36-37). Elizabeth’s philosophy of religious equality leads her to Buddhism, which advocates an avoidance of idolising power. “That’s what the Buddha said.... Avoid the greed in the heart” (134). Elizabeth further indicates that Buddhists “had the whole message in their posture, in the softly drooping hand. It was a hand that did not want power of any kind because power and ambition had never been part of their world” (134). Rather than the hierarchical religious ideology of Christianity and the separatist philosophy of black power, then, Elizabeth advocates a “power that belongs to all of mankind and in which all of mankind can share” (135): it is a power of communal responsibility. The text points to an end of “all personal love.... It was the point at which there were no private hungers to be kissed, loved, adored” (202). Personal love becomes instead universal:

And yet there was a feeling of being kissed by everything; by the air, the soft flow of life, people’s smiles and friendships; and, propelled forward by the acquisition of this vast and universal love, they had moved among men again and again and told them they loved them. That was the essential nature of their love for each other. It had included all mankind, and so many things could be said about it, but the most important was that it equalized all things and all men. (202)

At the text’s conclusion the narrative relates that Elizabeth has “fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man” (206) – cf. Walker’s concept of sisterhood. This emphasis on universalism and inclusiveness allows Head to work against the establishment of a counterhegemonic ideology such as the one proposed by the BCM, for she is aware of the possibility that such a discourse can be used to deny class and other social cleavages within and outside of black communities.
In contrast, *A Question of Power* sprawls across cultures, religions, and mythologies, and Elizabeth ultimately exists as a member of a universalised community with no external identity. Her final act is to place “one soft hand over her land”; it was, as the narrative explains, “a gesture of belonging” (206). Although this closure is not uncomplicated because of the circular structure of the narrative, it is significant that Elizabeth attains, at least for a moment, a feeling of ‘belonging’.

Some understanding of the nature of Black Feminist thought has been drawn from Patricia Hill Collins’ other book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000).

[1](http://web.mit.edu/thistle/www/v9/9.01/6blackf.html) .

[2](http://www.jamesrobertson.com/) .


Mbiti postulates that for Africans “traditional religions occupy the whole person and the whole of his [sic] life” (qtd. in Kebede 74).


11 My understanding of deconstruction is based on the following sources: Deconstruction and Critical Theory by P. V. Zima, Deconstruction and the Postcolonial: At the Limits of Theory by Michael Syrotinski, Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, and the Return of the Dead by Colin Davis, Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Derrida on Deconstruction by Barry Stocker, Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction and the History of Philosophy by Penelope Deutscher, and “Feminism and Deconstruction” by Mary Poovey.

12 I realize that I am simplifying the goals of these feminist movements, but my point is not to discuss the differences among these groups. Rather, it is to look at how postcolonial or third world feminism in general differs from them.

13 As will become clear, I do not wish to invoke the category of the ‘third world woman’ or ‘third world feminism’ without reservation, because I take Chandra Mohanty’s point that western feminism has constructed a monolithic ‘third world woman’ as its object of knowledge. I employ this terminology, however, to signal a form of feminism that differs from forms of western feminism that do not account for their own implications within imperial discourses.

14 This is discussed in further details in the last chapter of this dissertation, “Discourse of the Body”.

16 Even Mohanty herself finds that the term ‘third world woman’ has strategic cultural purchase, for her first book is entitled *Third World Woman and the Politics of Feminism*.

17 Parry (2004) questions the way Bhabha displaces the idea of anti-colonial struggle in his idealisation of hybridity and colonial resistance, arguing that he obscures the antagonism and aggression that is characteristic of the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. She advocates, by invoking Fanon, a focus on social and historical events in addition to the attention paid to the discursive nature of resistance.

18 For Fanon, the mimic becomes dislocated when he (for Fanon it is always a ‘he’) realises that he can neither attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire, nor shed the blackness he has been taught to devalue. Fanon’s image of the black skin/white mask encapsulates the dislocation inherent in mimicking that which is unattainable, and his book of the same name chronicles the psychic trauma that results from this split subjectivity. Although Fanon points out the instability of the fluctuating subject, and the tenuousness and instability of his identity, he does assume that a unifiable subject, which assumes an essential self, is attainable. An important distinction between Bhabha and Fanon is that Bhabha examines hybridity at the level of subject constitution and does not assume that a unifiable identity is attainable. For Bhabha, hybridity is inseparable from and constitutive of identity itself.

19 *Orientalism* claims monolithic status for Western discourse; Aijaz Ahmad points out that the text perpetuates a monolithic notion of Orientalism as a reductive and biased
discourse of power that does not account for the possibility of resistance or difference (183).

20 Ania Loomba argues that the colonised subject is, for Bhabha, ultimately male (178), but Bhabha has become increasingly aware of the specific and unique positionality of women and migrants in a colonial and postcolonial context.

21 This becomes evident in Bessie Head’s novel, *A Question of Power*, where the effect of colonisation, racism and male-chauvinism lead the heroine into mental breakdown. We see later in this chapter how Elizabeth, herself a hybridised subject deprived of the status of a subject position, attempts to “locate” herself and succeed only, if partially, after rejecting all forms of hegemony and trying to create an all-inclusive space. The same thing can be seen in Alice Walker’s novels, *The Color Purple* and *Meridian*, though in a different form and to a lesser extent.

22 Ania Loomba (178) argues that the subject projected in Bhabha’s work is “curiously universal and homogeneous – that is to say he could exist anywhere in the colonial world”. This homogeneity occurs precisely because Bhabha theorises the subject at the conceptual and idealised level. The way he positions the universal, male colonised subject as paradigmatic runs the risk of eliding how subjectivities are shaped and variously informed by questions of class, gender, corporeality, and context, and affected by varying degrees of individual empowerment. To further Bhabha’s conceptual work, it is useful to transpose it to specific locations, which will entail a translation of his theory of hybridity from the discursive to the local and corporeal: we must, as Loomba (179) suggests, “peg the psychic splits engendered by colonial rule to specific histories and locations”.

23 For their criticism of Bhabha’s views, see Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,” Parry’s “Problems in Current Theories of
Colonial Discourse,” and Ahmad’s In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures. Yet it is important to remember that Bhabha does not intend to do other than theorise colonisation and the resistance it engenders as played out in colonial discourse, and that his work is most usefully thought of as articulating a reading strategy. The universalising tendency in Bhabha’s conception of colonial identities and colonial power relations derives in part from, and is partially explained by, his theoretical basis in psychoanalysis. However, here also Bhabha does not attempt to reconcile his psychoanalytic approach with a reading of actual colonial events. Although psychoanalytic theory has been used to analyze specific colonial incidents, both historical and fictional, it is more commonly employed, by theorists such as Fanon and Bhabha, to examine how the imagined or fantasised fulfilment of wishes that are either denied or prohibited by social mores are affected by colonialism. Bhabha alerts readers to the potential agency of resistance to domination made possible by the indeterminacy of the sign, but he seems to have paid little attention to the political history of colonialism with its actual imperial practices of violating cultural systems and socio-economic frameworks, and its exploitation of populations and their resources. Yet Bhabha himself indicates that this is deliberate: “there is no master narrative or realist perspective that provides a background of social and historical facts against which emerge the problems of the individual or collective psyche” (42).

24 Admittedly, this separation between the deliberate and the unconscious is difficult to sustain, but it is worthwhile to attempt the distinction.

25 This point is manifest in Walker’s novels: in The Color Purple, Sofia suffers the consequences of following a ‘violent’ and masculine strategy of resistance, and Meridian in Meridian reaches to a conclusion that the strategy for resistance should change so that the rights of the black in general, and the black women in particular can
be reclaimed. In Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth’s strategy for resistance can be seen to reach its peak within, followed by resisting the forces of oppression coming from outside.

26 For Irigaray, this ‘role’ is femininity, a mask worn by women to satisfy men’s desires. Irigaray represents masquerade as a woman’s performance of herself as the man would have her. It is the non-parodic adoption of a role. I am transposing these theories of mimicry and masquerade into the colonial situation not because the binary relationships between male/female and coloniser/colonised are identical, but because the systems of power and domination that are operational in both are similar enough to merit the inclusion of Irigaray here.

27 In doing so, Butler relies on J. L. Austin’s notion of performative utterances, which he describes as statements that do not describe but perform the action they designate (Austin 5-6). For example, the expression ‘I do’ uttered in the context of a marriage ceremony is performative or has illocutionary force.

28 Butler’s conception of the performative force of language becomes particularly significant in the three novels discussed here, particularly as conceived and performed by black women in America and southern Africa. Butler asserts that the performative force of language is caused by the repetition of prior norms, and that the force of the insult “Queer!” comes not from the intention or authority of the speaker but because “Queer!” repeats shouted insults of the past, interpellations or acts of address which produce the homosexual subject through reiterated shaming or abjection. Butler writes “‘Queer’ derives its force precisely through the repeated ... invocation by which a social bond among homophobic communities is formed through time. The interpellation echoes past interpellations, and binds the speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time. In this sense it is always an imaginary chorus that taunts ‘queer’” (*Bodies* 226).
What gives the insult its performative force is not the repetition itself, but the fact that it is recognized as conforming to a model, a norm, and is linked with a history of exclusion. The utterance implies that the speaker is the spokesperson for what is normal and works to constitute the addressee as abject. It is the repetition, the citation of a formula which is linked to norms sustaining a history of oppression, that gives a special force and viciousness to otherwise banal insults such as ‘queer’ and ‘nigger.’ Yet these insults do not remain uncontested; rather, they are reappropriated in order to rob them of their degrading force.

29 The case here is different as far as Elizabeth in A Question of Power is concerned. Sello, whom Elizabeth sometimes hints at as a guardian, serves an ambivalent role. He stands helpless and hopeless on the face of Dan’s mental victimization of Elizabeth. At least, Celie had some confidence in “the white bearded God”, but Elizabeth shows no trace of such confidence in Sello – Sello, too, wears white clothes and sits inertly on a chair in Elizabeth’s room (inside her mind). The final conception of God for Celie and Elizabeth stands as an outcome reflecting the way they conceptualize God during their ordeals and how they think of God’s role in assisting them out: while Celie brings God on par with stars and humans and trees, Elizabeth views God as dwelling in man.

30 Just like Elizabeth in A Question of Power: we will see later in this chapter how Elizabeth resists categorisation under race or class.

31 Elizabeth, too, in A Question of Power, does not submit to frustration after she has been fired from the school, where she used to work, on psychological grounds (actually, the novel’s tone carries several hints that Elizabeth’s dismissal was based more on gender and colour issues). Instead she starts her own farming business in the Cooperative, thus attempting to secure a financial income to sustain herself and her own son.
In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth also has her political views. Basically, she is a refugee. This will be dealt with in more detail later in this chapter and later chapters.


Nixon’s argument that the apartheid state created Head’s insanity is, however, overwritten in its determinism, for the state does not have complete control over the domestic sphere. The apartheid state undeniably influences domestic politics in South
Africa, but to assert that Head had no individual power betrays the masculinist bias of Nixon’s argument.

36 Although Bessie Head left South Africa on an exit permit for Botswana in 1964 and *A Question of Power* is set in Motabeng, Botswana, it chronicles the emotionally, physically, and sexually destructive effects of apartheid on the life of a coloured woman.

37 I am not asserting that Head’s mental illness is a result exclusively of this social madness, but the apartheid state’s ability to deny her an identity does have an impact on her psychological condition.

38 Head emphasizes the phallic aspects of Dan’s identity, for he continually exhibits his “huge, towering black penis” to Elizabeth in hopes of subduing her independent desire for a female identity.


40 See Nixon, Rob. “Border Country: Bessie Head’s Frontline States”.

41 I am not suggesting that identification is the only form of relation that Head establishes between Elizabeth and the reader, but identification remains particularly significant in the context of Elizabeth’s ability to construct a subject position for herself that is not bound by stereotype.

42 Thus, Head retains aspects of liberal/democratic humanism’s conception of the subject.
Mandela indicates that Nelson, his more widely used English/Christian name, was “not given to me until my first day of school” (1).

Recent theories of racial alterity and difference owe much to the rethinking of Self/Other relations that Fanon elaborates in *White Skin, Black Masks*. Fanon describes how the black man is subjugated to and racially othered by the white man: “not only must the black man be black, he must be black in relation to the white man” (110). He contends that “the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man” (161). In Fanonian terminology, the white man monopolises and secures unfettered access to subjectivity and the black man is condemned to the refracted position of otherness within this destructive Self/Other binary. Fanon reveals that the Other is an ideological construct designed to uphold and consolidate imperial definitions of selfhood. However, Elizabeth, just as Head herself, is a coloured woman and does not completely fit in this duality of black-white distinction. That is, there may be many Others-subjects who do not quite fit into the rigid boundary definitions of (dis)similarity of Fanon’s conception of this binary. Elizabeth is, thus, an example of Other others.

Dan and Sello may also be read as parodic embodiments of the BCM because of their representation as divisive and separatist black nationalists in the text.

I am extrapolating Spivak’s concept of “in-betweenness” from “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak defines individuals who exist in this state as a “buffer group, as it were, between the people and the great macrostructural dominant groups” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 79). Bhabha defines this state as liminality.

In 1910 Louis Botha became Prime Minister and established the foundations of the white power structure in South Africa. See “Louis Botha 1862-1919”. 

http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/botha-1.htm
Elizabeth’s salvation remains ambiguous because of the circular structure of the text: because it is a retrospective narrative in which Elizabeth comments at the beginning somewhat cautiously, “[t]he nightmare was over. Dan was not over” (14).
Chapter I: Bibliography

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


---. Allegories of Empire: the Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text. 2nd imprint. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.


Walker, Alice. “Alice Walker’s Novel Scores Big With Readers; Now Is The Time To Open Your Heart Is A Deeply Moving Personal Story”. Interview with Alice Walker. Sacramento Observer. 05 May 2004. Print.


