CHAPTER III

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

OF RACE AND GENDER

ON BLACK WOMEN:

WALKER’S MERIDIAN AND HEAD’S

A QUESTION OF POWER
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Walker’s *Meridian* and Head’s *A Question of Power*

“A normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world.”

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

It has been indicated in the earlier chapters that discrimination on the basis of race and gender negatively affected black women throughout the history of the relation between the blacks and the whites. This chapter comes to delineate this issue in some detail with reference to two novels by Alice Walker and Bessie Head (*Meridian* and *A Question of Power*), revealing how racial oppression and gender bias can create psychological problems for black women and can sometimes lead to madness. These two novels by Alice Walker and Bessie Head are in a sense autobiographical and political. While *Meridian* reflects the complications of being involved in activism and, meanwhile, of attempting to redefine the female self as against the traditional stereotypes, much like what Alice Walker has even been trying to achieve, *A Question of Power* appears to document the writer’s personal experience as a black female in a highly racialised and male-chauvinist society. Both the novels present the traumatic circumstances of two black women suffering from racial discrimination and stereotyped gender roles in two different societies: (the south in) the US and South Africa. Such discrimination clearly affects the personal growth and the psyches of the protagonists, Meridian and Elizabeth. Thus, these two novels seem to serve as mouthpieces for the authors, describing, out of their personal experiences, how far social injustice can harm not only the female body but also the psyche.¹
Despite the fact that this chapter has a strong affiliation with psychoanalysis, such terms as ‘psychosis’ and ‘neurosis’ will not be used technically to refer to the state of mind of any of the characters since these terms may imply dismissal of a certain character from logical consideration, rendering the character invalid for analysis. The study uses more general terms to describe mental and psychological disorders, whether mild or intense, rather than, for example, the term ‘neurosis’, which means “a functional psychological disorder with no organic causes whose origins in emotional conflict can be understood and dealt with by psychotherapy ... and may be manifested as anxiety, fugue, hysteria, obsession, compulsion and phobia” (Statt 91). The reason is that the focus of the study is on how the politics of gender, colour and race affect the protagonists psychologically. Besides, not all the characters under investigation suffer from the same degree of intensity of psychological disorders despite the fact that most of the symptoms of neurosis apply to both with varying degrees. Therefore, terms like ‘madness’ or ‘psychological/mental disorders’ are used, not to mean complete dissociation of the individual from the society and its norms, but as general terms indicating stressed behavioural reaction affecting the individual’s mental and physical health and attitudinal behaviour towards the self and others (as measured by the adherence to the societal norms) as a result of mistreatment by other members of the society.

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

Obviously, the origins of most of the pain and suffering in both the novels can be traced to the social circumstances that women have to endure. It appears that depression, hopelessness, exhaustion and fear emanate from hunger and overwork, domestic violence, entrapment, and economic and personal dependence. The novels show that although women are integral to all aspects of society, racial oppression can cause tremendous pressure on them and can sometimes drive them to taking extreme measures and even create mental problems more than others in the community. This chapter aims to analyze how Walker and Head portray the negative psychological impact of racism and gender prejudices on black women in their respective societies.

In the case of women, Soshana Felman (2) states that “madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest of self-affirmation”. In her article, “Does Racial Discrimination Cause Mental Illness?” Apu Chakraborty (2002) maintains that there is a link between racism and mental illness, more heinously if the political struggle of the oppressed or discriminated group is “medicalised”. Race and racism were found to have impacts on the mental health of African Americans (Nommo). The theme of female madness has also been noticed in a number of African literary works (Newell 2008; Mountain 2001). Extensive research has been made to gauge the sources of madness and in the case of female madness, a number of interpretation have been introduced, including social injustices or hereditary reasons (the two most relevant reasons for discussion here).
There have been efforts to investigate possible links between racism and mental illness, because of the stress of everyday minor acts of discrimination on the individual. Social justice should ensure equality and fairness, but in the existence of discrimination where someone is treated as superior to others in blood, gender or position whereas the other suffers disadvantage and deprivation, the latter will be prone to higher rate of mental disorder. If it is claimed that anybody who lives in a higher rate of depression becomes mad, then there should be some questions to be addressed: Do race and gender problems cause mental illness? How? And what are the psychological consequences which are caused by social bias based on race and gender prejudices? Bessie Head and Alice Walker in the novels discussed here describe these acts and the racial attack on black women who become victims of depression and madness.

Racism is “a form of discrimination that stems from the belief that a group should be treated differently according to phenotypic differences” (Chakraborty 2002). The impact of discrimination is escalated by factors pertinent to the individual such as, socio-economic status and skin colour. People who respond to racism always stereotype on group identity, because (whether in the US or South Africa) focusing on psychological differences between groups of different colours rather than on the power disparities inherent in a predominantly racist society serves only to reinforce the idea of racial differences. The social movement of the 1960s in the US opposed psychiatric focus on inner conflict and emphasized the social sources of sickness: after multiple racist killings during the Civil Rights Movement, a group of black psychiatrists sought to have murderous bigotry based on race classified as a mental disorder (King 176-82).4

Racism and its impact on the mental health of African Americans has been the central focus of imperial research because of the history of racial discrimination against the people of colour. “It is a system currently managed and maintained in the United
States and other Western nations. Racial discrimination will be considered as all racially motivated acts which involve ridicule, scorn, contempt, and degrading treatment by others resulting in anger, rage and damage to self-esteem” (Landrine and Klonoff 1990; qtd in Nommo). Understanding the sources of mental disorder for women means understanding how cultural, racial and economic forces interact to undermine their social status. Mental illness in Afro-American women has a historical reason, especially as women are unable to minimize the serious nature of their problem. It is a stigma placed on African American culture, a sign of personal weakness. The rates of mental health problems are higher than average for black women because of psychological factors that result directly from their experience as black Americans in spite of reaching heights and achieving milestones (Nommo).

Education and hard work have enabled black women to achieve successful careers and respect in mainstream society. Despite all this, black women still find themselves lagging behind white women and men in health and mental health indices. The depression rate among black women is higher than that of the American white women. The rates of mental health problems are higher than average for black women because of psychological factors that result directly from their experience as black Americans. These experiences include racism, cultural alienation, violence and sexual exploitation. This point supports the argument of Frantz Fanon that “a normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with white world” (143).

Black psychology has come to be used as a general term referring to the study of the psychological functioning of black people with a focus on the affect of racialism on them. “[M. L. King, Jr.] often brings anthropology and biology into his speeches, sermons, and texts to contradict any arguments that purport to establish racial
inferiority with scientific evidence ... [and] use the disciplines of psychology and sociology when he discusses the stigmas that slavery, segregation, and the ghettos have left in the black community” (Sunnemark 98). Black psychology is the study of the psychological functioning of black people. Some of the exciting and important research black psychologists are doing today includes not only the study of the detrimental effect of racism but also of the importance of racial identity as a protective factor against depression and stress. Discrimination is a major threat to African American women’s mental health. It undermines their view of themselves as masters of their own life circumstances and makes them less psychologically resilient and more prone to depression: these are the findings of a study made by Verna Keith and her team from Florida State University, who also proved that there is a relation between perceived discrimination and depression.7

Mamie Clark found that black children typically identified white dolls as desirable and black dolls as ugly.8 This provides clear evidence that the racist environment of black children negatively affect their self-esteem. It is very important to know why African Americans are made to feel inferior:

This trauma, it is true, has been quite expelled from the consciousness and the memory of the patient and as a result he has apparently been saved from a great mess of suffering, but the repressed desire continues to exist in the unconscious; it is on watch constantly for an opportunity to make itself known and it soon comes back into consciousness. (Black Skin, White Masks 144)

Fanon refutes the claim that “The Negro makes himself inferior. But the truth is that he is made inferior” (149). This point is echoed in A Question of Power: the narrator maintains that “There they said the black man was naturally dull, stupid, inferior, but
they made sure to deprive him of the type of education which developed personality, intellect, skill” (57).

In *A Question of Power*, Head presents a situation where racist dehumanization of the heroine, Elizabeth, undermines her sense of self-worth so deeply that she suffers a mental breakdown. Being an offspring of a white Scottish descendent woman and a black South African man, Elizabeth is defined as a “coloured” according to the South African law. Like all other coloured South Africans, Elizabeth is regarded as a queer specimen of humanity that does not belong to either the white or the black race. That is to say, she is defined in terms of what she lacks, i.e. blackness or whiteness. At the time of her conception, the Immorality Act was applied in South Africa, prohibiting sexual intercourse between the races. Elizabeth, thus, is the product of “uncontrolled” interracial sexuality, the repercussions of which culminated in the protagonist having two mental breakdowns in the course of four years. Head describes this dehumanization by saying: “In South Africa, she [Elizabeth] had been rigidly classified Coloured. There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being human being with personality. There wasn’t any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. They were races, not people” (44).

Elizabeth is a young South African woman who immigrates with her little son to Botswana, where she started to teach in a primary school in the village of Motabeng. Psychological problems begin to surface as she starts to challenge the prejudice against the refugees, more intensely women refugees. Over a period of four years she loses her teaching post, has two severe mental breakdowns and becomes involved in an agricultural cooperative where she is in charge of a vegetable garden. The sequence of events closely resembles Bessie Head’s own experience. Head even states that: “I could not be considered as a South African exile, but as one who has put down roots.
And yet, certain strength in me, certain themes I am likely to write about, have been mainly shaped by my South African experience” (qtd in Rose 403). However, what is more important than the autobiographical element is the link between Elizabeth’s mental instability and the political and social systems that prevailed in South Africa for about forty years. In other words, Elizabeth’s story creates an illusion of autobiography through Elizabeth’s voice.

Even if both Head and her heroine are similar, the attempt can be viewed from a feminist point of view as a manoeuvre by Head to “put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement” (Cixous, “Laugh of Medusa”, 875): writing according to Cixous is “precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (879). This implies that even if Bessie Head employs incidents from her own life to recount the story of Elizabeth, it does not affect in any way the value of the novel as a critique of how political and social complications of racial and sexual discrimination can inflict horrible psychological harm on individuals.

Elizabeth attempts to escape from that confinement by going to Botswana, but the feeling of being exiled as well as the view of herself as a person distorted by the apartheid ideology have affected her psyche. She is different even among the ‘authentic’ blacks of Motabeng Village, where she settles. The failure to fit in there has raised her initial sense of being a racial oddity, causing emotional and psychological agony that culminates in mental breakdown. The process towards the breakdown is marked by a series of hallucinations and nightmares dominated by visions of evil. There are pervasive sexual acts performed by a character called Dan, and these acts are the most recurrent form of evil that her mind evokes: “The nightmare was over. Dan
was not over. He had not yet told the whole of mankind about his ambitions, like Hitler and Napoleon, to rule the world” (14).

Head makes it clear that these sexual horrors stem from the heroine’s stigmatised identity. Coloured people are the product of mixed procreative relationships between whites and blacks in a racist South African society where sexual relationships between whites and blacks are outlawed. Hence, Elizabeth repeatedly expressed her view of herself as a “half-breed” (104), a “mixed breed” (147), and not “genuinely African” (159). By virtue of this view, Elizabeth sees herself not only as a racial impurity, but as an inferior. In addition, her sensitivity to the fact that she does not speak any indigenous African language makes her feel more estranged from the villagers around her:

‘It wasn’t my fault,’ she said, over and over. ‘I am not a tribal African. If I had been, I would have known the exact truth about Sello, whether he was good or bad. There aren’t any secrets among tribal Africans. I was shut out from the everyday affairs of the world. Dan knew and traded on my ignorance. He did more. He struck me such terrible blows, the pain made me lose my mind.’ (145)

Effectually, Dan’s persistent racial persecution of Elizabeth not only makes her feel inadequate, but leads her to view herself as a social reject. Dan is a psychological projection of the South African society from which she attempts to escape.

One of the most crucial reasons which led Elizabeth to leave South Africa is her husband. When she met him after he had just been released from jail, Elizabeth felt lucky to have someone who was interested in Buddhism and in philosophies of the East. She had spent time with families from India and was very interested in eastern philosophies. To Elizabeth, this was a “good” man to pair with. When she discovered
his evil nature, which manifested itself through lies, deceit, infidelities and petty power plays, he remained engraved in Elizabeth’s subconscious. Therefore, the reader sees all the characteristics of Elizabeth’s husband divided between Sello and Dan, getting both his virtues and vices, his good as well as evil attributes. Her life in South Africa never stops haunting her:

She [Medusa] turned her head to one side and carefully examined Elizabeth’s face, then she said: ‘What are you buying this time?’

Elizabeth replied: ‘Buddha.’

She pointed to Elizabeth’s right hand: ‘What’s that?’ she asked.

Elizabeth raised her hand ... [and] said ‘It’s the prize I have to earn in this life. It is symbolic of the brotherhood of man.’ (37)

Head’s Medusa is a derivative of a mythical figure. But unlike the still and silent Medusa of the classical mythology, Head’s Medusa is active and helps Elizabeth in locating her plural identities and selves while at the same time attempting to silence her. Medusa is introduced by Sello as his wife. Her first action against Elizabeth is an act of aggression as “her face had assumed a mean expression” (38). During one of Medusa’s initial encounters with her, Elizabeth depicts Medusa as a wicked black woman with long black hair, powerful eyes and “an exciting way of walking” (38). These words suggest a kind of attraction to this woman. At the same time Elizabeth is under a condition of exile or her identity as a coloured woman seems confused about her feeling for Medusa. It is the physical attraction which makes Elizabeth fall in love with her black body, the pure black body which Elizabeth is hoping to have. Medusa teases her that she has potential which Elizabeth has never had. But Elizabeth is confused because she thinks that sex is evil and it is only a way of controlling power. This confusion increases when Medusa starts taunting her about being different.
Consequently, this extreme sense of disorientation pushes Elizabeth forward to her mental breakdown.

Medusa is a realist, like Dan. She questions Elizabeth’s lack of Africanness, and Elizabeth situates her within the framework of an African oppression over the coloured people, who are not genuinely African. “The wild-eyed Medusa was expressing the surface reality of African society. It was shut in and exclusive. It had a strong theme of power-worship running through it, and power people needed small, narrow, shut-in worlds. They never felt secure in the big, wide flexible universe where there were too many cross-currents of opposing thought” (38).

Obviously, women’s madness in South Africa appears to be a consequence of subjugation coming from two main sources: the European colonialists’ racial oppression, and the African male’s patriarchal oppression. The problem of Elizabeth’s colour leads her to pain and uncertainty as she lives with no agency. Her journey for identity and self-reflections does not merely end with her definition of the self, but it ends with the ways individuals and the State define her. There is no wonder then if Elizabeth defines everything in terms of male; even the two people she chooses to accompany her mental journey are men. The man-made restrictions of the South African State, which account for every one of its subjects, cannot be overstated.¹ In *A Question of Power*, race and sexuality are a combination that brings forth madness, and merge into an intricate web for which Elizabeth struggles to free herself.

Head’s novel *A Question of Power* takes the reader on a journey inward, into Elizabeth’s psyche. Most of the actions in the novel take place within Elizabeth’s consciousness as she undergoes a “nightmare soul-journey” (35) – that is, at once a mental breakdown and a quest for renewal. The novel dramatises Elizabeth’s suffering in terms of her inner conflicts. Head’s use of a subjective narrative perspective, filtering
all major events through Elizabeth’s consciousness, thus compels the reader to accompany Elizabeth on her journey and share in the disorientation and confusion of her breakdown. The movement of Head’s novel, however, is from fragmentation to wholeness. It is Head’s wholeness of the “brotherhood of man” (201). In this way the creative process of the novel mirrors both Elizabeth’s journey and Head’s theme: the possibility of creating, out of “degradation and destruction” (202), a new world of hope and compassion.

Elizabeth’s ‘soul-journey’ unfolds on three interrelated levels. On a personal level, her journey is a quest for identity and self-affirmation. On a social level, it is a quest for belonging and for community. Finally, Elizabeth’s journey can be seen on a spiritual level as a quest for both enlightenment and regeneration in which she learns “the extremes of love and tenderness through the extremes of hate” (202). The three levels of Elizabeth’s journey, however, are not merely interrelated but, indeed, inseparable. Just as Elizabeth’s inner madness mirrors the madness of the world around her, of a South Africa fragmented by apartheid, so too apartheid in turn reflects the potentiality for evil that exists in all people and all societies – what Head has called “the horror that exists behind the everyday affairs of man” (12).

Despite Head’s focus in A Question of Power on “the problems of mankind in general”, any attempt to construct meaning from the novel must begin with Elizabeth’s personal history for it is in terms of the concrete realities of Elizabeth’s experience, both her South African past and her present life as a refugee in Botswana, that Head develops her vision of goodness, power and love. This novel expresses a vital interest in exploring the psychological reality of someone exiled from a country. It accepts the promise that South Africa is the symbol of all potential as well as possible evil which can exist in this world, or that can be inflicted by one human upon another. A Question
of Power is the chronicle of an exorcism of that same evil symbolised in large part by South Africa. Through an exorcism, the protagonist tries to achieve a state of innocence while suffering extreme mental and physical torment.

Elizabeth attempts to determine whether good or evil has the greater control over her psyche. While she is deciding, the reader is given an exploration trip through the essential nature of absolute Good and absolute Evil. The discovery of Good and Evil does not undermine the lure of escapism that must attract an artist, especially one of the ‘wrong colour’, in South Africa. Bessie Head writes about seeing the unquestionable natural beauty of South Africa, but she never forgets the price that is paid daily by the blacks and coloureds alike to maintain that beauty. She was destined to leave South Africa, the wealthy country which exiled her as a woman and as a writer, and begin a life, a very simple life, in a very small and poor country like Botswana.

The relations between sexes in this novel progressively deteriorate until reaching a low ebb where a woman (Elizabeth) finds herself caught in the middle of a power struggle between two male figures, Sello and Dan. In A Question of Power, communication between man and woman collapses as Elizabeth secludes herself in an internal world of nightmares. At the heart of her nightmares lies her fear of sexuality; at the root of her fear lies her mixed racial origins. Through the inner turmoil experienced by Elizabeth as a “half-cast”, A Question of Power exposes the horrors of apartheid at the psychological level. Rather than everyday South African reality, Head’s novel explores the shadows of apartheid that intersect where the mental damage such a system of life inflicts can be seen. Elizabeth’s mind and body become the site where sexuality, madness and power converge in a battle of wills.

In fact, Elizabeth enters and explores the realm of power, of history, precisely by this act of writing her own self. A Question of Power can thus be seen as a record of
Elizabeth’s impact into the dualistic world. The novel abounds in indications of the
dualistic nature of the structure and the theme of the novel. Structurally, it is divided
into two parts: Sello and Dan – the symbolism of these characters is indicated below.
According to Margaret Tucker: “The narrative structure of this text, the movement
between Elizabeth as inscriber and Elizabeth as that which is inscribed, continually
subverts the linear notion of a single beginning and ending. The book ends with the
beginning, begins with the ending, and the past is shown to be never ending” (172-3). 10
Thematically, the novel and the characters oscillate between two points and the conflict
always lies within. However, both the structural and thematic dualisms integrate to
make up the novel. The suffering of oppression, when dragged to the surface, causes
Elizabeth to go insane and re-delve into her inner self. The first journey, that of
recognizing oppression, is complete when the novel begins. The second journey up is
one of naming and dispelling the horrors. Elizabeth is first concerned with figuring out
what to do with oppression once it is recognized. Elizabeth is described, towards the
middle of the book, as not “thinking coherently at all, or sorting anything out. She was
just the receiver of horror, her whole life was suspended” (131). To be a passive
receiver of horrors is to become the abject, the undesirable – Kristeva’s abjection
theory. “She was not supposed to sort out one thing from another. Dan had set her up as
the queen of passive observation of hell” (148). It is precisely this passivity that
Elizabeth attempts to escape through the written word and, as transmitter of horror to
us, the readers. Her question, “Why must I be the audience of shit?” shatters the notion
of the abject as object (175). She refuses to remain an object; she becomes a subject, an
“I.” Elizabeth must name the horror; she must write this text. And in so doing she
displaces the abject onto the written word and the reader so that the reader shares in her
victimization. This is the beginning of the destruction of a central duality, that of text and reader.

In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth’s story creates an illusion of autobiography through Elizabeth’s voice. The novel is divided into two parts, each focusing on a male figure. Within each part, however, there is a further structural division between the external world of Motabeng village where Elizabeth works and interacts with “real” characters and the internal world of the psyche where she struggles with her nightmarish projections: Sello, Medusa and Dan. Elizabeth’s external world is visible during daytime and its symbol is the vegetable garden, part of the agricultural cooperative project she joins. It is part of utopian landscape where light and harmony prevail. On the other hand, Elizabeth’s internal world takes over at night and its symbol is the hut where she lives. The hut is also associated with darkness and chaos.

Obviously, the two major invasive agents acting upon her are racism and sexism. These shape and paralyse her mind, provoking two severe mental breakdowns. Femi Ojo-Ade indicates some general factors, which can be attributable to Elizabeth’s insanity: i.e. colonialism (“the master-slave relationship that exists in such a society … [and] has been adopted and carried forward into the neo-colonialist structure of the independent society, provides a classical setting for the dissipation of sanity and its replacement by dementia”), racism, apartheid, and “other dehumanizing ideologies” (qtd Tucker 170). When Elizabeth grew up in South Africa as a coloured who was rejected by both blacks and whites, she internalized this hostile attitude: she rejects herself as she is rejected and turns others’ hatred into her own. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Elizabeth’s origins help to identify the main source of her self-hatred. When she turns thirteen and is sent to a missionary school by her foster-mother, Elizabeth is abruptly informed by the principal about her biological parents: “Your
mother was insane. If you’re not careful you’ll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native” (16).

The novel shows that interracial sexual relations are considered not only immoral but also illegal in the repressive society of South Africa. Elizabeth is not only classified but also learns how to classify herself as an outcast. The only relative who visits her as an infant is her grandmother and the only family member known to her is her mother. Yet, all Elizabeth receives from her mother is some money set aside for her education, a letter, and a spectre of insanity. Elizabeth’s journey into the self, thus, begins as a quest for origins, a search for the mother apartheid took away from her.

Once Elizabeth becomes a school teacher, she returns to the village where she was born to gather information about her deceased mother. Her attempt to seek identification with her mother is suggestive of the author’s sentiments towards her [Head’s] mother; Head remarks:

There is a terrible depth of loneliness in supposed or even evident insanity. There is more. A birth such as I had links me to her [Head’s mother] in a very deep way.... She must have been as mad and impulsive as I.... I still say she belongs to me in a special way and that there is no world as yet for what she had done. She left me to figure it out. (qtd in Nixon 108)

As she acquires more knowledge, Elizabeth develops a sense of guilt and feels responsible for her mother’s ill-fortune. Unconsciously, she blames herself for the suffering others inflicted upon her mother. As a result of having had an affair with a black man and having become pregnant by him, Elizabeth’s mother is doomed to alienation by her family and victimization by her society. Finally, she is isolated and
institutionalised in a mental hospital. She commits suicide after giving birth. During the four years that Elizabeth experiences mental instability, like her mother, she often considers suicide. To a certain extent, by associating her memories of her mother with madness and suicide, Elizabeth precipitates her own insanity in a self-destructive attempt to share in her mother’s suffering and to alleviate her internalised guilt.

As a child, Elizabeth’s suspicion that she may indeed become mad is inculcated by the principal of the Christian mission school, whose harsh treatment remains among her most painful childhood memories:

The missionary ... lived on the alert for Elizabeth’s insanity. Once Elizabeth struck a child during a quarrel, and the missionary ordered:

‘Isolate her from the other children for a week’.

The other children soon noticed something unusual about Elizabeth’s isolation periods. They could fight and scratch and bite each other, but if she did likewise she was locked up. They took to kicking at her with deliberate malice as she sat in a corner reading a book. None of the perfects would listen to her side of the story.

“Come on”, they said, “the principal said you must be locked up”.... Later she became aware of ... the silent appeal of her dead mother: ... ‘Do you think I can bear the stigma of insanity alone? Share it with me.’ (16-17)

It is obvious here that Elizabeth’s childhood is similar to that of Meridian. Meridian lives the guilt of thinking that she made her mother suffer because of her. As she gets impregnated by her boyfriend, she is forbidden to go to school and is locked up in the house at the age of thirteen.
The impacts of racism and hatred start very early in Elizabeth’s life, accumulating to her trauma of being an orphan. She comes to accept labels that single her out as an outcast. The recollections of her South African past, of the environment that shaped her psychologically, help the reader to understand the fears that inhibit her mind as an adult and to recognize the underlying factors that lead eventually to her mental breakdown. Through an alteration of the narrative voice and Elizabeth’s own account of events, the memories expose the horror of living under apartheid in general and its impact on Elizabeth in particular.

In spite of her inability to like or understand political ideologies, she had also lived the back-breaking life of all black people in South Africa. It was like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you. (19)

As a coloured, Elizabeth is excluded from the solidarity shared among black Africans, too. She thus remained an alienated Other in both South Africa and Botswana. While she could not cope with the circumstances in South Africa due to the apartheid, Elizabeth has trouble “reading” the story of life in Botswana: “It became clear to Elizabeth that they knew something, that they were following a story with a logical outline, much as she was. This story kept on coming out in bits” (27). She must learn to piece together the story of the community of Motabeng, just as she has to piece together the images of power forced on her by Sello and Dan. The stories they are following are the same: how does one find community and a voice in a world that continually denies these presences to blacks, women, and exiles. This exclusion becomes apparent through the nightmares she endures as a refugee in Botswana.
The other major force which invades Elizabeth’s psyche is sexism. Much of Elizabeth’s nightmare world is sexual and expresses a perception of destructive male egoism. As she recounts the initial stages of her search, Elizabeth reflects:

Journeys into the soul are not for women with children, not all that dark heaving turmoil. They are for men, and the toughest of them took off into the solitude of forests and fought out their battles with hell in deep seclusion. No wonder they hid from view. The inner life is ugly. (50)

Yet, for about four years, Elizabeth engages in a psychological quest for self-knowledge, seeking answers regarding the nature of good and evil. Sello and Dan invade Elizabeth’s subconscious and take control over her. This control, she struggles to free herself from. These two figures embody male power and the consequences the abuse of such power can have. These two male forces threaten her and divide her into soul and body.

The interplay of voices in *A Question of Power* becomes enriched by the appearance of Sello and Dan. While the main voices are those of the narrator and of the female protagonist, Elizabeth is by no means a univocal voice. On the contrary, she encompasses a plurality of voices. The other character which is produced by Sello is Medusa, an ambiguous deity that combines destructive and creative elements, while Dan manufactures an entire parade of sex-objects.

The first part of the novel depicts Elizabeth’s relationship with Sello, the guide who leads her through the initial stretch of the journey. The basis of their relationship seems to be their equality. While the opening lines of the novel refer to Sello, they also describe Elizabeth, since “most of what applied to Sello applied to her, because they were twin-souls with closely-linked destinies” (11), but Elizabeth has waged a fierce battle against the dominating power of Sello. As she succeeds in purging him from her
psyche, Elizabeth reaches the conclusion that she stands on equal footing with her former master.

Basically, Elizabeth finds in Sello the model of goodness and the spiritual guide to help her out of her inner chaos especially in the initial stage of her journey: “She too rapidly accepts Sello as a comfortable prop against which to lean ... and the day he abruptly pulled away the prop of goodness she floundered badly in stormy and dangerous seas” (29). Elizabeth finds in Sello a source for moral strength and intellectual force at a critical point of time when she is in need for reconciliation with her past experiences. The figure of Sello, thus, becomes associated with religious leaders and political figures who have had an imprint in the progress and improvement of social and racial circumstances in Africa. As far as the novel is concerned, Sello’s calling is help Elizabeth out of her psychological turmoil and spiritual recess.

In that respect, the novel raises a problematic supposition purporting that in case Elizabeth rejects violence and militant political action as tools of counteracting social and political iniquities, how then is she supposed to act? “Did it help if one sat silently in the night and cried?... Did it help, if on and off one had been kind and tender and humorous and could not comprehend permanent brutal savagery? No, it did not” (131). Growing up under apartheid, Elizabeth learns to internalise a divided and static view of the world. In this connection, Sello interferes here to galvanise Elizabeth and shake her out of this constrained view by igniting her self-awareness and the faculty of choice. Sello spurs Elizabeth on to cast off a set of attitudes shaped by a system of life in which a select oligarchy wields and manipulates power to oppress the majority and to replace them with a new frame of mind in which ordinary people can realize their own potential for effecting change.
The novel, however, exposes another Sello figure. In contrast to the Sello figure described above; the other one is described as an ordinary man in a brown suit who undermines the efforts and teachings of the first. This Sello figure shares in tormenting Elizabeth by repeatedly trying to inject her with negative feelings towards black Africans. In this way, Elizabeth becomes a victim of apartheid in its despairing form: she has internalised racism. She painfully remarks that “a person eventually becomes a replica of inner demons he battles with” (149-50). Having had to put up with the label of ‘coloured’ throughout her life, she ultimately realizes that this term has come to be the sole source of her identification. She even makes use of a mechanism of her oppressors, i.e. she begins to classify others. She maintains a feeling of superiority owing to her white half; however, as a ‘half-cast’ she also believes herself to be inferior to the ‘pure’ blacks: “A persistent theme was that she was not genuinely African; he [Sello] had to give her the real African insight” (159), and occasionally superior to the whites, especially those white liberals who are condescending towards the ‘natives’ and come to Africa intending to help the ‘poor blacks’. Elizabeth reflects on the issue of racism: “The victim of a racial attitude cannot think of the most coherent and correct thing to do to change the heart of evil. He can scare them with violence. He can slaughter them; but he isn’t the origin of the poison. It’s like two separate minds at work” (84).

Sello with the brown suit not only instigates her racial hatred but also creates Medusa, the double-edged deity that ushers in Elizabeth’s first mental collapse. Through the figure of Medusa, Elizabeth’s perspective on the relationship between women, domination and power is examined. Combining both creative and destructive elements, Medusa proves to be nearly fatal for Elizabeth. On the one hand, Medusa reflects an image of holiness out of which goodness emanates: “Shining out of her eyes
was the tender, blue glow of great love.... She stood alone, her head bent. She threw her eyes into her own heart with such intent concentration that only the whites of her eyes were discernible. Slowly, she turned her head and looked at Elizabeth.... Then she said: ‘This is my earnings with you’. She pointed at Elizabeth’s heart: ‘I made that heart of compassion’” (33). On the other hand, Medusa is also portrayed as aggressive, arrogant and manipulative, driven by an urge for power that makes her “the direct and tangible form of [all] evils, ... lusts, ... greeds [sic], ... self-importance and ... the death of the soul” (40). Generally, it is this negative side of Medusa that prevails in the novel.

Medusa dominates Sello of the brown suit and nearly succeeds in imposing full control over Elizabeth’s life. Elizabeth resists and withstands severe attacks by Medusa, who repeatedly flaunts her racial and sexual superiority. The implacable hostility Medusa directs against Elizabeth appears to be rooted in the latter’s racial mixture. Medusa’s objectives are two-fold: she intends to frustrate Elizabeth’s quest for self-knowledge and, by heightening her racial hatred, to prevent her from coming to terms with her past. Through a series of mythical illusions, Medusa is associated with the emasculating control women can exert over men.

Hadn’t they a name for her in India – Mahamaya, the Weaver of Illusions, the kind that trapped men in their own passions? It was the trap of death. They had stumbled upon her as a creative force, as a power outside themselves that could invade and destroy them.... How had all her wild fires quieted down into that still river of eternal abstraction of the soul? (98-99)

Through Medusa the novel reflects on extremely paradoxical view of women and power. Medusa is the only female figure to loom large in Elizabeth’s subconscious and, as such, she represents a threat to patriarchal figures like Sello.
Having experienced social alienation due to her mixed colour, Elizabeth has developed a negative concept of sex, associating its practice not only with transgression of law but also with immorality and filth. Her obsessive fear of men’s lust has saturated her with severe psychotic precipitation:

Naked women were prancing wildly in front of her and there was Dan....

[Elizabeth] had a clear sensation of living right inside a stinking toilet.

(14)

Did it matter then what a man slept with ... a cow, a horse, a child or anything? (43)

There were dancing-girls on the road in blue silk pants with confused roar,... perverts of all kinds, ... and one weird little girl... (64)

Along with these negative images of sex, Elizabeth has internalised the racist notion that black sexuality is primitive and unbridled. Medusa symbolises the idea of the exuberant dark woman as sensual goddess; in the second part of the novel, Dan is her male counterpart.

Medusa coerces Elizabeth into feeling estranged from the black community and exacerbates her insecurity as a member of the “coloured” minority. Accusing Elizabeth of not being a genuine African, Medusa tells her: “Africa is troubled waters, you know. I’m a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You’ll only drown here. You’re not linked up to the people. You don’t know any African languages” (44). The issue of racial ‘purity’ in A Question of Power is put in the hands of black racists. Setting the novel in Botswana allows Head to divert attention from South Africa’s apartheid and redirect it towards the universality of racial intolerance.

In one of Elizabeth’s recollections, the South African slums are described as places where young girls are periodically raped and where homosexuals are
“laughingly accepted as one of the oddities of life” (117). Rather than the result of individual choice, in the novel, homosexuality seems to result from the general identity conflicts engendered by apartheid. According to the narrative voice, mulatto homosexuality is deemed “a disease one had to live with”. The homosexual men are portrayed in *A Question of Power* as feminised males who “openly paraded down the street dressed in women’s clothes ... tied turbans round their heads, wore lipstick, fluttered their eyes and hands and talked in high, falsetto voices” (45).

Obviously, political overtones play a crucial role in the psychological aspect of homosexuality in South Africa. The homosexual activities of these men may be seen as proof of their assimilation of the role imposed on them by apartheid. Elizabeth’s sexual anxieties, which become overt through her neurosis, resemble those of mulatto homosexuals, but Medusa forces her to draw a parallel between the position of “weak, homosexual coloured men” (47) and her own as a mulatto living in a black African community. Upon reading a biography of Oscar Wilde, Elisabeth realizes the incongruity and injustice of her homophobia. Yet, she claims that the instinct to empathise with oppressed groups can only be exercised when the object of concern is sufficiently distant from oneself. Given Elizabeth’s predicament (i.e. mental disintegration), homosexuality becomes part of the fabric into which her delusions are woven.

Medusa raises Elizabeth’s sexual and racial inferiority, as well as the persistent reminder that Elizabeth hates black Africans, prompting the protagonist’s first breakdown. After a long period of intense nightmares, she loses control while shopping at a store:

She entered.... From that moment her eyes remained riveted to his [African clerk’s] face and she began pitching and heaving in a crescendo
of torture. The insistent hiss, hiss of horror swamped her mind: ‘You see,’ it said. ‘You don’t really like Africans....’ The insistent hiss was mean, stifling, vicious. Whom could she accuse, to end it? She sprang to her feet, slamming the chair back against the wall, and shouted: ‘Oh, you bloody bastard Botswana!! Oh, you bloody bastard Botswana!!’ Then she simply opened her mouth in one long, high piercing scream. (50-51)

Elizabeth’s self-hatred threatens her survival. She is now an outsider: as a political refugee, as a “half-cast”, as a lonesome woman and, ultimately, as an insane individual. In *A Question of Power*, the borderline between sanity and madness appears to be located at the intersection of repressed and expressed anger, at the point when the personal trespasses into the social. Only when her pain reaches the public sphere is she categorised as insane.

Elizabeth is admitted for a brief stay in the local hospital, while friends look after her young son. She is dismissed from the school where she taught. After she has been released from the hospital she finds a new job on a cooperative farm. She does many things to escape from her disturbing inner world. She latches on to the vegetable garden of which she is in charge and to the people with whom she works. The daily routine involved in the farming project and her contact with others provide her with a degree of stability. Gradually she recovers her mental balance by the end of the first part of the novel.

In the second part of the novel, Elizabeth encounters Dan, who symbolises a concept of political and sexual power based on violence. He reminds her of the political exclusion shared by non-whites, establishing a basis for cooperation between the two. As the relationship develops, their encounters come to illustrate two distinct periods in the career of nationalist leader: following an initial spell of fascination and renewed
hope, a progressive deterioration into disillusionment and fear unfolds. The confidence built during the first period when the leader shares a common cause with the people is manifested through Dan’s seduction of Elizabeth. Beside sexual fulfilment, he promises her love:

There was a heaven there where the light had shaded down to a deep midnight blue. A man and a woman stood in it, wrapped in an eternal embrace. There were symbols of their love.... There was nothing else, no people, no sharing. It was shut-in and exclusive, a height of heights known only to the two eternal lovers. (108)

But Dan’s romantic face rapidly fades giving away to a more authoritarian stage in which he openly displays his violent personality. As the initial infatuation with Dan ends, Elizabeth observes: “Any heaven, like a Black-Power heaven, that existed for a few individuals alone was pointless and useless. It was an urge to throttle everyone else to death” (133). Through a growing awareness of Dan’s false pretences she learns that leaders who try to create a heaven for a select minority eventually manipulate power against their own supporters.

Once Dan takes control over Elizabeth, all promises of love and trust are broken – his strategy is to disarm her psychologically. Like Medusa, he uses two vehicles to achieve his aims: his sexual superiority and blackness. Once again, Elizabeth’s alleged racial inferiority comes to force as Dan persists in making her aware of her disassociation from the African milieu surrounding her:

A persistent theme was that she was not genuinely African; he had to give her the real African insight. People in her daily life were vividly reintroduced through imagery at night.... In almost every way she had to
be aware of Africans as a special holy entity and deep mystery he alone understood. He was a deep mystery she would never fathom. (159)

Dan’s presentation of “the real African insight” is a rather dismal account of life in the continent. He has a hostile attitude towards everything and everyone and tries to suffuse Elizabeth’s mind with the pervading influence of evil in African life. Elizabeth’s contact with Dan cuts off her communication not only with other people but also with her inner thoughts. Under his nightly omnipresence, her neurosis deepens and her paranoia regarding human relationships increases. Dan’s power emerges from and is embodied by his sexuality. It is this power that enables him to dominate and manipulate women. Head makes Dan sexual excesses stand for what they are: a crippling manifestation of male power.

Dan tells Elizabeth that he has to have sex with other women because she has white blood and is sexually inadequate: “your hair is not properly African.... You are inferior as a Coloured. You haven’t got what [real African women have] got.... Coloureds or half-breeds ... contaminate ... pure black skin” (127). In order to lower her self-esteem further, Dan insists on having sex with other women in Elizabeth’s presence. The ‘superior’ women Dan favours have suggestive names like the Womb, Miss Sewing-Machine, Mrs. Pink Sugar-Icing, Madame Make-Love-on-the-Floor, the Sugar-Plum Fairy, and Miss Chopper. Apparently, his position as master depends on the fragmentation of women. He uses his “seventy-one nice-time girls,” named after dissected body parts and pieces of machinery, to torture Elizabeth. In torturing her with images of women, Dan effectively silences Elizabeth. He seems to be asking her both to see herself reflected in these women (woman as womb, woman as whore) and to see herself as lacking something that they have (sexual power, possession of Dan). Elizabeth is thereby doubly negated: she is not even as good as the sexual objects with
which Dan continually has sex. Dan reduces woman to an object and a sign of culture, rather than the subject and/or producer of it.

Although Elizabeth claims not to be interested in sex, the sexual nightmares reveal how distressed she feels about it. Her sexual self-denial recalls her mixed origin, her birth through a prohibited union. Dan rapes her mentally by dissecting her mind into fragments, thus depriving her of any possibility to achieve wholeness. As a result of Dan’s constant assault, Elizabeth’s mental balance collapses once more. Her second breakdown takes a more violent turn than the first one did. This time she strikes a white woman, an elderly Christian missionary whom she imagines to be the mother of Dan’s seventy-one lovers. No longer able to tell reality from nightmare, Elizabeth (as well as the reader) gets stuck at a point in the text where the internal and external levels of the narrative merge. Dan’s pervasive influence has driven Elizabeth to despair and she even considers the idea of killing her son and then committing suicide. At this point the police intervene and she is admitted to a local hospital. Subsequently, she is transferred to a mental institution where she remains for over half a year.

During Elizabeth’s second mental breakdown she expresses hatred for everything African. Asked to join other inmates in keeping the hospital clean, she refuses and demands different treatment because, she claims, “I’m not an African” (181). Observing her behaviour, the white psychiatrist in charge of her case assumes that Elizabeth identifies herself more as a white than as a black. Although not fully recovered from her turmoil, shortly after realizing the psychological damage of thinking primarily along racial lines, Elizabeth is able to overcome her anger and returns home from the hospital.

Towards the end of the novel and after a long time in ordeal and nightmares, Elizabeth gets relief as she pours her energy into the vegetable garden. The Motabeng
farm project thus symbolises Elizabeth’s success in finding freedom from and amidst oppression, her painful yet successful manoeuvre of exposing hierarchies of power and, in particular, the objectification of women as the foundation of patriarchy and her liberation from Dan’s and Sello’s “big picture” in order to set another formula for identity, one which is empowered by and expressed in terms of the community rather than by some authoritative abstraction of history. The novel ends with an emphasis on the village whose name means “place of sand” (19) – this name prefigures the process of psychological disintegration that Elizabeth was to experience. After four years of mental instability, Elizabeth begins to come to terms with the fact that she must let go of her past in order to live in the present. It is at this point that her painful South African memories begin to recede – perhaps the most valuable insight she gains from her introspective journey into the socially imposed situation created by the apartheid. She succeeds in divesting herself of the psyche manipulations that kept a tight grip on her life by ridding herself of false spiritual guides and tormenting projections of racist and sexist dominance by others. As her nightmarish struggle against internalised racism is over, Elizabeth resolves that both blacks and whites are “shut in and exclusive” (38) and opts for identifying with humankind in general rather than with any particular ethnic group. “Her realization that God is in everything allows for a celebration of otherness; power becomes relational rather than a system of domination and submission” (Tucker 175). The final pages of the novel reveal Elizabeth no longer as the stigmatised political refugee, the “half-cast”, or the insane woman, but as an artist who has managed to articulate a written account of her breakdowns. As her nightmare journey comes to an end, “she begins to jot down fragmentary notes such as a shipwrecked sailor might make on a warm sandy beach as he stared back at the stormy sea that had nearly taken his life” (204).
Walker’s *Meridian* is thematically similar to Head’s *A Question of Power* in depicting the intensity of the protagonists’ quest for their location in a world fraught with racist and sexist obstacles. *Meridian* is a book that moves between the Civil Rights Movement and the 1970s, depicting the life of a southern African American woman, Meridian Hill, and the choices she makes: marriage, motherhood, education, activism, and her final resolve that her place is with poor southern African American women struggling to realize their potential, obtain self-determination and re-locate themselves in their society. But within all these quests, the heroine is incapable of adjusting the imposed reality of what she should function and how she should be treated either as a poor or black woman. The heroine goes through a traumatic experience and mental and physical disorder, seeking help from religious people until she finally becomes aware of her reality, the reality of the black community from which there seems to be no escape.

It appears that Walker’s intention to create literature for the purpose of guiding women through the heroine’s journey began in 1976 with the publication of *Meridian*. In her essay, ‘Saving the Life That Is Your Own’ – published the same year she wrote *Meridian* – Walker explains her frustration regarding the lack of literature written with the intention of moving women “toward freedom and experience” rather than “comfort and security” (*In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens* 6). She maintains that at college she found most of the literature she was required to read to be “sexist and racist and otherwise irrelevant to so many lives” (8). As a woman, Walker discovered through personal experience that certain literature, novels with female heroes, helped her connect her inner and outer realities and created a ‘window’, a shift of consciousness, which enabled her to see a new reality. They demonstrated that she was capable of being a hero and that the patriarchal standards and stereotypes she had been schooled in
since birth were based on the false premise that females are inferior to males. Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth* reminds us that the patriarchal point of view, like any other key archetypal event or major shift of consciousness, can be undone. Just as patriarchy came into dominance with the aggressions of the Semitic tribes, and “as imperialistic people they usurped the matriarchal mythologies” and “annihilated any god or goddess” that was not their own contemporary, women can certainly wage their own campaign to eradicate male domination by creating a shift of consciousness, promoting equality between the sexes (213). For Walker, ‘reattuning’ women to the forgotten female hero archetype will be an integral part of the process. Her task, like that of the hero, will be to remind women that ‘place is something they have always had, just not recognized.’

In *Meridian*, Walker creates the first of a series of women characters who take the mythical hero’s journey and redefine the hero archetype, so that modern women will understand that the pattern itself need not be based on gender stereotypes. She refuses to offer strategies for coping with the unfairness of patriarchal double-standards; instead, Walker argues against beliefs stating that women must be wives and mothers to be fulfilled. In fact, she illustrates in *Meridian* how the restrictive nature of marriage and motherhood, as defined in patriarchal terms, imprisons women and prohibits them from developing into complete selves. Through a comparison of Meridian’s thoughts with her mother’s, Walker describes the dangerous consequences of forcing women to endure lives of limited opportunity. She also demonstrates how conspiracy of silence on the part of women destroys any chance for new generations of women to learn from their mother’s mistakes.

It has been mentioned earlier that Meridian’s quest for economic, artistic and intellectual self-determination has been developed through her endeavour with three
characters. These three characters, i.e. her mother, Truman, and Lynne, influence the decisions she makes and reshape her thinking and attitudes. As it appears, Meridian does not find fulfillment in marital obligations nor is she fulfilled by the only professions open to her: motherhood and homemaking. Her adventure or journey begins after her teenage pregnancy and resulting marriage. Although still young, her life is “settled” by society’s definition because she has a home and a profession. Walker describes how Meridian’s adventure begins ‘unknowingly.’ Her unconscious resistance to the responsibilities of motherhood and marriage takes the form of depression and bitter criticism of her life and husband. Lonely and unloved, Meridian suffers in silence, unaware of any greater purpose in life than that of being a wife and mother.

In the novel, Meridian grows up through the eyes of the reader. The author shows the emotional, physical and psychological stages of resistance that Meridian puts up. Starting from the thought that she has shattered her mother’s emerging self, Meridian is unable to become a typical African American mother or play the traditional role of the “Black Mythical Mother” as it is defined by Barbara Christian:

[the] tradition which is based on the monumental myth of Black motherhood, a myth based on the true stories of sacrifice Black mothers performed for their children.... [It] is also restrictive, for it imposes a stereotype of Black women, a stereotype of strength which denies them choice, and hardly admits of the many who were destroyed. (qtd in Bloom Alice Walker: 61)

Meridian decides to break off this tradition by rejecting this dangerous maternal legacy because she observes its affect on her mother. Meridian therefore lives in a state of matrophobia, which is, as defined by Adrienne Rich, the fear of “becoming one’s mother,” a daughter’s fear of reliving the life of her mother. Her emotional balance is
influenced by her early sense of resistance. She resists to be abused as a wife and mother living under the shadow of a man. During her marriage, her psyche appears to be deeply affected until she starts thinking of killing her child and commit suicide. In fact, Meridian does not object to children, or mothers bearing children, but the role a woman is expected to play once she becomes a mother. According to this role a mother, particularly the Mythical Black Mother, should suppress her individual personality and concerns in order to live for her children. Unfortunately for Meridian, the only way she can escape this unwanted role is to leave her child and family, accepting her own mother’s disapprobation. She must, however, learn to shed the guilt this action produces.

Obviously, Meridian’s early marriage results in two consequences. The first consequence of marriage and motherhood requires that Meridian be “expelled from school because of the pregnancy” (Meridian 62). “She hated the fact that although he was still in school and she was not, he did not seem to know anything about books – or about the world” (71). “She was so exhausted it was futile to attempt to think straight, or to even think at all. It took everything she had to tend to the child, and she had to do it, her body prompted not by her own desires, but by her son’s cries. So this, she mumbled, lurching toward his crib in the middle of the night, is what slavery is like” (69). The second consequence of her ill-timed marriage and motherhood, the one that begins the journey for Meridian, results from her anger and suicidal depression. Because she has no role models of women who initiate change through action, aggression, or violence, she resists passively. Overcome by lethargy and seeming passivity, she resorts to criticism. “And she began to find fault – with everything” (70).

Then she decides to give up her family and motherhood when she gets the opportunity to attend college. When she decides to give her child away, she does so
with a light heart. She does not look back, believing that she has saved a “small person’s life” (Meridian 90-91). Meridian feels that it will be best for the child as well as for herself; this decision causes huge disturbance within her because of her mother’s disapproval. As an attempt to escape the feeling of being a slave, she resists motherhood and abandons her child. She is unable to become a typical mother like her ancestors because she thinks that, unlike them, she has many goals to accomplish and that anything that would stand on her way must be resisted no matter what. Meridian becomes separated from the world not because she seeks to enhance and expand her sense of self after marriage and motherhood but, rather, because these states have robbed her of any self at all. There are no role models or stories of women who successfully reject marriage and motherhood and survive in a patriarchal society, or even of women who redefine the roles of wife and mother so that their actual responsibilities allow them time for a personal life.

Naturally, psychological disorder is a trauma that happens to a person whose conscience and sensitivity are faced with unexpected bitterness of (certain situations and circumstances in) life. When Elizabeth and Meridian break down, it does not merely mean that they are weak. The reason mainly lies behind their initial incapability to figure out and instantly cope with the circumstances imposed on them. Meridian’s story – detailed in the previous chapters – shows that she is not looking for safety. Rather, she is searching for a time she feels that she has discovered her purpose as a social revolutionary taking part in sit-in demonstrations, being arrested and beaten in order to bring about political and social reform. Meridian herself experiences brutal beatings during demonstrations and in jail. Because she must live with the constant threat of violence and death, Meridian, like the others in the Movement, suffers from “battle fatigue,” which appears as symptoms such as
“constant” crying or feeling that she has just been shot (87-5). Viewed from a different perspective, such fatigue that Meridian suffers can be attributed to her frustration at member activists of the Movement, seeing her choice to abandon family and join the political cause about to fail. Just like Elizabeth, Meridian feels that change of the status quo is a must so that the oppressed can have an equal share of life. But while Elizabeth is trapped within, Meridian finds a way to vent up her anger, i.e. through activism.

The feeling of being abandoned initiates Meridian’s journey. By contrasting Meridian’s imposed emotional and physical isolation from the community with her husband’s “happiness” or satisfaction, she is giving her life. The thirteen year old “woman” is not able to have a happy marriage. She is still interested in learning and the desertion provides her with a unique opportunity to move away from “Mythical Black Mother” because she considers black motherhood to be synonymous with defeat, submission, slavery, and eternal sacrifice. Walker demonstrates that when Meridian rejects her motherhood as a role model, she has symbolically broken with her maternal history. Meridian thinks of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history whereas she thinks of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority. In addition to demonstrating that resisting cultural stereotypes may result in emotional frustration, Meridian by discovering her self discovers many sides of her personality.

Meridian takes revolutionary choices, and her choices throw her into an eternal dialogue between herself and her self in an attempt to understand the unconscious dimensions of her choices. Lynn Pifer (87) explains that “in order to survive, Meridian must see through the mystique of martyrdom, learn to value her own life, and find a community to live with, rather than a list of names to be listed among”. Meridian’s acute sense of racism grows very early when she watches her silent history teacher
father, who, despite the protestation of Mrs. Hill, decides to return a piece of his land to the native Indians because of the burial mound on it. A practical woman, Mrs. Hill does not share his desire to atone for the sins of the past through the sacrifice of a valuable piece of land. Meridian becomes aware of racism when she watches the results of her father’s actions. Mr. Hill decides to seal the sixty acres containing the Sacred Serpent to Mr. Walter Longknife, a native Indian. Yet, the Indians soon become uninterested in the land and return it to Meridian’s father. Shortly after, the United States government takes over the land to convert it into a park. They offer only a token payment and, of course, do not include blacks when the public is invited to visit the mound. What later becomes even more painful to Meridian is the fact that when blacks eventually are given permission to visit the serpent, they behave irreverently and boisterously. “Meridian grieved with her father about the loss of the farm, now Sacred Serpent Park. She understood his gifts came too late and were refused, and his pleasures were stolen away” (Meridian 48).

Meridian stands in sharp contrast to her mother. Although the two never discuss Mrs. Hill’s feelings, Meridian understands her mother as well as Mrs. Hill’s view of her marriage and of motherhood – discussed in the previous chapter. Meridian’s sense of guilt emanates from two main sources: her feeling of disappointing her mother and her act of giving her child away – with the former being the main source of guilt. Mrs. Hill’s disappointment at marriage life and motherhood impacted her children negatively. She is shown to have a clean house and to attend church (her adherence to religion seems to highlight her escapist attitude due to the feeling of entrapment by sticking to what society expects her to be versus her need for personal growth), but it appears that she is actually incapable of loving her children and will not forgive them for being born:
It was for *stealing her mother’s serenity*, for shattering her mother’s emerging self, that Meridian felt guilty from the very first, though she was unable to understand how this could possibly be her fault.

When her mother asked, without glancing at her, “*Have you stolen anything?*” a stillness fell over Meridian and for seconds she could not move. The question literally stopped her in her tracks. (51; my emphasis)

As implied in the question, the mother does not trust her daughter and even as a child, she feels guilty for “stealing her mother’s serenity”, demonstrating how mothering sometimes can have a devastating effect on the female self. Meridian does not have the emotional stability that she needs as she grows up. Although she is unable to articulate her feelings of guilt, Meridian is made to feel that she has stolen her mother’s life.

Meridian’s feeling of guilt, thus, brings with it an aversion to pregnancy, to having any children. As the narrator of *Meridian* says, Mrs. Hill is not “a woman who should have had children” (49). She is “capable of thought and growth and action only if unfettered by the needs of her dependents or the demands, requirements, of a husband.” Her unexpressed anger and resentment finds its relief only through her fanatic devotion to religion. Even though she never expresses frustration to her children, her unexpressed anger and resentment poison their lives:

> In the ironing of her children’s clothes she expended all the energy she might have put into loving them. Her children were spotless wherever they went. In their stiff, almost inflexible garments, they were enclosed in the starch of her anger, and had to keep their distance to avoid providing the soggy wrinkles of contact that would cause her distress. (79)

Mrs. Hill withholds the information about her resentment and frustration towards
mothering from Meridian and other black women despite the fact that it would help them to avoid making the same mistakes. Meridian, in fact, has been emotionally starched shut. Due to lack of information from her mother about sex and how a woman’s reproductive system functions, Meridian gets pregnant by her boyfriend while she is in high school. As a result, she is expelled. She then gets married to Eddie and has a son, without having any understanding of what it means to be a mother and wife. Her pregnancy comes to her as a “total shock,” and Meridian feels betrayed by her mother, who never educated her about sex. Meridian begins her relationship with Eddie mainly because she wants a boyfriend to protect her from all the other men. And the demise of the relationship comes about when Eddie finally notices that Meridian does not enjoy having sex with him. Even though Mrs. Hill is herself a victim of unwanted motherhood, she is unable to help her daughter avoid entrapment by marriage and mothering: “She refused help and seemed, to Meridian, never to understand. But all along she understood perfectly” (51). Her intentional refusal hides her own feelings of bitterness and anger. Walker demonstrates how Mrs. Hill’s silence stems from her inability to challenge a role model that has been manipulated to impede and eventually curtail the development of any inner life at all. Her mother’s silence causes Meridian to experience a lack of belonging and prolongs her ‘separation from the world.’ Walker also demonstrates how the lack of communication induces feelings of despair and causes bouts of paralysis in Meridian. More importantly, this absence of communication denies them both an opportunity to share their mutual hate of a legacy that requires the complete sacrifice of personal happiness.

When Meridian says no to motherhood, she offends and loses her own mother, her family and her community. She feels guilty for leaving her baby, and she cannot adequately explain why she must. But by shedding her prescribed “happy mother” role
and standing up for her own needs, Meridian takes the first steps towards becoming a revolutionary. She stops living by others’ standards, learning to grow for herself, as she must in order to survive, since her rebellious acts will alienate her from the rest of society.\(^{13}\) Meridian is rejected by her mother, not only because she repudiates her maternal responsibility, but also because she fails to accept her mother’s religion.

Meridian knows that, like her mother, she is incapable for loving her child as a natural mother does. “One day she [Meridian] really looked at her child and loved him with as much love as she loved the moon or a tree, which was a considerable amount of impersonal love. She wanted to know more about his perfect, if unplanned-for, existence” (90). Even at this moment of “maternal love”, her love for him seems rather ‘unmotherly’. However, after her decision, she constantly suffers from the guilt of having failed both her mother and earlier generations of women by not being able to “live up to the standard of motherhood” (91). Confronting a maternal legacy which symbolizes sacrifice, endurance and self-abnegation, she feels “condemned, consigned to penitence” (91) for giving up her child:

Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of 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. (91)

Mrs. Hill condemns Meridian for her “selfishness” in abandoning her child to pursue her own happiness. She insists that Meridian has to bear the burden, whether Meridian
wants it or not. She confesses that she raised all of her children even though she had never wanted any: “Everybody else that slips up like you did bear it. You’re the only one that thinks you can just outright refuse” (88). Guided by her self-righteousness, she calls Meridian “a monster” for abandoning her baby, an act which she denounces as an unacceptable and unforgivable sin.

Meridian remembers the day that she lost her mother’s love forever. She was thirteen years old, sitting next to her mother in church. Unlike other girls who accept God as their Master and Jesus as their Saviour, she was unable to say that she acknowledged him as her Master, to her mother’s disappointment. Rejected by her mother, Meridian desperately longed for her love and forgiveness: “She struggled to retain her mother’s hand, covering it with her own, and attempted to bring it to her lips. But her mother moved away, tears of anger and sadness coursing down her face. Her mother’s love was gone, withdrawn, and there were conditions to be met before it would be returned. Conditions Meridian was never able to meet” (30). In spite of her mother’s rejection, however, Meridian thinks that “it is death not to love one’s mother” (30). Her desire to love and understand her mother causes her to examine the maternal history which shapes her mother’s life. Meridian’s reconciliation with her mother, it would seem, may be achieved only when Meridian comes to the understanding of maternal history. Meridian comes to an understanding of her mother’s life as a “sacrifice, a blind, enduring, stumbling through life” (77). By understanding the maternal legacy of sacrifice and endurance, Meridian reconciles with her mother:

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. (120-21)

However, she is never forgiven by her mother. Instead, Miss Winter, a music teacher at Saxon College, becomes her surrogate mother by ‘forgiving’ Meridian.

The battle fatigue Meridian encounters as a result of working in the Civil Rights Movement turns into emotional fatigue brought on by the endless guilt she feels for putting her child up for adoption. Even though she knows her child is better off without his seventeen-year-old mother, Meridian cannot forgive herself for giving him away. She feels that she has abandoned her son and her own heritage:

Meridian knew that enslaved women … 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 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. (91)

Meridian’s condition gets further complicated by her disappointment at three major events in her life: her education at Saxon; her involvement with the Movement; and her love for Truman. In addition to that, two incidents need to be mentioned: the molestation by George Daxter when she was a little girl, and the sexual advancements of Mr. Raymond, the black professor Meridian has worked for to earn money for her own upkeep.

Basiclly, she gave up her son to pursue education, which she considers as a prerequisite for self-fulfilment. But the system of education at Saxon turned out to be yet another channel to tame women and subdue their growth. Women in the college are expected to be virgins and are treated as if they were children. In addition, the Saxon
education represses the growth of “funkiness” or any sign of daring spirit in the students. The purpose of its education is to inculcate female submissiveness and domesticity. Black women are indoctrinated to imitate the values that white society regards as proper for a lady, so that they can fit into an already existing social structure without creating much friction or any disturbances. It is the type of education which encourages black women to become submissive, obedient and timid, and which wipes out their cultural heritage.

As far as the Civil Rights Movement is concerned, Walker suggests that the will to live in spite of all obstacles one has to confront in life, is more heroic than death and martyrdom. Meridian is rejected by her revolutionary sisters and brothers because she refuses to declare that she will kill for the Revolution. After witnessing the extreme violence inflicted upon black dissidents, the black revolutionary intellectuals believe in the use of violence in their counterattack. However, Meridian believes in the sacredness of life and cannot accept the principle of killing, even for the Revolution. Meridian realizes that she suffers because she cannot accept her inability to kill, because she thinks, “I am not to belong to the future” (201). Ironically, those who believe in violence are the ones who leave the Movement once it becomes unfashionable. Meridian thinks that the basic questions raised by the Movement still exist and that the Revolution cannot be reduced to “a fad.” For her, the revolution is not over so long as black people live in poverty. Instead of choosing death, she continues to live, no matter how difficult it is: the respect she owes her life is to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. In addition, Walker’s reassessment of the Movement itself exposes the sexual oppression within the Movement which was silenced in an attempt to achieve equality for blacks.
It is during her involvement with the Movement that Meridian comes to meet Truman, the only man she thinks she is in love with, and also the man who shatters every possibility for Meridian to have another relationship. Meridian’s relationship with Truman reveals some of the dark sides of the Movement. Their relationship becomes intimate as they participate in the protests against segregation and the marches for freedom: “They were at a time and a place in History that forced the trivial to fall away – and they were absolutely together” (84). However, Meridian becomes just a woman, just a sex object to him. Like “a conquering prince,” he conquers Meridian when they have sex and he is gratified by his masculinity without being sensitive to her feelings. Perceiving Meridian as a body, he asks Meridian at one point to “have [his] beautiful black babies.” He is unable to see Meridian as a human being rather than a sex object that he can use: “Here was a woman to rest in, as a ship must have a port. As a train must have a shed” (141). In fact, he does not want a woman who has her own mind and who claims her own life. His self-centredness results in his blindness and inability to see the humanity in other people. He acts irresponsibly, as is shown by the fact that he never realizes that Meridian is pregnant and later has an abortion. As long as he is limited in his perception of women as objects rather than individual human beings with their own thoughts and emotions, his relationship with women is doomed to failure. When Truman returns to Meridian in the first chapter, wearing a jacket of the type worn by Chairman Mao, he looks “like a revolutionary.” In fact, he used to wear an elaborately embroidered Ethiopian robe and speak in French. His superficiality and pretentiousness blinds him to what it really means to live by revolutionary principles as Meridian does.

Meridian’s transformation and mental balance is achieved gradually. She expiates her guilt for having failed as a daughter and as a mother by finding direction in
her life through her social and political work. She dedicates her life for the cause of black people. When Anne-Marion calls Miss Winter about Meridian’s illness, she takes care of Meridian. While Meridian is delirious, she dreams about her mother trying to push her over the railing in the sea. Meridian’s cumulative guilt becomes so great it prevents her from seeing or moving freely. She slips into her own petrified trance, and it takes an act of sisterhood from faculty member, Miss Winter, to bring her out of it. Meridian desperately struggles to free herself from her mother: “Mama, I love you. Let me go” (125). Miss Winter, sitting by her bed, instinctively answers Meridian’s solicitation, saying “I forgive you.” Although Meridian is unable to get forgiveness from her mother, she expiates her guilt through a symbolic mother figure.

Secondly, Meridian’s understanding of maternal history and of feeling a connection to the past is concomitant with the reconciliation with her mother. The re-evaluation of the history of the Civil Rights Movement is also necessary to Meridian’s healing process, since her personal relationship with her mother is intimately intertwined with the history of black people in the 1960s. In her essay “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?” which was written in 1967, Walker explains what the Movement has meant to blacks and what it has accomplished for them:

If the Civil Rights Movement is “dead,” and if it gave us nothing else, it gave us each other forever.... It broke the pattern of black servitude in this country. It shattered the phony “promise” of white soap operas that sucked away so many pitiful lives. It gave us history and men far greater than Presidents. It gave us heroes, selfless men of courage and strength, for our little boys and girls to follow. It gave us hope for tomorrow. It called us to life. (Gardens 128-9)

Meridian started to value herself. The self-hatred and the feeling of unworthiness that
Meridian has – which culminate in her disregard for her body and her decision to cut every possibility of pregnancy after her abortion – gradually dissipate as she gets transformed by her ideals of the Movement; although she fails to understand Truman’s interest in white women, at first, because she does not consider that the historic relationship of black men to white women was different from that of black women to white men. By portraying Meridian’s deliberate action of undergoing abortion, Walker makes it clear that not choosing motherhood is a conscious decision for Meridian this time. Meridian devotes herself to accomplishing goals considered ‘revolutionary’ in 1960s. She succeeds at proving that, as an African-American and a woman, she can compete academically with men. She is able to overcome her inner voice: “the voice that said terrible things about her lack of value. It was talking to her, and it was full of hate” (92). She triumphs over her personal fears and champions the rights of others during Civil Rights demonstrations. Meridian’s transformed understanding of the cause of the black people and of how to resolve the conflict enables her to imagine a place for herself and her nonviolence in the future. She is finally able to find her voice and break her silence and sing with the congregation:

… 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, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all. (Meridian 201)

Walker redefines the notion of revolution. Instead of violence and death, “love is the
revolutionary emotion” (5). Since revolution lies in transformation of the inner self, it must first occur within. Meridian also points out that the revolution does not begin with an act of killing but with teaching. By turning to the songs and stories of her cultural heritage, Meridian finds a way to serve her people. And finally she can speak out against racist, patriarchal hegemony, rather than standing alone in the margins, holding her tongue. Her ability to see the connection of black people to each other and to their collective past and to see herself as the preserver of that past and its spiritual values highlight an aspect which Walker deems necessary for the “spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people” (Gardens 250).

To conclude this chapter, it has been shown that, in order for them to know themselves and their potential, the protagonists have had to pass through the hurdles imposed by the political and social circumstances where they exist. They have had to go against all the odds despite the suffering that almost costs them their mental health. Both the heroines have had to financially support themselves and work in societies that are highly prejudiced against blacks in general and single black women/mothers in particular. They have had to resist the crippling frame where they are expected to fit in, break the stereotype image, and choose their own paths rather than the paths drawn for them so that they could see themselves as subjects, functioning by themselves. Through these characters, the authors portray the psychological impacts of political and social bias against women, redefine the gendered roles and re-locate women in another social paradigm, that of the subject position.
There is a very interesting paper written by M. Bahati Kuumba where a comparative study of gender and social movements has been made between the US and South Africa.


*Black Skin, White Masks.*


Similar information is also available in this link: [http://www.webster.edu/~woolflm/mamieclark.html](http://www.webster.edu/~woolflm/mamieclark.html).

See Robert Harvey’s *The Fall of Apartheid: The Inside Story from Smuts to Mbeki* and Rita Barnard’s *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*.


In her character, Meridian, we are able to see Walker’s admiration of women such as Rebecca Jackson, of whom Walker writes, “the remarkable general power of Rebecca Jackson, ... a woman whose inner spirit directed her to live her own life, creating it from scratch, leaving husband, home, family, and friends, to do so” (*Gardens* 79).

See also Walker’s “I Know What the Earth Says” William R. Ferris. interview
Chapter III: Bibliography

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


