CHAPTER II

THE POLITICS OF MOTHERHOOD

IN THE NOVELS OF

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“It is in maternity that woman fulfils her psychological destiny; it is her nature ‘calling’, since her whole organic structure is adopted for the perpetuation of the species.” (Simone de Beauvoir, Second Sex: 501).

This chapter compares the notion of motherhood as depicted by both writers Alice Walker and Bessie Head, who are mothers themselves and whose life-stories live and breathe in their novels. In their novels, motherhood faces many problems which change its real conception. Traditionally, the mother is the one who is ever prepared to put the infant’s interests above her own. Again, the childrearing process is natural and intuitive and the child’s needs are easy to anticipate and accommodate. And because of “the seeming natural connection between women’s childbearing and lactation capacities and their responsibilities for child’s care, and because humans need extended care in childhood, women’s mothering has been taken for granted” (Chodorow, Reproduction of Mothering: 3). With this stereotyped conceptualization of motherhood in mind, this chapter delineates how the concept of motherhood is portrayed in the novels of both writers. The focus will be on black motherhood as a biological and psychological experience along with the problems of ideologies of race and gender, which remain a critical point in the life and writings of both writers.

The discussion in this chapter begins with a broad view of the concepts of motherhood and mothering, at the same time touching upon points relevant to the novels chosen. Then, the concept of motherhood is discussed with reference to three
novels by Alice Walker (namely, *The Color Purple*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*) and three novels of Bessie Head (i.e. *A Question of Power*, *Maru* and *When the Rain Clouds Gather*). The discussion will show how both the said writers portray mothering in their novels, and attempt to re-locate their women characters in the social paradigms of their societies.

One of the basic tenets of the feminist framework is the revaluation of motherhood and the role of mothers in the light of the general calling of the movement, seeking to re-define the social preliminaries and traditional stereotypes. The investigation into this area attempts to review not only the nature of mother’s relation to her children and society but also how the conceptualization of motherhood and mothering contributes in oppressing as well as liberating mothers/women. Historically speaking, Janneke van Mens-Verhulst (1993, xiii) points out that in the seventies (of the previous century) the role of mothers was “primarily symbolic, limited to psychotherapists’ couches or therapy groups for women”. The nineties, however, witnessed a revival of interest in re-examining the paradigm of motherhood, leading to a re-explication of this concept and its aspects (e.g. mothering, motherhood, good enough mothering, mother-son/daughter relation, etc.).

Feminist theorists and writers in fact challenge valorisation of motherhood fostered by conservative patriarchies. It is, however, important to emphasize that feminists do not reject maternity or devalue the woman-centred experience of birthing and mothering. Their project is to interrogate the myths and assumptions that impose oppressive role expectations and erase the reality of maternal experience. Feminist voices seek to liberate motherhood from the institution and the myth that confine it to a narrow arena of the conventional family leaving no space for women to choose alternative identities.
While most feminists, especially in the second wave, viewed motherhood as a form of bondage patriarchy imposed on women on biological grounds, Adrienne Rich in her *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986) is recognized by some feminists as the first to acknowledge motherhood as ‘a complex site of women’s oppression and a potential location for women’s creativity and joy [as well]’ (Green 125-6), an institution marked with social definitions and restrictions emanating from socially accepted ideology of mothering and is simultaneously oppressive and potentially liberating. The description of the institution of motherhood by Rich is as follows:

When we think of the institution of motherhood, no symbolic architecture comes to mind, no visible embodiment of authority, power, or of potential or actual violence. Motherhood calls to mind the home, and we like to believe that the home is a private palace....We do not think of the laws which determine how we got to these places, the penalties imposed on those of us who have tried to live our lives according to a different plan, the art which depicts us in an unnatural serenity or resignation, the medical establishment which has robbed so many women of the act of giving birth, the experts – almost all male – who have told us how, as mothers, we should behave and feel. We do not think of the Marxist intellectuals arguing as to whether we produce “surplus value” in a day of washing clothes, cooking food, and caring for children, or the psychoanalysts who are certain that the work of motherhood suits us by nature. We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us, in the name of the institution of motherhood. (qtd in Green 126-127)
Motherhood is restrictive, and at times, oppressive because of the expectations placed on women to conform to and replicate an ideal of motherhood that prescribes particular behaviours. The revaluation of motherhood in this way, however, implies that women negotiate the tension between societal expectations of motherhood and their personal experiences of mothering. Hence, motherhood becomes rather empowering and liberating.

The societal expectations of a “good mother” stipulate for certain qualities and standards, and any deviation certainly incurs condemnation. An ideal mother is a heterosexual woman who stays at home with her children while her husband (the father of their children) works to support them financially (Green 127): her “innate” ability to parent and her “unconditional love” for her husband and children make her selflessly adopt their wants, needs, and happiness as her own; she always has a connection with her children, never has an ill feeling towards them, and is completely responsible for caring for and nurturing all of her family members; she never gets angry because she finds parenting to be the most meaningful aspect of her life; it is through providing love and care for her family that she gets boundless happiness and self-fulfilment.

According to Rich, the empowering element of ‘patriarchal’ motherhood (the arena where women can practise agency, resistance, invention, and renewal within this institution) comes from

The tenderness, the passion, the trust in our instincts, the evocation of a courage we did not know we owned, the detailed apprehension of another human existence, the full realization of the cost and precariousness of life. The mother’s battle for her child – with sickness, with poverty, with war, with all the forces of exploitation and callousness that cheapen life – needs to become a common human battle,
waged in love and in the passion for survival. But for this to happen, the institution of motherhood must be destroyed.... To destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood. It is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work. (qtd in Green 129-130)

In this sense, a good mother is good not because she fits in but because she enjoys and is successful in the experience.

Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva (1996) states that feminist perspectives have asserted that motherhood and mothering are not natural for women but that they are historically, culturally and socially constructed. She draws a distinction between motherhood and mothering based on interpretations of the changing roles of women both historically and culturally. While a legal connection between mother and child is applicable to motherhood, mothering remains mostly connected to the caring activity per se. Although motherhood is not necessarily derived from biology and is a social construction, mothering in itself is absolutely disconnected from biology. However, there are various connections between motherhood and mothering and very often the terms are used interchangeably. Yet ‘good enough mothering’ can be well explored as an autonomous feature of various kinds of motherhood (i.e., by adoption, biological, married or lone). The description ‘good enough’ applies to a mothering that is acceptable, not ‘perfect’. It reflects both a diversity in experiences of mothering and the substitutability of the provider of mothering (Winnicott 1965, 1971; Rodman 1987). ¹

Having shed light on the concept of motherhood as an institution, and the distinction between motherhood and mothering, the discussion now turns to relate the above theoretical concepts to the novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head. In dealing
with black motherhood, it is obvious that the novels of both Walker and Head depict the African mother as a spiritual anchor; she is greatly respected in African societies. By giving birth to children, African women ensure their peoples’ continuity, both in the here and in the hereafter. Hence, the high regard for women, circumscribing them even as it honours them. African women in many traditional societies were not defined only by their positions as mothers and wives. Their contributions to the household were indispensable and their status was often higher than that of their European counterparts. However, these women lost many of their traditional rights when European colonialism imposed its cultural gender constraints on the colonised nations. Undoubtedly, the intersection of traditional values which both respected mothers yet restricted them, and the colonial system which denied them the traditional rights, gravely affected the meaning of motherhood in the African society.

Feminist critiques from South Africa point out how nationalist and patriarchal causes have appropriated the African woman as a mother. This figure has been used to extol the ostensibly unique qualities of nurturance, protectiveness and altruism of African women, qualities that are often believed to make them morally and culturally superior to Western women. Celebrated in much of nationalist poetry and prose during the 1950s and 1960s, the African mother recurs in a range of the present day discourses in public and domestic life. In another context, ethnographic research from Asia and the Pacific shows that maternal experiences vary greatly depending upon historical time and local discourses. For instance, motherhood as an embodied experience for women in colonised societies was shaped by colonial policies, missionary influence, and conflicts between western medicine and biomedical birthing methods. All these shaped the experience of modern mothering in many colonial societies.
Motherhood has been the predominant framework of identity for women in African literature, whether it is from the perspective of male writers or that of the female writers. The concept of motherhood is closely linked to understanding African women's life and identities within their socio-cultural contexts. Similarly, the mother figure in African American communities is also greatly respected, because the very lineage of ‘black’ in the United States is determined by the status of the mother.

According to the custom during the period of American slavery, if a woman was black her child would be black and therefore born into the slavery. Because of slavery, African American motherhood became a battleground for racist and sexist ideologies. Slave women were valued not only for themselves, but for their capacity to breed, the ability to produce children and to bring them up until they became producers for the society. At the same time, since slave families were often separated, the mother attempted to be a physical as well as spiritual safeguard for her children. The idea that mothers should sacrifice everything appears to be seen as a norm in every African community. The centrality of motherhood in Africa-American culture probably has its roots in African culture. These roots are strengthened by the precarious position in which the African American communities and therefore the mothers and children are situated in US.

African-American motherhood as well as African motherhood can be seen as a contested terrain involving three distinct points of view, i.e. the African-American view of motherhood, the white view of motherhood, and the white view of black motherhood. These points of view intersect to produce a distinctly complex ideology of African-American and African mothers. Alice Walker and Bessie Head dramatize the change that affected their psyche and lives. Walker's novels for example carry an appraisal of the ideology within the context of changing forces in Nigeria of the 1930s.
and 1940s and 1960s, times when these societies were forging strong movements of liberation. At that time the African-American activists were struggling for their rights, including the right to abortion. According to Loretta J. Ross (141), African-American women’s struggle for abortion not only emerges from their historical struggle against racism, sexism and poverty but is also a manifestation of African American women’s struggle to make a decision for themselves. Notwithstanding, feminism and self-reflexive questionings within the women’s movement in North America drew attention to the fact that notions of motherhood were racially specific and conditioned by prevailing social hierarchies. In the American context, it has also been argued that early twentieth century depictions of motherhood for African American women sought to depict mother as active agent rather than passive instrument of reproduction. However, the narratives also revealed that women’s agency as mothers comes at a price and has been continually constrained by fixed gender roles and social expectations of bi-racial identity. Such fictional and non-literary texts also reflect the use of motherhood and race as key tropes for discussions of social progress and decline. These texts also establish that even notions of universal motherhood that fostered cross-racial conversations reinforced social and racial hierarchies. Ross (144) acknowledges:

Controlling women’s reproduction was important to maintain the race, class and gender inequality of the slave economy. Plantation owners tried to keep knowledge of birth control and abortion away from both slaves and white women to maintain the caste system of white supremacy used to justify slavery…. African-Americans [however] used birth control and abortion as a form of resistance to slavery. Abortion and infanticide were acts of desperation, motivated not by a desire to
avoid the biological birth process or the burdens of parenting, but,
instead, by a commitment to resist the oppressive conditions of slavery.\textsuperscript{6}

Thus, motherhood is one of the social constructs that regulate womanhood and is seen
as both subjection and subjectivity (cf. Rich’s conceptualization of motherhood) – a
cultural commodity determined and regulated largely by men. Further, black
motherhood is a social construct which combines racial and historical experiences
(such as slavery). It must first look within itself, self-reflexively, and iron out the
societal seams.

Alice Walker’s portrayal of motherhood in her novels touches on several issues
at the same time: issues related to the picturisation of mothers in the African American
society in terms of the mother-daughter relation, issues related to how the mother figure
stands for the African ancestors (i.e. part of the formation of the African American
identity), and issues related to modern mothering problems, namely abortion. Walker’s
novels reflect a contrastive analysis of the historical evolution of the concept of
motherhood (what it was and how it should traditionally be versus what the characters
want their motherhood to be like). Such transformational turning-points are seen in
Walker’s fiction possibly because Walker has experienced the societal change and re-
examination of gender and historical roles fostered by the black and women’s liberation
movements of the 1960s and 70s, and engaged in the struggle for both their physical
and psychological survival. The lives of these black women consist of struggle, a
struggle to survive the horror of racism and sexism. Walker’s women are engaged in a
struggle to control their lives, a struggle that may sometimes take radical swerves for
the purpose of redefining the self and the role no matter what the consequences might
be.
The theme of motherhood in *The Color Purple* is a haunting one indeed, starting with a female character who suddenly finds herself a mother without knowing anything about what motherhood is, followed by a sense of bereavement at the loss of her two children at the hands of her step-father, yet finally reconciled by a family reunion at the end of the novel. Celie, the main character in Walker’s novel, *The Color Purple* is represented as a poor, uneducated, passive and traumatized woman. It is suggested by this depiction that the only direction for her in life is a life of domesticity. Chodorow maintains that “the acceptance of the domestic ideal is the foundation of women’s oppression”. Being the oldest female sibling and also due to her mother’s illness Celie takes on her mother’s responsibilities as the one who cooks, cleans, and looks after her younger siblings. Besides all these duties, she is raped by the step-father whom she thinks is her ‘Pa’ (dad).

Since her step-father claims the ownership of her body and of every female in the house, this claim of ownership assumes the power to exploit and deprive women from all they possess, including their sexuality. Because of the status that women have in this society, her step-father’s actions are not questioned or even thought about. So, when Celie gets impregnated by her ‘Pa’, she already loses her good enough mothering not because her babies are taken away from her soon after their birth but because when her identity is being shaped, she lives the crisis of rape. The stages of the woman’s personal, biological and emotional status are completely disturbed.

Celie is, however, still ignorant of what is happening to her:

Dear God:

I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me. (*The Color Purple* 3)
She functions as a substitute to her mother as well as to her younger sister, Nettie, in her step-father’s bed. Her pregnancy along with her mother’s sickness burdens her. She has to be a nurse to her mother and a mother to her sister. For this young woman, motherhood is a shattering feeling. She becomes pregnant twice by ‘Pa’ and she does not know the fate of her own babies: “Pa” takes them away from the home and gives them to a childless missionary couple to rear as their own.

Donald Winnicott, who is a psychoanalyst and paediatrician, emphasizes in his writings on the particular need for maternal sensitivity. He describes “primary maternal preoccupation” (1956), the psychophysiological preparedness of a new mother for motherhood, as a special phase in which a mother is able to identify closely and intuitively with her infant, in order that she may supply first its body-needs, and later its emotional needs, and allow the beginnings of integration and ego-development. He also indicates that the mother’s proper place is home, the place where she is treated as a respected figure, and where she is to spend her time caring for her infant. But Nancy Chodorow (Beyond Drive Theory: 312) maintains that “Winnicott’s view ... shows how childhood experience and the childhood subjective world come to be integrated into the adult’s creative life and culture as a whole without seeing creativity as simply a return to childhood wishes, fantasies, and fear”. Describing Winnicott (among others) as “British object relations theorists” (ibid.: 307), she emphasizes that the view that mothers, rather than fathers, are the primary caretakers of children and the home is socially and economically constructed based on income inequality, just as the society makes it “more rational, even necessary, in any individual conjugal family for fathers, rather than mothers, to be primary wage-earners”. Besides, no one can claim that this mother is good enough and the other is not, and there is no way of assessing the degree to which mothers follow the
psychoanalyst’s advice. It is, perhaps, likely that many do not, as the guidance for
mothering, because many psychoanalysts are unbending and do not take into account
problems or variations in family’s social situation. The mother is assumed to be in a
stable marriage; difficulties related to her economic situation, marital status, class and
race are ignored. Many psychoanalysts provide advice to the mother about the way she
should care for her children, but the notion that every woman desires motherhood is not
universally accepted.

Simon De Beauvoir is one of the first and, perhaps, the most influential to
proclaim that women’s ability to give birth is the source of their subordination. In her
view, motherhood signalled that women were twice doomed: biologically, during
pregnancy when they lacked control over their bodies, and socially when children
restricted them to home. She opines that “pregnancy and motherhood are very variously
experienced in accordance to a woman’s true attitude which may be one of revolt
resignation, satisfaction or enthusiasm” (Second Sex 510).

Motherhood is a duty forced upon Celie and she performs the role of mother
with a complete dissatisfaction.

I can’t move fast enough. By time I get back from the well, the water be
warm. By time I git the tray ready the food be cold. (Purple 4)

Celie’s motherhood starts when she is still immature. As she pities her mother’s
situation with her step-father, she pities herself for having babies and for losing them.
Her mother’s illness increases when she sees her daughter unable to move:

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. When I start to hurt and then my stomach
start moving and then that little baby come out.... (Purple 4)
Then Celie explains how she loses her first baby girl. She thinks that ‘Pa’ took it while she was sleeping and “kilt it out there in the woods” (ibid.). The other baby, boy, is taken also but she thinks that he is alive. Her step-father does not have anything for her except breasts full of milk running down on herself. Instead of carrying babies, her ‘Pa’ teaches her how to carry guilt and shame on herself: “He act like he can’t stand me no more. Say I’m evil an always up to no good” (5). Because Celie has no other adults to offer her guidance after her mother’s death, she has only ‘Pa’ to teach her what she can expect from life.

Motherhood is a word which has no meaning in “Pa” Alphonso’s concept of family. It is also a dirty word in his mouth. He tells Mr. ___ (Albert) that Celie is not fresh and she is spoiled twice (i.e. she has given birth to two children). When Mr.___ comes to ask for a wife, asking for Nettie’s hand, Celie’s step-father refuses and offers him Celie instead, comparing the step-daughter with the cow (10). Convinced that he cannot have Nettie, Mr.______ returns to marry Celie and condemns her to a life of physical and psychological abuse. His motivation for marriage is obvious: he is desperate for someone to care for the unruly children of his first marriage. Celie is merely a salve destined to care for his children and home and serve as an outlet for his sexual urges.

The idea of male possessiveness has emerged in the beginning of the novel. Celie believes that she is nothing more than a slave. This indication has to do with Harpo’s retaliation against his father bringing home a new mother. Celie is hit on the head by a rock and there is a profuse bleeding. Instead of getting any sympathy from her husband, she thinks that this kind of aggressive attack on her is just a normal thing as she wraps the wound and gets to work in the house.
But despite the crisis, Celie represents the maternal image of the novel. She is a mirror of the black female of the time. Walker illuminates the women in the novel as instinctively adept at raising children even though faced with sexual oppression by patriarchies in society. When the mother is no longer able to provide nurturing for children, the other suppressed female characters care for the children’s upbringing. Celie concentrates on every detail in the house and she unconsciously starts acting like a mother.

The girls hair ain’t been comb since their mummy died. I tell him I’ll just have to shave it off. Start fresh. He say bad luck to cut a woman hair. So after I bandage my head best I can and cook dinner ... I start trying to untangle hair. They only six and eight and they cry. They scream. They curse me of murder. By ten o’clock I’m done. They cry theirselves to sleep.

But I don’t cry. I lay there thinking about Nettie .... (14)

In her book *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow challenges the traditional view that woman is biologically predisposed towards nurturing infants based on “the seemingly natural connection between women’s childbearing and lactation capacities and their responsibility for child care” (3; italics mine), and explores the psychological basis of mothering and analyzes the reproduction of mothering as a “central and constituting element in the social organization and reproduction of gender” (7). Even by losing subject position and losing their identities, black female characters in the novel demonstrate a commitment to motherhood. Women are not only able to bear children, they also take more responsibility for infants and children than men do, and sustain primary emotional ties with infants. For example, Celie is able to sustain good relationship with Harpo in spite of all he has done to her. Celie is always mistreated by
her husband who is presented as a nameless figure, as Mr___ in Celie’s letters; however, she displays some dormant desire to be loved and cared for.

As Celie and her mother are totally oppressed by ‘Pa’ (Alphonso), her mother did not have a chance to ring up all of her emotions. She was unable to bring in her the feelings of pride. Her mother was always sick and there were many obstacles that forbade the mother-daughter relationship to actualize in an expected way. Mens-Verhulst (xiv) distinctively relates mothering and daughtering:

If mothering can be defined as actions and activities related to the role of mothers (usually conceived of as daily care of the young—looking after them, raising them in an intense and emotional relationship), daughtering must be understood as all the actions and activities inherent to the role of daughters. Therefore, daughtering implies being involved in an originally dependent relationship involving being cared for by older or more powerful people.

It is argued that African American girls and boys are indubitably impacted by marital dissolution among parents and gain, to some degree, cues from their parents about how to relate to future mates: the African American mother-daughter relationship has been identified as one that is characterized by frequent and intense training about how to behave with males and general life success. But the young daughter, Celie, does not seem lucky enough to have any effective motherly guide. In fact, she is deprived of both the subject positions: she is neither a mother in the true sense of the word, nor does she receive the treatment of a daughter. She finds herself in-between and in need to know more about herself and her personality. This is the reason that Celie’s emotional and spiritual state remains veiled, and when she gets the chance to know the
details which are hidden from her away through abuse and enslavement, she moves beyond all limitations.

The image of a weak and sick mother can never be Celie’s example, so she sought motherhood inside some other woman who she thinks is superior to both her and her mother in every aspect. Beauty, self-esteem, confidence and independence which Celie always dreams of are now in front of her eyes in the person of Shug Avery, her husband’s mistress. This woman sets a precarious example for others, for woman who seems unbounded by the restrictions that are placed on her sex. “And then I think about Shug Avery”, says Celie in one of her letters, “I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him” (*The Color Purple* 14).

The lack of the maternal or sexual relationship between her step-father and her mother causes her abuse and now she is with a man who has a beloved. Consequently, Celie assumes that this woman is able to win her husband’s heart, and the result is that she falls in love not with her husband but with his beloved. Shug understands the transitory nature of her freedom; it provides the perfect backdrop for a singer of the blues. Celie notices how Shug talks and acts sometimes like a man. This demeanour is different from any Celie has ever known. With Shug’s help, Celie finds inner strength, an identity worthy of love, a sense of self-worth as well as a sense of place and, as Sunitha Diwakar (131) states:

Shug becomes the embodiment of feminist existential freedom in choosing her career as a blues singer and in refusing to settle down for a life of domesticity. Celie sometimes feels that there is something masculine about Shug. Shug has grown strong and independent by being true to her own experience.... Shug’s character functions not only as the
antithesis of Celie but also as a vehicle through which Celie becomes conscious of and empowered to address the conditions that oppress her.

When Celie looks at Shug as an example of the woman whom she has never met before, she is struck by her beauty, her loud and impressive presence and the courage with which she carries off her glamorous clothes; the conventional romance for the blues singer starts as an infatuation. Even before their meeting, Celie is attracted to the very sight of Shug in a photograph. She comes to Albert’s house and she is sick. Celie notices the tears rolling down on Albert’s face. As he cannot nurse her he orders Celie to do that. Celie’s physical attraction to Shug comes to the extreme when she is asked to bathe the sick singer: “she is confused whether she has transgressed her gender role and ‘turned into a man’” (Chatterjee 208). Her ecstasy is akin to that of a prayer: “I wash her body, it feel like I am praying. My hands tremble and breath short” (47).

Celie’s admiration of Shug makes her feel comfortable with herself. Shug also awakens in Celie a sexuality that was never felt with Mr. ___. This is related in the following observation Celie makes:

I look at Shug and I feel my heart began to cramp. It hurt me so, I cover it with my hand. I think I might as well be under the table, for all they care. I hate the way I look, I hate the way I’m dress. Nothing but churchgoing clothes in my chifferobe. And Mr ___ looking at Shug’s bright black skin in her tight red dress, her feet in little sassy red shoes. Her hair shining in waves.

Before I know it, tears meet under my Chin.

An I’m confuse. (*Color Purple* 69-70)

She is confused by her reaction to Shug. Celie, who has never been a sexual creature, becomes one with Shug. The strength of their bond outside of the world of man and the
retrieval of letters from Nettie allow her to begin her transformation. Celie realizes that
she is worthy of love and finally she finds someone who adores her and loves her.

    My mama die, I tell Shug, my sister run away. Mr___ come git me to take
care his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on
top of me and ... , even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say.

    She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me....

(103)

“Female bonding explores the numerous vistas of the lesbian theme and leads up to the
pivotal relationship between Celie and Shug” (Chatterjee 203). This relationship is
perhaps a corollary of the traumatic experience which Celie went through, ending up in
an experience which has remained unseen and unknown for long time. The crisis starts
with her concern for her mother’s life if anybody knows about her rape (“you better not
tell nobody but God; it’d kill your mammy”). It also indicates Celie’s concern to her
mother’s health also especially when her mother deliberately avoids sex and
consequently Alphonso’s desire turns to Celie. She explains that by saying: “But I
don’t never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook. My
mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now. But too sick
to last long” (Color Purple 3).

    It is obvious that women’s bonding starts from the very beginning of the novel.
Celle makes many sacrifices for her mother and for her younger sister. She marries
Mr.____ because all she thought about was nothing except how she can come to her if
she marries him and then they both will run away. Celie never thinks of marital stability
and her lesbian attitude is the result of marriage resistance, but ironically, Celie allows
her sister to run away from her husband’s advances and stays loyal to her house and
thinks deeply of Shug Avery. Celie experiences motherhood to her sister, Nettie, in her concern about her education and her survival independently but she never thinks of someone who is concerned about her and loves her for what she is. Shug shows her interest in Celie’s development: the development of her identity and self esteem. But first Celie has to “emerge from her own blindness” (Chatterjee 206). Shug starts to bring her up like a child. Since she insists on her to see her face in the mirror and to feel that she is beautiful and desirable, Celie finds herself loyal to Shug.

Undoubtedly, and as it is mentioned clearly in the novel, Celie is attracted to Shug’s masculinity and the way she cares about all the women in Albert’s house:

Shug come over and she and Sofia hug.

Shug say, Girl, you look like a good time, you do.

That when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl, you look like a good time. Women always talk bout hair and health. How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they hugging on look like a good time. (77)

It is possible to ostensibly perceive that all the women in the novel represent motherhood because it’s a woman’s instinct, particularly so far as the Celie-Shug relation is concerned. Shug looks at Celie as a child, despite her age, who needs to grow up. Shug reformulates and crystallizes Celie’s personality and brings her to the society as a mature woman. But we cannot consider lesbianism as mothering because motherhood and lesbianism are completely different from each other in both motivation and orientation. The relation between Celie and Shug is a way by which Celie discourses her body as Shug raises up every detail of her personality. But Celie lives longing for her motherhood and she remembers it in every aspect of her life.
By the time I got back home I was feeling so bad I couldn’t do nothing but sleep. I tried to work on some new parts I’m trying to make for pregnant women, but just the thought of anybody getting pregnant make me want to cry. (23)

In support of refuting the claim that the relationship between Celie and Shug is an aspect of motherhood, one has to refer back and analyse the definitions of womanism offered by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of our Mother’s Garden* in which she sophisticatedly present the relation between women (xi-xii):

1. **Womanist 1.** From *womanish.* (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or wilful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious.*

2. **Also:** A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance for laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every flower
color represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.”

Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”


4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

Clearly, the relationship between Celie and Shug is that of two womanists, taking care of each other, and not that of mother and daughter. At least on the part of Celie, she has certain sexual urges towards Shug, and Shug does reciprocate.

Moreover, in *The Color Purple* we come across two stories of two women/mothers: one is Celie, who has lost her children and who is longing to see them; and Shug, who has left her three kids with their grandmother and says simply “I don’t miss nothing” (*Purple* 48). The personality of Shug is strongly delineated from the beginning of the novel. She appears complete in her courage and validity in the male dominant world – this attitude can be compared to Meridian’s view of motherhood later in this chapter. When Alphonso tells Albert that Celie is no longer able to bear children, she seeks comfort in Shug’s photograph. So, there is no wonder if Celie surrenders to Shug to know about life or to learn some of her courage, considering that Celie is a woman who spends her life oppressed and prohibited from practising any of her rights.

The relationship that Celie shares with Shug is a core of women’s bonding in spite of Walker’s awareness of using the word ‘lesbian’. Walker reminds us: “The word ‘lesbian’ may not, in any case, be suitable (or comfortable) for black women, who surely would have begun their women-bonding earlier than Sappho’s residency on the Isle of Lesbos.” She says that black women would rather prefer to refer “to themselves
as ‘whole’ women … women who love other women, yes, but women who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all black people” (Chatterjee 207).

In *The Color Purple*, the theme of motherhood is also echoed in the behaviour of almost all the female characters. Squeak, Harpo’s second wife, looks after Harpo’s children after their mother, Sofia, is imprisoned. Nettie also takes care of Celie’s son and daughter, more intensively after she discovers that they are Celie’s children. One important aspect that reflects the mothering-race intricate interaction is the attitude Sofia has towards the white lady, Eleanor Jane, and her son, Reynolds Stanley: Sofia blatantly expresses her dislike though she has to work for the white lady and take care of her son as a condition for her parole (Sofia was imprisoned for offending a white man and his wife). That is to say, Sofia has to practice mothering for others, though reluctantly, while her children are being mothered by another lady.

The black male’s oppression of the wives and daughters never stops in one novel of Alice Walker, but emerges as a pervasive motif in most of her novels. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is a remarkable representation of the miserable fate of the black mother. In this novel we see women starve under dismal conditions, trying to create, from nothing, a suitable and sane life for their children in spite of all the hardships. Here, motherhood faces an ordeal of poverty, race and gender. The novel relates the story of exile and the story of black people in the South of America, and the situation of African American women who are desperately seeking a loaf of bread for their children.

Alice Walker depicts the sharecropping system and its impact on three generations of a black family. Grange Copeland earns his living as a sharecropper for Captain Shipley. He is powerless to control his economic survival. He vents his frustration on his wife, Margaret. He couples his beating of her with the
psychologically inflicted pain of his weekly visits to the whore, Josie. Like Grange, Margaret toils in the fields. The physical exhaustion she experiences is augmented by the weariness resulting from the care of her house and children. Margaret is tired of the abuse she is subjected to by her husband, Grange, and her boss. She reacts in a passive way. Her extramarital affairs appear as a means to escape the brutality and drudgery of her marriage and home life, a life which leaves her emotionally and spiritually impoverished.

While exploring ways to improve her family’s economic status and mitigate Grange’s debts, Margaret succumbs to the advances of one of Shipley’s white men. Grange is shocked first by her action and then by her pregnancy. Infuriated, he abandons her and her children. Margaret, however much verbally and physically abused, is unable to face the future without him. When Grange departs for the North, she poisons the infant and herself. This suicide is a direct result of Grange’s treatment of her. Margaret has been psychologically abused for so long that she fails to see her life as being worthwhile without him.

The complex Brownfield, the son of Grange and Margaret, poses a dilemma that is reflected in his treatment of female characters in the novel. Sigmund Freud describes the mother as the child’s primary love object and as the parent most responsible for its optimal development. He argues that in the early years of the infant’s life, the relationship with the mother is closed, but during the Oedipal conflict stage, the boy renounces the love of his mother in fear of his more powerful father. This view seems to support the reason behind Brownfield’s hatred for his mother. Her reluctant consent to his father Grange’s cruelty, as well as her obedience to his commands, makes her appear as a woman who is more concerned about her marriage than her children. According to Freud, the girl also moves away from her mother whom she sees as
powerless and ‘castrated’. The novel begins with a child, Brownfield, as he tries to understand his father. At ten he loves his mother; already his father seems unreachable. Grange hardly ever talks to his son, hardly ever admits his existence.

In contrast, Brownfield’s children move away from him and remain attached to their mother, Mem, whom they see as more powerful and who performs as the most powerful and the supporter to the family. For her children, Mem becomes as a strong shelter in which they can hide and protect themselves from the father’s weakness, selfishness and ignorance. Mem is set as a foil to Margaret, who is depicted as being more concerned with her marriage than her children. Brownfield’s earliest perception reveals her subservience to Grange: “He thought his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn’t have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father” (Grange Copeland 5).

Brownfield indicates that not only is his mother uncommunicative with the children, but also she was negligent. Margaret is a black woman who merely exits. She is unable to find happiness in her marriage with Grange or with men to whom she prostitutes herself. Her children are witnesses to her impoverished existence and the role of the mother provides neither purpose nor happiness to her. Neither family nor friends exist to offer Margaret a relief from her marriage and home life. Walker here depicts a black woman devoid of emotional sustenance.

Brownfield Copeland, whose mother kills herself because of his father’s abandonment, grows up hungry and unloved. Throughout his marriage he has unsatisfied needs for protection which persist although for a while his wife passionately mothers him as he grows big, strong and firm with love. But his life does not allow him to look after her. The debts grow faster than the cotton and he begins to loathe her. Every Saturday night he beats her, trying to put the blame for his failure on her face,
much like his father did to his mother. Alice Walker, skilfully, depicts Brownfield turning into a murderous, whining beast. Her sympathy, however, is plainly with his wife, with all black women, whom she sees as the victims of both whites and their own men’s rage.¹⁴

Brownfield follows his father’s footsteps into the mine of the white man’s sharecropping system. Feeling defeated and trapped, he turns his rage against his wife and children. Eventually, Mem grows tired of Brownfield’s abuse and the unhealthy condition in which they live. She forces Brownfield at gun point to get a factory job and returns to her profession as a school teacher. And then she succeeds in raising the family’s standard of living until her health fails. Though Brownfield holds no hope for change, Mem’s dreams survive. She continually saves money in hopes of moving her children to a house of which they can be proud. Brownfield, however, undermines her efforts by stealing the money each time and squandering it on an unsuccessful attempt at pig farming and the purchase of a car which is later repossessed. He reminds her not to aspire so highly: “‘Just remember you ain’t white,’ he said, even while hating with all his heart the women he wanted and did not want his wife to imitate. He liked to sling the perfection of white women at her because color was something she could not change and as his own colored skin annoyed him he meant for hers to humble her” (Grange Copeland 58).

In spite of all these insults, Mem does not succumb to him. Though she is physically exhausted from her abusive marriage, demands upon her children, and the fact of her labour, she presents the promise of an improved life to her daughters while their father symbolizes failure. When Mem’s health leaves her unable to work, Brownfield does not pay the bills and as a result, they are evicted. They move to a cottage owned by a Mr. J. L, whom Mem is incapable of resisting and provides him
with a perverse satisfaction. She imploringly argues: “you can’t just let these children freeze to death” (148).

Yet she recovers to work again as a domestic servant for seventeen dollars a week. This money becomes the backbone of the family. Brownfield, of course, cannot bear this and the gun which once she pointed at him to go to the factory is now pointed at her face shooting her to death as his horrified daughters look on:

What Ruth remembered now with nausea and a feeling of cold dying, was Mem lying faceless among a scattering of gravel in a pool of blood, in which were scattered around her head like a halo, a dozen bright yellow oranges that glistened on one side form the light. She and Ornette were there beside her in an instant, not minding their father, who had already turned away, still cursing, into the house. They were there looking at the oranges and at the peppermint sticks and at everything. It occurred to Ruth sadly that there really was no Santa Claus. She was Santa Claus. Mem. And she noticed for the first time, that even though it was the middle of winter, there were large frayed holes in the bottom of her mother’s shoes. On Mem’s right foot the shoe lay almost off and a flat packet of newspaper stuck halfway out. Daphne ran up screaming and threw herself across her mother’s legs. She began to rub Mem’s feet to make them warm.” (Grange Copeland 172-3; emphasis mine)

On the one hand, one can be acquainted through this extract to the extent of sacrifice Mem has offered to her children. On the other hand, Chodorow (1999) is of the view that the perpetuation of mothering to daughters makes women more sensitive than men to emotional and personal life experiences. Daphne’s futile attempt to revive her mother stands in contrast to Brownfield’s turning of his back; Mem is to be mourned by
her children, not her husband. We can see that the mother-daughter relationship is clearly a passionate and a central one. This relationship may overwhelm and invade both the mother’s and the daughter’s psyche.15 “Daughters and mothers both take an active part in shaping their relationship”, states Mens-Verhulst (xiv).

Margaret and Mem Copeland are victimized by abusive husbands who are irresponsible to their wives and children. But unlike Margaret, Mem embraces the role of the mother. The children are her raison d’être, and her death leaves the family shattered. Brownfield is imprisoned; Ornette prostitutes herself; Daphne is institutionalized and Ruth goes to live with the grandfather, Grange and his wife Josie. After seven years in prison, Brownfield is set free. Josie gives him his daughter, Ruth, because she feels jealous of Grange’s care for her. Brownfield’s attempts to take Ruth away from Grange infuriates Grange so he shoots his son in full view of the court and sacrifices his life for Ruth’s freedom from the father’s crudity and brutality.

Following Robert Coles (1971), Walker’s message is clear: the black male’s response to the racism of the white society prevents the black woman from succeeding in her attempt to improve the economic status of the family. It is true that the tragedy had to be documented, yet social documentation and political prescription can be static and flat and self-defeating when the men, women, and children involved become merely part of something described as a history of exploitation and oppression.

Walker’s Meridian depicts the story of South American black people, but here Walker makes the main character epitomize “every exemplary act of bravery for the black community” (Piercy, 1976). Motherhood in Meridian is trapped between history and choice. The history of black women who had children and who lost them for only one reason, their colour, and the choice of the black woman who had to choose between her identity and being a good mother. Walker’s depiction of the black woman in her
roles as a wife, mother and lover illustrates why it is morally imperative for Americans to work towards the eradication of racism and sexism; these institutionalized attitudes result in suffering and the tragic waste of human potential and lives.

In *Meridian* Walker focuses on the world of middle class blacks, for whom marriage fails to provide happiness. The first marriage in the novel is the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Hill, Meridian’s parents. Right from the beginning, the reader is told that the marriage between these two is a wrong choice. Meridian’s mother “was not a woman who should have had children. She was capable of thought and growth and action only if unfretted by the needs of dependants, or the demands, requirements of a husband. Her spirit was of such fragility that the slightest impact on it caused a shattering beyond restoration” (39). Mrs. Hill is a school teacher, an earning person, looking for possibilities to seek teaching position anywhere. She has a desire to experience married life and a curiosity about what married life could hold. She decides to choose what other black women have chosen:

There grew in her feeling that the mothers of her pupils no matter that they envied her clothes, her speech, her small black car, pitied her. And in their harried or passive but always overweight and hideously dressed figures she began to suspect a mysterious inner life, secret from her that made them willing, even happy to endure. (*Meridian* 40)

Although Meridian’s mother has not been given information about the restriction of motherhood, both she and her daughter are told about its glory. Thus Meridian has glorifying, yet precarious, perception and knowledge of her maternal ancestors – i.e. mothers who were slaves and who were often denied their children; mothers who did anything and everything to keep their children. Meridian is subjugated under the memory of those slaves who had to starve themselves to death to feed their children.
There is, indeed, a clearly established tradition in the US that prescribes marriage and motherhood as the primary function of women: the society, especially the southern American society “embraced gendered notions of propriety, which emphasized the separation of male and female ‘spheres’ and particularly stressed women’s domestic capacities as wives and mothers” (Clark, 59; my italics). Although she seems to stick to her traditional role as wife and mother, Meridian’s mother was not fit for the role of a mother. She had the freedom of thinking about the possibilities to improve her life. But after tasting her independence as a school teacher, she wanted ‘more of life to happen to her’ (33). She began to believe that she was missing something in life, some ‘secret mysterious life’ (ibid.) which she thought mothers were experiencing. Thus she marries Meridian’s father and becomes pregnant, believing that this will add something to her personal life. “She could never forgive her community, her family, the whole world for not warning her against children” (35). For this woman, motherhood meant ‘becoming distracted from herself’ (37). What appeals to her most of all is the fact that she cannot even resent her motherhood and the ‘death’ of her personal life: “There is no one she could cry out to and say ‘It is not fair!’” (50). Motherhood to Mrs. Hill is a burden which represents the loss of her teaching position and, more importantly, her own self. She never pretends to enjoy her daughter, nor does she make any attempt to find enjoyment or satisfaction in the keeping of her home. In this case, it is not poverty or an abusive husband that conspires to cause the black woman’s misery; it is her conformity to the behaviour of other black women.

Walker entitles the chapter in which these ideas are expressed, “Have You Stolen Anything?” The question Mrs. Hill asks her daughter Meridian makes her daughter realize that her mother’s life is stolen. Mrs. Hill never discusses marriage or motherhood with her daughter. It is no wonder then that Meridian has deep conflict or
illusion towards the issue of motherhood. So when Meridian sees her mother’s attitude towards motherhood, she becomes unable to repeat the same experience. But Meridian knows that her social standing in her society will be determined by her ability to attract and keep a boyfriend. As Meridian leaves on her dates, her mother teaches her how to deal with the man. And after her engagement with the boyfriend, she finds herself pregnant. Her boyfriend, Eddie, who is an attractive high school basketball player, marries her. They move to a small house near the school. Though her parents are against her early marriage, they acknowledge that the boyfriend has high aspirations. He continues his study and works overtime at a restaurant to support his small family. His parents welcome her into the family, spend time to know her and prepare for the baby’s arrival. Meridian, however, never thinks seriously about the baby. She knows only one thing: she does not want the baby. Even her love for Eddie starts to fade: “But he was ‘good’ to her, even then. He did not ‘cheat’ and ‘beat’, which meant he was ‘good’ to her, according to her mother, the other woman in the neighborhood and in fact just about everyone she knew, who seemed always to expect the occurrences together, like the twin faces of a single plague” (Meridian 58). Instead of being very grateful to her husband’s kindness, she is oblivious of it. Meridian cannot express or explain how much her husband is unable to measure the width of her dreams.

Walker then shows Meridian at her earlier age, between twelfth and fifteenth years. This small woman is exposed to marriage life. Meridian always remembers her early days in the funeral home when the owner of the house, George Daxter, would give her candy and money to abuse her. (This can be linked to the concessions she makes later in her life, namely to the black professor, Mr. Raymond, she works for.) Her physical experiences with Eddie, her boyfriend and husband later, are linked in her mind with those earlier experiences at the funeral home. So the birth of their son
sounded the alarm for the end of Meridian’s married life. From the start she links the child with slavery and dreams each night of ways to kill him. In the chapter entitled “The Happy Mother”, Walker describes the teenager Meridian’s experience of motherhood as ‘slavery’:

She sat in a rocker Eddie bought and stroked her son’s back, her fingers eager to stretch him out of her life. She realized that she was even more helpless than herself, and yet she would diaper him roughly, yanking his fat brown legs in the air, because he looked like his father and because everyone who came to visit assumed she loved him, and because he did not feel like anything to her but a ball and chain. (Meridian 63)

The thought of her inability to enjoy or endure the troubles of “happy motherhood” frightens her and creates a sense of guilt in her, leading to her entertaining thoughts of committing suicide. Meridian departs with Eddie because she can neither love him nor the baby. Meridian is just like her mother, finds no pleasure in married life. Walker indicates in her portrayal of this kind of marriages that marriage can stifle an individual’s growth and fail to be the “right choice” for some women.

In fact, a crucial difference between Mrs. Hill and her daughter, Meridian, is that Mr. Hill stays with his wife despite their differences, but Eddie leaves Meridian because she does not experience physical ecstasy nor union with him and his child. Soon after, she decides to give up the child so that she can journey north to attend Saxon College. For Meridian, making a relation with a man is a matter of self-fulfilment, but her experience with Eddie does not bring her closer to him; however, the result is the child. The initial experience of mothering has a different value for Meridian: It is a means which distances her from life.
The difference between the initial conception of motherhood and what Meridian does to her child is shown in the chapter “Battle Fatigue”. In this chapter, the mother and her daughter confront each other. Mrs. Hill shows her disapproval of Meridian’s desire to pursue education at Saxon College. This opportunity is given to her by a white family in Connecticut. Besides, Mrs. Hill never agrees to Meridian’s involvement and participation in the Civil Rights 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 are crazy. God separated the sheeps [sic] from the goats and the black folks from the white. And me from anybody that acts as foolish as they do. It never bothered me to sit in the back of the bus, you get just as good and you don’t have all those nasty white asses passing you. (Meridian 81)

Mrs. Hill has a superficial assessment of the Civil Rights Movement and she wants Meridian to opt for what she has chosen for her:

“I just don’t see how you could let another woman raise your child”, said she. “It is just selfishness. You ought to hang your head in shame. I have six children,” she continued self-righteously, “though I never wanted to have any, and I have raised everyone myself.” (Meridian 86)

Apparently, Meridian’s attachment to the Civil Rights Movement is just a justification to herself to avoid the role of the mother. She feels that she has failed to uphold the tradition established by her ancestors:

Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that they had laid down their lives, gladly, for their children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessing from “Freedom” was that it meant they could
keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill done with her precious child? She had given him away. She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member. (Meridian 87-88)

Here the past is depicted as posing a psychological dilemma for Meridian, a dilemma which is heightened by her mother’s stance. As Christian, the children receive from their ancestors a heritage of sacrifice and suffering, but Meridian knows very well that she must leave her child for his own good. She decides to leave him instead of treating him like a burden. She does not want the child to grow up with the same feelings of guilt.

She had not anticipated the nightmares that began to trouble her sleep. Nightmares of the child, Rundi, calling to her, crying, suffering unbearable deprivations because she was not there, yet she knew it was the opposite: Because she was not there he needn’t worry, ever, about being deprived. She felt deeply that what she’d done was the only thing, and was right, but that did not seem to matter. On some deeper level that she had anticipated or had even been aware of, she felt condemned, consigned to penitence, for life. (Meridian 91)

It seems as it were that Meridian has sacrificed her life for her child, and she is trapped between her aspirations towards self-fulfilment and the regret and guilt of leaving her child. Even if she reaches a position in society, the fact that she has given her child up for adoption is absolutely a sour truth.

Meridian studies very hard, searching for the “extraordinary” (90). At Saxon College, she earns an excellent social and academic reputation. Because it is difficult
for her to study when others are beaten and jailed, she joins the Atlanta Movement in her second year. Before journeying to Atlanta, Meridian has vowed not to engage in sex. Her work in the Civil Rights Movement, however, offers her the opportunity to become involved with Truman Held, who “she felt protected when she was with. To her he was courageous and ‘new.’ He was, in any case, unlike any black man she has known. He was a man who fought against obstacles, a man who could become anything, a man whose very words were unintelligible without considerable thought” (96).

In this way, Meridian seems to want to make quick mindless love with him whenever he is near. After doing that, Truman leaves her to return to one of the white exchange students on campus, Lynne Rabinowitz. Though Meridian feels deeply for him, their relation gets irreparably damaged. She decides to have an abortion rather than tell him of her pregnancy: “On her way to have an abortion she saw them riding across the campus in her [Lynne’s] father’s new red car. From a distance, they both looked white to her, that day” (112). When Truman sees her again, she feels very embarrassed to see him dating the exchange students. In fact, this seemed to her strange and unfair. He dated them because their ‘color made them interesting – made her ashamed as if she were less’ (103). He approached her, put his arms around her shoulders and said, “You walk with your head down. It should be up. Proud and free” (ibid.). Meridian felt disgusted at his words. She asked him whether freedom, liberty, equality could cover all his beliefs, and in her mind she wished to confront him about the exchange students but she never does because she has a belief also, a realization that nobody wants white girls except for their empty heads and white bodies. At this time, she can actually remember her ancestors who were oppressed by white people. The idea of slavery dominates her. She remembers that her mother, Mrs. Hill, though
not a maid, has often worked for white families near Christmas time in order to earn extra money. Meridian seems even to share her grandmother’s disgust at and opinion of white women, whom, she thinks, are “useless except as baby machine which would continue to produce white people who would grow up to oppress her” (105).

To Meridian, Truman’s decision to pursue a relationship with Lynne is a conscious choice of whiteness over blackness. The Civil Rights Movement dedicated itself to creating opportunities for black people where there were none. Truman’s relationship with Lynne is one such opportunity. Just as he feels free to leave Meridian without explanation, she feels no obligation to tell him of the child he would have fathered.

Meridian’s abortion is a painful experience:

Later, as the doctor tore into her body without giving her anesthesia (and while he lectured her on her morals) and she saw stars because of the pain, she was still seeing them laughing, carefree, together. It was not that she wanted him anymore, she did not. It enraged her that she could be made to endure such pain, and that he was oblivious to it.

(Meridian 112)

Furthermore, the doctor is inhuman in his treatment of her, assuming she is promiscuous: “I could tie your tubes’, he chopped out angrily”, and Meridian’s response is quick: “Burn ‘em out by the roots for all I care” (ibid.) She is more than willing to ensure that her fecundity will never again result in an unwanted pregnancy. Once freed from the possibility of pregnancy she is able to become a mother figure for all she encounters. Following Robin Morgan (1978) in her autobiography describing the conflict between feminist politics and maternal experience during the liberation movement’s early days:
Since the patriarchy commanded women to be mothers (the thesis), we had to rebel with our own polarity and declare motherhood a reactionary cabal (antithesis). Today a new synthesis has emerged; the concept of mother-right, affirmation of a woman’s child-bearing and/or child-rearing when it is a woman’s choice. It is refreshing at last to be able to come out of my mother-closet and yell to the world that I love my dear wonderful delicious child. (qtd in Hirsch, 162-3)

In fact, this incident draws attention to some of the controversial issues in contemporary society, such as abortion rights, the ethics of reproductive technology, children’s right to “divorce” parents, the establishment of maternity and family leave policy, requiring workfare for welfare recipients, etc.; some of the most heated social and political debates taking place in the late twentieth century America turn out to revolve around disputed meanings of mothering and motherhood in contemporary society.

Walker describes the crisis of abortion painfully, though she is one of those activists who encourage it. In this novel, the abortion case which the heroine goes through is traumatic and affects her life all through the novel. De Beauvoir says:

Abortion is considered a revolting crime to which it is indecent even to refer. For an author to describe the joy and the suffering of a woman in childbirth is quite alright; but if he depicts a case of abortion, he is accused of wallowing in filth and presenting humanity in a sordid light.[sic] (The Second Sex 502)

Walker, details the excruciating experience of Meridian’s abortion, both physical and psychological, albeit she also refers to the experience as emanating from the heroine’s free will.
Abortion being a moot question, there are generally two attitudes: the pro-life and the pro-choice. The first position is based on a conviction that women are bound by their biological roles, and that motherhood should be women’s sole mission and source of gratification. In contrast, the pro-choice proponents opine that women are not or should not be subject to the dictates of biological reproduction, and that motherhood is one of many roles, a burden when defined as the only role. Both Meridian and her mother Mrs. Hill seem to belong to the second position, looking at her child as a burden which circumscribed her growth, but whereas Mrs. Hill sticks to it and maintains motherhood, even if lacking in motherly affection, Meridian opts for her growth and not only leaves her child but annihilates any future possibility of pregnancy after her abortion. Loretta J. Ross (141) aptly observes, “To ask whether African-American women favor or oppose abortion is the wrong question.... The question is not if we support abortion, but how, and when, and why”. She reasons out that: “Abortion, in and of itself, does not automatically create freedom. But it does not allow women to exert some control over our biology, freeing us from the inevitability of unwanted pregnancies, and therefore indispensable to bodily and political self-determination” (144).

Meridian’s relationship with Truman, however, does not end with the abortion of his child. They remain friends and Meridian becomes a source of advice and comfort to Truman. She, later, rejects Truman’s attempts to have any relation with her. Lynne also maintains an ongoing relationship with Meridian, especially after her child, Camara, dies. Though nobody comforts her after the loss of her baby, Rundi, and her later abortion, she is now able to see another mother’s pain. Actually, Meridian functions like a mother to both Lynne and Truman; as they suffer heartbreak and disappointment, they seek guidance from her.
Once freed from the possibility of unwanted pregnancies and the sexual advances of men around her, Meridian is able to act as a protector of all the black children she encounters. Just as she attempted to care for the Wild Child when she first arrived at Saxon, Meridian adopts the cause of defending the black children she meets during her work in the Movement. Meridian is depicted facing a tank in a small Mississippi town as she demands that black children be allowed to view a visiting sideshow. The show consists of the sham, mummified remains of a white woman, Marilene O’Shay. Though the show holds nothing of worth, Meridian defends the right of black children to satisfy their curiosity, as the white children have done.

Walker juxtaposes historical events, such as the assassination of President Kennedy, with the events of Meridian’s life to illustrate how personal sacrifice is necessary among all members of a society in order to enact a meaningful and lasting change. Though Meridian’s quest does not culminate in her happiness, she does, however, find spiritual and emotional growth as a result of her efforts. And, most importantly, she garners the power to cause individuals around her to re-examine their own lives. Meridian devotes her entire life to the Movement. Though, she stands apart from her mother Mrs. Hill in her approach to motherhood; she still respects her mother and her sacrifices:

To Meridian, her mother was a giant. She had never perceived her in any other way. Or, if she did have occasional thoughts that challenged this conception she swept them out of her mind as petty and ridiculous.... Meridian’s sadness had been only that she had failed her mother.... That her mother was deliberately obtuse about what had happened meant nothing beside her own feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Besides, she had already forgiven her mother for anything she had
ever done to her or might do, because, to her, Mrs. Hill had persisted in bringing them all (the children, the husband, the family, the race) to a point far beyond where she, in her mother’s place, her grandmother’s place, her great-grandmother’s place, would have stopped. (*Meridian* 120-1)

Meridian’s mother’s great-great-grandmother had been a slave whose two children had been sold away from her. She followed the man who bought them for days until she was able to steal them back: “The third time – after her owner had exhausted one of his field hands whipping her, and glints of bone began to show through the muscles on her back – she was allowed to keep them on the condition that they would not eat no food she did not provide herself” (121). She was able to take care of them despite all of the obstacles. Even during summer, they would exist by picking berries at night. In autumn they lived on nuts they found on the woods. They smoked fish they caught in streams. They continued this way until the children became teenagers. The great mother died, “the result of years of slow starvation” (121), and her children were sold on the same day of her burial. Mrs. Hill’s mother married a man of many good qualities. He was a man who kept his word, ran a prosperous farm and, beside all these qualities, had no desire to bring children up. Though, he enjoyed sex with any good-looking woman he could ever meet – “and he beat his wife and children with more pleasure than he beat his mules” (122).

Meridian’s sense of guilt makes her recall all the great efforts put in by her mother and grandmothers. The story of her mother’s education is very painful. Mrs. Hill’s father refused to send her to school saying that she was only learned to cook collard greens, but her mother stood against the father’s desire. She bargained with him and the agreement resulted that: school would cost twelve dollars a year, and her
mother would have to earn every cent of it. She refused to complain and she never even mentioned the hardship of it. At that time, she was pregnant with her twelfth child. Meridian’s mother worships her mother not only for this but for all her efforts and labour in the field with her rub board under her arms.

When Meridian’s mother finished school, she did the same thing for her four sisters. She helped them finish school, though they walked bare-footed. Meridian thinks that she is a burden to an overburdened woman. Her mother had passed through many hardships and she stood still to continue. Her seeking after knowledge of rightness and her pursuit of it will never meet her mother’s and her grandmother’s extreme purity of life. But such purification and goodness are also compelled by necessity: “They had not lived in an age of choice” (123). But Meridian lives in an age of choice and she chooses to realize herself rather than become a mother. The fraught relationship Meridian has with her mother casts a shadow over much of her life, and she struggles to overcome this and the other obstacles as she searches for self-awareness and self-acceptance.

This conviction is also reflected in Alice Walker’s 1983 anthology In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, which has been central to feminist scholarship on mother-daughter relationships. Dedicated to Rebecca, her only child, In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens addresses Walker’s relationship with her own mother, a woman whom she describes as expressing her curtailed creativity in the one outlet granted to her: her garden. In the title essay of this collection, Walker writes: “[N]o song or poem will bear my mother’s name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories.” The black daughter who comes of age during the women’s liberation and civil rights movements, Walker says, has opportunities never given to her mother. This daughter has an obligation to tell her mother’s stories, which would otherwise disappear. Like Walker, Meridian does celebrate the stamina of her mother,
grandmother, and great-grandmother, while being aware of her right to choose to evolve.

But while Meridian sees that following the pathway of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother would hamper her progression, Walker could celebrate her mother’s life without anxiety that her own life would be eclipsed in the process. “And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower that they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.” Walker would get to reap the benefits of the creative seed planted by her mother; she could found her feminism, and her career, on the basis of celebrating her mother. Being the good daughter could serve as her entry into feminism. Walker was able to affirm her mother while simultaneously moving beyond her. She had nothing to lose in telling her mother’s story.

Meridian not only stands apart from Mrs. Hill in her approach to motherhood, she also stands apart from the other young black women in the Movement in her approach to commitment, i.e. non-violence. Yet ten years later, as Meridian watches a black man in church speak of his slain son – though she refuses to admit to willingness to kill for the revolution – she finds herself momentarily capable to vowing to kill before another son can be slain in that manner. Her newly found resolution wavers; however, as she hears the voices of the congregation joined in a song:

I am not to belong to the future. I am to be left, listening to the old music, beside the highway. But then, she thought, perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries – those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and therefore go right ahead – and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats
too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, formed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. I can only do that, my role will not have been useless after all. (205-6)

Meridian rejects violence as a method for effecting change in American society, emerging instead as a symbol of nurturance. She appears triumphant at the novel’s conclusion. Her guilt and the physical pain caused by her seizures and headaches disappear. She is strong enough to move out into the world again to fight injustice, and wise enough to know that she must pass her struggle on to Truman.

Truman, like Meridian, is a product of a black society whose expectations are powerful. His work in the Movement dictates his choice of lovers. Although he admits to be in love with “you [Meridian], African woman .... Have my beautiful black babies” (113), Truman marries a white woman when it is fashionable to do so, and leaves her when politically black women are in vogue. He implements the Movement’s policies at a high price, however; he loses the woman he truly loves. When he is anxious to resume a relationship with Meridian, she rejects him. At the novel’s conclusion, Meridian advises Truman not to lament the fact that she may always be alone. She tells him that all people who are as lonely as her will one day gather at the river and will watch the evening sun go down and in the darkness maybe they will know the truth. Truman realizes that he must undergo the same process that she has endured, as all people who seek to know themselves must. Truman, as a black man, must redefine his possibilities for selfhood, just as Meridian, as a black woman has.
Walker illustrates the guilt and suffering which plague both men and women as they are forced to choose between following the dictates of their own consciousness and following the behaviour patterns which have been promoted by significant others in their environments. This novel illustrates that a civil rights movement entails changes not only in the white society’s perception of black men and women, but also in their perception of themselves. Walker has depicted a black woman to remind the reader of the need for a re-examination of gender roles, suggesting that intellectual and spiritual growth are impossible for the black woman as long as she is victimized even by the fecundity of her womb and her use as sex object by the black man. Here the past is depicted as posing a psychological dilemma for Meridian, a dilemma which is heightened by her mother’s stone. The children receive form their ancestors a heritage of sacrifice and suffering. When Meridian decides to abandon the traditional role of mother, she is able to serve as a mother figure on a different level. Through she is never depicted as a happy or content woman, she is shown at having arrived at peace with and understanding of herself.

On the other hand, Bessie Head’s treatment of the motherhood motif can be seen as less complex than that of Alice Walker. But that does not mean that Head compromises the role African mother plays in the formation and building up of the African society. In fact, her novels accentuate the notion that it is the female character that contributes most to the welfare of the community despite the many challenges and obstacles. The following pages shed light on the theme of motherhood in Head’s novels, *A Question of Power*, *Maru* and *When the Rain Clouds Gather*.

*A Question of Power* reveals the impact of oppression, racial as well as sexual, on African women’s life. The novel is intensely personal and introspective and a work of huge scope, encompassing much of human history myths and religions. Elizabeth,
the heroine must be seen simultaneously as a particular individual, a representative 
South African women and a representative of all humankind. Early in the novel, the 
reader learns the circumstances of Elizabeth’s birth, circumstances which seem 
emblematic both of “an element of the sudden, the startling, the explosive detail in 
[Elizabeth’s] destiny” (18) and of her “capacity to endure the excruciating [experience 
she passes through]” (15). Elizabeth is brought up in racist circumstances; her father is 
black and her mother is white. She is part African and part white, but in her situation 
she seems to belong to none and is discarded by both the factions. When she becomes 
thirteen, she suddenly learns the story of her real mother from the principal of the 
mission school she attends. The principle informs her that: “We have a full docket on 
you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you are 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).

At first when this information is imparted, Elizabeth thinks little of it. She is too 
young at that point to understand the implications of the words, or to forecast the far-
reaching impact that is going to happen to her later on in her life. She now thinks of 
somebody telling her the story of her mother. Instead of thinking about this story of her 
mother, she starts thinking about the details of life and “oppression in South Africa” 
(16) and now she is unable or unwilling to form a picture for her life under this 
oppression. The story is not some information being told to someone, but for Elizabeth, 
is a disaster imposed on her life and curses her forever.

Another dimension to the story of her mother’s death implies that the mother-
daughter relation has no place in Elizabeth’s life. Deprived from any real maternal 
affection or guidance, Elizabeth’s individuality grows and is formed under the social, 
racial and sexual pressures surrounding her. Such lack of mother-daughter reciprocality
affects the way she deals with her son to some extent. The apparently weak motherly connection Elizabeth has with her son is not a result of selfishness; in fact, Elizabeth is so selfless that all she aspires to see is love and harmony in all humankind. The lack of mother-daughter interaction and the difficult milieu (social, political, etc.) impose on Elizabeth to dedicate her mind to react to an all-inclusive existential predicament which affects not only African women but men as well. She is more concerned with the problems of the whole society than with her own personal problems.

Just as Elizabeth’s mother is confined to a mental hospital for daring to break South African’s colour bar, so the principal isolates Elizabeth from the other children at the school, forcing her to bear the stigma of shame for her mother’s defiance. Although Elizabeth’s mother is never mentioned again in the novel, she exerts a powerful influence over Elizabeth’s destiny. Both Elizabeth’s isolation and her trouble and uncertain sense of self can be traced to the circumstances of her birth. As the child of white mother and black father, both of whom are unknown to her, she is coloured and she is caught between two identities. Nobody knows which classification can justify her rootlessness. Moreover, the severing of Elizabeth’s bonds with her mother, from whom she is taken at birth, signifies that she is drifted from all human ties. As a child she is isolated in one room if she makes a mistake. Once Elizabeth struck a child during a quarrel, and the missionary ordered: “Isolate her from the other children for a week” (16). But the children noticed that, and they felt that there was something strange because “they could fight and scratch and bite each other, but if she did likewise she was locked up” (16). The principal gives orders to lock her up even without listening to her story.
After seven years, and when Elizabeth becomes a primary school teacher, she returns to her small town where her foster-mother lives, asking about the story of her mother. The foster-mother tells the story with eyes full of tears. She says:

My husband worked on the child welfare committee, and your case came up again and again. First they received you from the mental hospital and sent you to a nursing-home. A day later you were returned because you did not look white. They sent you to a Boer family. A week later you were returned. The woman on the committee said: “What can we do with this child? Its mother is white”. My husband came home that night and asked me to take you. I agreed. The next thing was, the family came down in a car from Johannesburg on their way to the racecourse in Durban. The brother of your mother came in. He was very angry and said: “We want to wash our hands of this business. We want to forget it, but the old lady insists on seeing the child.... When you were six years old we heard that your mother had suddenly killed herself in the mental home. The grandmother brought all her toys and dolls to you. (A Question of Power 17)

Elizabeth’s loss of her mother represents not only her loss of identity, but the lack of tenderness and human connection. The story of her mother shapes her destiny. She is similar to her mother who is at once a hero and a victim. In her relation with the black man we see that her mother asserts the primacy of love over inhuman laws and artificial racial barriers, like the rebellion of Elizabeth’s grandmother, who insists on seeing her baby granddaughter in defiance and in an affirmation of human ties in a country where people are not people at all (Question of Power 17). Her mother’s defiance thus exposes the insanity of perceiving all human interaction in terms of race, yet it is she,
ironically and tragically, who is declared insane, leading to the family’s decision to commit her to a mental hospital. She is unable to see her child, and she commits suicide. That suicide and insanity become Elizabeth’s legacy; and as Elizabeth grows up, she comes to see her own experience.

Likewise, Bessie Head was taken away from her mother at birth and raised by foster-parents until she was thirteen years old. She was placed in a mission orphanage. Her mother had asked that some of her own money be set aside for Bessie’s education. When the mother committed suicide shortly after giving birth, a sum of money was made for her education. Elizabeth’s birth circumstances are not different from those of Bessie Head. When she is told that she was born of a white mother and a black father, she is automatically located in a position of contradictions coupled with the fact that she does not know where her parents are. The fact that the family of her mother proved to Elizabeth the hypocrisy and outright discrimination of the whites is interpreted by her attitude towards some white women in the society of Motabeng, where she lives in Botswana: Elizabeth’s reaction to Camilla, in essence, represents for Elizabeth white oppression as she experienced it in South Africa (Q of P 79). Meanwhile, the African society took a long time to show signs of acceptance of Elizabeth. Thus, deprived from family connections, motherly affections and friendly gestures, Elizabeth’s sense of motherhood in particular and of self in general is badly affected.

In an attempt to recover the figure of the mother, Elizabeth dreams of Medusa, the cruel goddess. Medusa keeps telling Elizabeth that because of the mixed or crossed sexual identity of the coloured males (hence coloured females), they are not African men (hence women). African men and women will never be like them and for that reason the ‘coloureds’ deserve to die. This reminds Elizabeth with her life in South Africa. Elizabeth is a woman, a single mother, a “coloured” and a woman in an
extremely sexual society where, if one does not engage in sexual activity, one is
deemed abnormal \((Q \text{ of } P \ 1)\). There immorality has spread during that period of time.
Even her husband is bisexual. Elizabeth claims in the text that the society needs to be
maintained and she is one woman who is too busy to be making babies, because she has
other important things to be working on. She leaves South Africa, which is a place of
oppression and a place of immorality, a place “where men dress like women and
women dress like men”. She leaves to Botswana as an exiled, and there she decides to
never engage with any man. Silva (2) highlights the point that: “Women’s greater
dependency on individual men tends to stigmatize lone motherhood more than in
situations where women have greater autonomy”. Thus, Elizabeth’s attempt to maintain
a family free of dependency on any male individual appears as a response to her desire
to secure an independent growth for her personality, but meanwhile creates gossip
around her.

Moreover, women’s decision of moving away from motherhood leads to other
possibilities. In discussing and eventually relating sex to the periphery, Elizabeth is
questioning the cultural and social constructs of what woman should be. In her mind, a
woman should be more than a receptacle of the male and should not be defined only as
wife, mother or daughter, but as an ordinary person concerned with things of soul.
Elizabeth’s consciousness as a woman helps her reach a certain conclusion about what
it means to be woman, as opposed to what society or culture defines woman. When
Tom, her American friend, wants to know why she would not find a husband, she
replies:

‘It is not part of my calculations, Tom’, she said, ‘I seem to have been
born for this experience. I had tremendous stamina. Someone weighed
up my soul and set the seal of doom on it. I’m opposing him because I
think I ought to live too, like everyone else. I don’t care to be shoved out of the scheme of things. I want to live the way I am without anyone dictating to me. Maybe in some other life I’ll just be a woman cooking food and having babies, but just now Shylock is demanding his pound of flesh. I have to attend the trial….’ (A Question of Power 192)

Instead of being a mother, Elizabeth has a sense of loneliness. She wants to be alone to reflect and philosophize on what good and evil mean in relation to power. She sees no contradictions in her desire to be single and her ideal for women to be both goddesses and housewives. Thus, she comprehends that not every woman is meant to be wife or mother. Her ideal is for love to be shared with humankind rather than with one person. It is about transcending self, and becoming something greater than the self.

Before starting with motherhood in Head’s novel Maru, it is important to point out that throughout history, racial prejudice has been directed against those who, for some reason, are exiled from the land of their birth. As the discussion started with Walker’s novels, we had a chance to reflect on the racial prejudice which is directed towards Afro-Americans. Racial prejudice may not occur at the same intensity between members of one race; race hatred usually occurs at the cost of an immoral subjugation of non-aggressive races by other races. Racists always like to stay within spatial, geographical and even abstract boundaries they impose on themselves. Race prejudice comes into play when those boundaries are violated by a group of people who are considered outsiders. The phenomenon of race hatred precludes the very possibility of universalism and rests on the notion of human as inherently belonging to tribes, to nations and to races.

Maru is about the systematic violation of these boundaries. First we are exposed to the harsh prejudice of the Botswana tribe against the Masarwa people. A dead
Masarwa woman and her live baby girl are found, yet no Batswana person wishes to bury her, and so English missionaries are called upon to perform the task. Margaret Cadmore arrives and is utterly disgusted by the discriminatory attitudes of the Botswana nurses who have been forced to help prepare the body for burial. Ms. Cadmore decides to adopt the baby and names her after herself, Margaret Cadmore, Jr. She believes that by giving this child the gift of education and a privileged upbringing, the child will defy the prejudiced minds that surround her. Margaret Cadmore is portrayed in the novel walking “to several angles of the room, studying the dead woman’s expression: ‘The note she scrawled at last said: ‘She looks like a Goddess.’ She took in too much after that: the thin stick legs of malnutrition and the hard caloused feet that had never worn shows” [sic.] (Maru 15).

Ms. Cadmore as represented in the novel has seen human suffering closely for the first time, but she is very frightened to adopt that part of the woman which is still alive, her child. Ms. Cadmore has no children. She is a scientist: “in her heart with a lot of fond, pet theories, one of her favourite, sweeping theories being: environment, everything; heredity nothing” (Maru 15). Small Margaret finds herself in the arms of a white woman who never treats her as a mother does, and being a coloured foster-daughter is simply a relationship between a white miss and a black servant. Head shows that the prejudice is universal, but what is insightful about her critique is her ability to portray how ugly is the face of prejudice inscribed within African thought, process and behaviour.

The young Margaret Cadmore is different. She is a Masarwa, a “Bushman! Low Bread! Bastard!” (Maru 11). To be born a Bushman or Masarwa is to be “the equivalent of ‘nigger’, a term of contempt which means, obliquely, a low, filthy” race (Maru 12). Though born a Masarwa, she looks like a half-caste, and the fact that she
has a white woman for a foster-mother and relative only confirms, in the eyes of her
teacher training school mates, that she is coloured. The white Margaret Cadmore not
only recognizes Margaret’s status as an outcast of birth, but decides to use her daughter
as an instrument for experimentation on the complex issues that circumscribe racial and
class difference among the Botswana. She clearly tells her foster-daughter.

“They are wrong. You will have to live with your appearance for the rest
of your life. There is nothing you can do to change it”.

It never stopped the tin cans rattling, but it kept the victim of the
tin cans sane. No one by shouting, screaming or spitting could un-
Bushman her. There was only one thing left, to find out how Bushmen
were going to stay alive on the earth because no one wanted them to,
except perhaps as the slaves and downtrodden dogs of the Botswana.
That half she would be left alone to solve. Margaret Cadmore succeeded
in only half her experiment – that if an environment provided the
stimulus and amenities of learning, any human mind could absorb
knowledge, to the limit of the capacities. (Maru 18)

Margaret is born into a world where her people are the untouchables, despised just for
being Bushman. Her adoption by a white woman at birth and her upbringing create “a
big hole in the child’s mind [because] ... unlike other children, she is never able to say:
“I’m this or that. My parents are this or that” (Maru 15). The fact that Margaret could
never say this becomes the focal point on which the story is constructed. She suffers
discrimination because of her assigned status as a Masarwa, an outcast among the
Botswana. Her inferiority by birth and the fact that she is a female make her an easy
target for oppression in a society that treats her people as sub-humans. Her life begins
with uncertainty (but is seen to reach a degree of certainty by the end of the novel,
However). She is born beside a roadside where her mother dies in childbirth with an expression of a goddess on her face. The image of the goddess is metaphorically significant, for it implicitly encompasses the notion of some sort of saving grace: an image to help her have some pride in her birth and create a good image for her mother whom she never sees.

After Margaret graduates from teacher training school, Ms. Cadmore thinks that her duty towards the young Margaret has now come to its end. She decides to return to England, leaving a young and a newly graduated Margaret behind, encouraging her to stay and help her own people and deny the prejudiced minds that surround her. The grey haired old lady comes to give her last minute advice:

“Don’t wear lipstick. It won’t suit you, but here’s some eye makeup because you have eyes as pretty as stars. Don’t forget to shave regularly under your arm and apply this perfumed powder. Don’t forget to write to me”. The old plump lady pretended to cry dabling at dry eyes with a dry hand kerchief. (Maru 19)

The argument here is that every woman is able to mother children despite all the differences of race or whatsoever, even though the degree of emotional connection varies between what is offered by a real mother and a foster-mother. This view is supported by Chodorow, who argues that when biological mothers do not parent, other women, rather than men, virtually always take their place (Reproduction of Mothering 3). Young Margaret is taken care of by a white woman, since no Botswana male nor female showed willingness to foster her. In spite of the fact that the old Margaret Cadmore does not function as a biological mother would, and has perhaps used the young Margaret to prove some theory in her mind, the fact remains that, had it not been
for Ms. Cadmore, the destiny of Margaret would have been obscure and might not have come to what it is.

The circumstances Margaret lived in, under Ms. Cadmore’s custody, have an impact on the formation of the independent and determined personality that Margaret shows when she starts her teaching career and in her dealings with others. She knows that she is a Bushman, and just as Ms. Cadmore said she cannot do anything about it, and so she is not ashamed of it. She is able to grow psychologically with confidence to such a point as to exert her feminine power on two male characters, Maru and Moleka. Margaret Cadmore, the Masarwa heroine of Maru, is an agent of change, a person of an immense courage and dignity, and a creative artist of the highest order. The climax of Margaret’s achievement is actualised with Margaret’s marriage to Maru, the prince, pointing to an idyllic world where equality and harmony exist: this world-view also presents a political shift in the attitude of the majority to the outcast minority, the Masarwa.

Moving now to another novel by Bessie Head, the theme of motherhood in When the Rain Clouds Gather can be discussed with reference to three characters: Mma-Millipede, Paulina Sebeso and Maria. These three characters are among the prime movers and shakers in Golema Mmidi’s transformation, either by inducing direct change or indirectly through inspiring male characters.

Mma-Millipede represents the women’s natural instincts to mothering, though she does not appear in the novel to have children. But her mothering can also be seen as being motivated by religious, political and philosophical drives. She is “one of those rare individuals with a distinctive personality at birth”: more than most men, she is able to “grasp the religion of the missionaries and use its message to adorn and enrich her originality of thought and expand the natural kindness of her heart” (68). The motherly
affection she directs to Makhaya (as to all other characters) symbolically stands for Mother Africa. She fills the vacuum in his heart during his estranged solitude: Makhaya finds in her what he left in South Africa. Ultimately, it is Mma-Millipede who initiates Makhaya’s salvation (126), with Paulina Sebeso being a crucial element in that salvation. Mma-Millipede on her part, is the “people’s mother”. She is interested in the welfare of the entire community. Although she is aged, she is willing to work for others. She makes every move to see into it that Makhaya feels at home, and feeds well. She investigates into his health situation thus: “do you eat well… please inform me so that I can accompany you to the hospital as you are now far away from your home and relatives” (71). Thus, through her character, Head portrays ideal motherhood. This could be understood as Head’s attempt at fraternisation. A mother is a symbol of life and motherliness and should be propagated even if one is not a biological mother. She is able to organize the wedding of Maria (with Gilbert) and Makhaya (to Paulina) as if they were her biological children. In a utopian setup, suspicion towards each other is absent. People must trust one another: thus Dinorego (Maria’s father) hands over to Mma-Millipede the total responsibility of his daughter’s marriage.

Maria, Dinorego’s daughter, grows up without her mother. Her father takes care of her. Despite the fatherly affections her father renders to her, the novel shows that she reciprocates such affections with her father in a due manner, but cannot share with him ‘women’s secrets’. She is purported to have two women in her: in nature one is “soft and meditative” while the other is “full of ruthless commonsense, and these two uncongenial personalities clashed and contradicted each other all the time” (101). This apparent self-split is perhaps the result of the absence of mother to help her unify the “two women” into a ‘Maria’. Since the novel does not extend as to show Maia as a
mother, it is difficult to judge her attitude to motherhood. But one might be able to see the character of Maria as to usher in the character of Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*.

Paulina Sebeso is a lone mother with two children, a widow with a son and a daughter whose husband committed suicide because of the affront to his honour after being suspected of stealing money from his employers. Paulina (along with Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*) can be seen as a representative of a very heated debate in feminist literature, i.e. lone motherhood. Besides, she is an exile who has come from South Africa to live in Golema Mmidi village in Botswana along with her two children, and who has to cope with social and political problems related to gender, race etc. Since “ethnicity, religion, class, economic resources and political beliefs play a powerful role in such gender politics and the resulting constructions of lone motherhood and ‘adequate’ mothering” (Silva 3), Paulina appears under the microscope of the people in the village. Each move she makes is interpreted by the people there and is often construed excessively. With no male support, Paulina has to manage her resources to provide her family with their basic needs. Her son also has to work in order to participate in the family sustenance. But despite the problems facing her (even the death of her son), Paulina shows strength. In support of Silva’s argument that “lone motherhood is increasingly a transient phenomenon” (3), and aware that the existence of a male partner in an excessively racialised society is important to maintain the family, Paulina wins Makhaya’s heart and marries him at the end.

As it appears, the novels of Walker and Head are saturated with the autobiographical element. It is through their personal experiences that they attempt to expose the drawback of their societies and propose ways for reform. Elaine Savory (208) points out:
Recent theoretical developments in the field of women’s autobiography argue that whereas textual constructs of the self are always fictional and the individual’s narrative of a life is in effect a creative work, it is still very important to acknowledge that women’s versions of their own experience have been vital in constructing necessary subjectivities to challenge hegemonies of gender, race, and class.

Walker and Head create characters that challenge the status quo, and are able to serve as agents of change. They provide readers with the various possibilities available for women in societies that deny women such possibilities. They show women how to move where their societies prescribe only a tightrope. In their novels both Walker and Head have presented multiple views on motherhood and mothering, and have pinpointed several issues related to black motherhood. While Walker have dealt with notions like motherly sacrifice, imposed motherhood, Black Mythical Mother, and abortion, Head seems to concentrate more on the dilemma of lone mothers. However, both lay considerable weight on the intricacies of mother-daughter relationship and how it can have an indelible imprint on the formation of the self and identity of both the mother and the daughter.


   Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality*. New York: State University of New York Press, 
   2009; and Wright, Handel Kashope. *A Prescience of African Cultural Studies: the 
   Future of Literature in Africa Is not What it Was*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 
   2004.

5 See Hecht, M. L.; R. L. Jackson and S. A. Ribeau. *African American Communication: 

6 Ross mentions that there are more than 500,000 annual abortion cases in the United 
   States.


8 e.g. his paper “The Observation of Infants in a Set Situation” (1941).

9 This “observation” is also included in Winnicott, D. W. *The Maturational Processes 
   famous statement, “There is no such thing as an infant” (1956: 38) implies that without 
   a mother and maternal care, an infant cannot exist.
Winnicott describes the ‘primary maternal preoccupation’ as a temporary stage which a mother passes through during adapting to the infant's maturational processes. He points out that it is a highly complex thing, one that makes tremendous demands on the parents, and at first it is the mother herself who is the facilitating environment. She needs support at this time, which is best given by the child's father (let us say her husband), her mother, the family and the immediate social environment…. Mothers recover from this state and forget (Maturational Processes 84).


Josephine Hendin, p.5.

Some critics (e.g. Nina Lykke) even went to such an extent as to argue that the mother is the first object of their daughter’s sexual feelings and that this neglect of erotic feeling in girls for their mothers stems from a taboo on homosexuality. Lykke, Nina. “Questing daughters: Little Red Riding Hood, Antigone and the Oedipus complex”. Daughtering and Mothering: Female Subjectivity Reanalysed. Ed. Janneke van Mens-Verhulst. London and New York: Routledge, 1993. pp. 15-25.


Walker, In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, 240.
Chapter II: Bibliography

Primary Resources:


Secondary Resources:


