CHAPTER IV

THE BODY AS A SITE OF OPPRESSION IN THE NOVELS OF ALICE WALKER AND BESSIE HEAD
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“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

Martin Luther King

This chapter deals with the representation of female body in the novels of Alice Walker and Bessie Head, how the gendered bodies of women are portrayed and treated in oppressive racist circumstances, how the female characters in the novels deal with these “facts” in their society (south American and south African) in their attempts to achieve their self-realization, and how Head and Walker set out to metaphorically liberate the female body from the limitations of various discourses and social taboos. The analysis revolves around the portrayal of female bodies in highly racist societies, socially as well as politically, where women of colour struggle to overcome the multifaceted challenges to secure a subject position by making certain decisions which, though received by others derisively or with antagonist attitudes, finally prove to be effective. In exposing the discourse of the body in the novels of Walker and Head, the discussion starts by shedding light on the concept of “body” in feminist and postcolonial studies, focusing on how traditional views of gender, class and sex circumscribe women’s growth and potential. The body as the central locus upon which competing discourses are written is significant because self-definition, and particularly female definition, begins with the human body: obviously one cannot talk about self without implying beforehand the existence of the body.
It is to be noted, however, that a comprehensive exposition of the views on the
body, or the investigation of all these views with reference to the novels of Bessie Head
and Alice Walker is surely too ambitious a move for this chapter to endeavour.
Therefore, this chapter’s main concern is with investigating the female body with
regard to racism and sexism as portrayed in select novels of Head and Walker – of
course, reference will be made to some of their other novels.¹ For a start, we begin by
considering the body as an object. *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines an object as
“something mental or physical toward which thought, feeling, or action is directed.”
Hence, a body becomes an object when one thinks, feels, or acts upon the body. In this
connection, body as object can be viewed from two perspectives: body vis-à-vis “gaze”
(Foucault 1963, 1977), and body as a temporary object. As regards the first perspective,
much feminist research and theory has focused on women’s adherence to cultural
Within this scholarship, the body is viewed as an object; it is something to be looked at,
judged and moulded through diet, exercise, eating disorders, cosmetic surgery, and an
array of other “normative feminine practices” (Bordo 1993). The “gaze” (Foucault
1977), or judgmental observation of the body by oneself and/or others, is considered an
apparatus through which cultural expectations of the thin female body are enforced
(Bartky 2005; Bordo 1993) – e.g. most women discipline their bodies to maintain
slenderness, especially after pregnancy and birthing in order to come up to the ‘gaze’ of
society.²

Moreover, contemporary sociological theories and research regarding the body
have focused much attention on the ways in which human experience both transcends
dualisms (body/mind etc.) and is shaped by society and culture. Sociological
scholarship on the body has also explored the relationships between the human body
and mind. It is widely recognized among sociologists of the body that an intricate relationship exists between the human body and self. In many facets of social life, the body is viewed as a signifier of one’s self. That is, the body “outside” symbolises and represents the individual “inside” (Holstein and Gubrium 2008; Turner 1982). Given that the body is a representation of the self, the self must put forth a considerable amount of effort to portray a socially appropriate and desirable self through the body.

Michel Foucault (1977) associates this self-body relationship with social power through his analysis of contemporary modes of self-regulation. Foucault argues that whereas the body used to be a locus of social control through physical torture, power is now enforced through control over the mind. Through control over ideas, individuals become subjects that regulate their selves through regulation of their bodies. The result is what Foucault calls “docile bodies” or bodies that conform and submit to societal control. Similarly, Chris Shilling (1993) identifies the “body as project,” something that substantial work is invested in and is accomplished as part of one’s self-identity. Freud regards the body as a causal, mechanical, secular and symptomatic representative of the mind. Mike Featherstone (1991) argues that as part of one’s identity, the self is responsible for “body maintenance” or ensuring that the body is clean and healthy. Embedded in these ideas is the expectation that the self maintains control over the body, which, in turn, represents the self. A self that loses control over the body loses its social acceptability (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991). In these conceptualizations of the body-self relationship, the self maintains power and subjectivity over the body as object.

In colonialist and postcolonial discourses of various kinds, the body has occupied a central position as manifested by its frequent presence in much postcolonial writing in recent times which has contended that the body is a crucial site for
inscription – i.e. the notion of how people are perceived controls how they are treated, and physical differences are crucial in such constructions. This view of the body as a site for representation and control is central to many early analysts of postcolonial experience, notably Frantz Fanon among others. Such concerns with the body centred on ideas of colour and race – e.g. chromatism, or the essentialist distinction between people on the basis of colour. Colonial and postcolonial studies emphasized the visibility of signs of difference when manifested in skin colour, hair type, facial features such as eye shape or nose shape, etc. Although such ‘differences’ do not constitute any decisive genetic dissimilarity (though theories of race have often asserted), they nevertheless became prime means of developing and reinforcing prejudices against specific groups. Such prejudices were generated either for economic reasons (as in slavery) or to control indigenous populations in colonial possessions by emphasizing their difference and constructing them as inferior (i.e. to reinforce hegemony). More recently, there has been an increased concern with, and understanding of, the special role played by gender in constructing images of colonial inferiority (the emasculation or feminization of postcolonial cultural representation in image, word, etc.) and in constructing a special ‘double’ colonization for women within the general field of colonial oppression. This has led to a greater concern with the body as a site for gendered readings of postcolonial subjectivity – this is, of course, in addition to several concerns regarding the exhibiting of colonised bodies in museums and exhibitions, how the colonisers saw the colonised as a body (a mere object deprived of any subjectivity, especially in the context of slavery), etc.

The body, and its importance in postcolonial representation, emphasizes the very special nature of postcolonial discourses. For although the body is a text, that is, a space in which conflicting discourses can be written and read, it is a specially material
text, one that demonstrates how subjectivity, however constructed it may in fact be, is ‘felt’ as inescapably material and permanent. (This is important for postcolonial studies in that it reiterates the idea that the discursive forces of imperial power operated on and through people.) However, the question of the materiality of the body is a moot point in phenomenological and psychoanalytic feminist studies, especially those that strive to assess the body from a postmodern point of view.

In the post-World War II context, ideas about the body, its cultural role and representations, changed drastically. While early twentieth-century discourse looked at the body in terms of health, sanitation, productivity and preservation, the post-war body was employed and described in terms of its degradation and permeability. With the proverbial boundary of the body broken through the horrors of war and turmoil, there came an increased awareness of the corporeal self as a receptacle for political inscription, and a distinct call from many theoreticians to acknowledge and activate the body through co-production of its constant choreographic reality. In his pivotal point for this discourse on the docile, politicized body, Foucault describes the physical self as at once the most fundamental, natural being, and also a ubiquitous, diffuse site of political production:

The disciplinary controls of activity belonged to a whole series of researches, theoretical or practical, into the natural machinery of bodies; but they began to discover in them specific processes; behaviour and its organized requirements gradually replaced the simple physics of movement. The body, required to be docile in its minutest operations, opposes and shows the conditions of functioning proper to an organism. Disciplinary power has as its correlative an individuality that is not only
analytical and ‘cellular,’ but also natural and ‘organic’. (Foucault 1977: 156)

Implicit in this political production is a possibility for the body to be employed to induce societal change, should agency be taken by the individual in this production:

That is to say, there may be a ‘knowledge’ of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them: this knowledge and this mastery constitute what might be called the political technology of the body. Of course this technology is diffuse, rarely formulated in continuous, systematic discourse; it is often made up of bits and pieces; it implements a disparate set of tools or methods. (Foucault 1977: 26)

Important here is the sense that there is a potential power latent in the individual body, but paired with the impossibility of that power being effectively engaged because of its dispersal into the scale of the individual, the breakdown of the body into its smallest choreographed and habitual acts.

Within post-structuralism, the body is understood as a cultural not (just) a ‘natural’ object; as something socially inscribed and produced within a network of socio-historical relations instead of being tied to a fixed essence (Grocz, Becomings: 1999; Cheah and Grosz 1998). It is through this complex process of inscription and performance that the philosophical underpinnings of phallocratic culture exist as a material power – a physical and productive power – not just an ideological one. That is to say, we do not just absorb the ideologies of patriarchy through our minds, but these are inscribed into our very being in the world through our relationships with our bodies. The body, in this sense, in its openness to cultural ‘completion’ (Grosz, Sexual Subversions: 1989), is the interface or point of contact between the political and the
personal (Grosz and Probyn 2000), with knowledge/discursive practices (or thought) as the dynamic link between power and bodies: that which ‘invests’, ‘contours’ and ‘animates’ them.\(^8\)

If power (or culture) is in Michel Foucault’s terms, a complex strategical situation, a field of force relations, then the body is both an effect of this, and its vehicle.\(^9\) The body is both product and agent, with the interactions and relationships between the embodied subject and its culture as the means by which and through which both are produced simultaneously. For power is not simply enacted upon individual subjects, but is involved in forming or constituting them in the first place; female subjectivity, for instance, formed ‘by virtue of having gone through such a process [as] “assuming” a sex’.\(^10\) Butler’s argument supports the idea that power exists in the things that produce us (and produce things for us), not just in the things which constrain or limit us; with the body not just an object of power, but a powerful object; with women taking an active role in the inscription of both themselves and others throughout their lives. For a woman’s identity or ‘self’ is not something she is born with, but something born out of a complex of recognitions, comparisons, exclusions, demarcations, divisions, alignments and realignments. Women identify themselves within a shifting field of images defined (made sense of) by language, and imbued with power relations. Female bodies are also powerful (and objects of power) in the way that knowledge is extracted from them – via science and medicine, for instance. This knowledge then works back onto bodies to invest them in a complex and dynamic process of continual exchange.

Referring to Michel Foucault (1977: 26-7), this power that operates on and through bodies exists as ‘a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity’. Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on
to or allows to slip away; power is exercised at innumerable points. Relations of power are not exterior to other types of relationship (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in them. It is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. This is the omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere: not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere (Foucault *The History of Sexuality*: 1980).

Judith Butler\(^\text{11}\) also looks at the body as an historically and culturally specific performance of materiality – as a discursive field in which discourse produces and marks (differentiates) what it names – rather than as a universal ‘natural’ or pregiven entity. In particular she looks at the way gender is regulated and produced through a complex process of reiterative performativity, a process that continually resignifies gendered and heterosexual bodies as normative. In this view, one does not walk like a man/woman because one is a man/woman, but to become one, constantly reinforcing (or reinscribing) one’s gender to oneself and others. Thus, Butler says, ‘identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (*Gender Trouble*, 25).

Vicki Kirby (1993) notes the tendency of some post-structuralist theorists to read the body as if it were only a surface. This somatophobia or reluctance to go ‘inside’ the body, to think *through* it, she suggests, would seem to be yet another ‘legacy of phallocentricism’s mind/body split’ (Kirby 1991: 10). That is to say, women do not just absorb the ideologies of patriarchy through their minds, but these are
inscribed into their very being in the world through their relationships with their bodies.\textsuperscript{12}

At this point it is relevant to mention the term ‘body politic’. In political discourse, ‘body politic’ refers to ‘a group of persons politically organized under a single governmental authority’.\textsuperscript{13} With Foucault in mind, this definition is not unrelated to the concept of ‘body politics’, which can be viewed as the manner and mechanisms of inscribing (on) the body. The term \textit{body politics} refers to the practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body, as well as the struggle over the degree of individual and social control of the body. The powers at play in body politics include institutional power expressed in government and laws, disciplinary power exacted in economic production, discretionary power exercised in consumption, and personal power negotiated in intimate relations.\textsuperscript{14} Individuals and movements engage in body politics when they seek to alleviate the oppressive effects of institutional and interpersonal power on those whose bodies are marked as inferior or who are denied rights to control their own bodies. Because body politics covers the power to control bodies on the one hand, and resistance and protest against such powers on the other hand, body politics can both uphold and challenge racism. In the United States, the Civil Rights Movement unseated the predominant racial body politics in abolishing Jim Crow laws and abating racial segregation.\textsuperscript{15} The slogan “Black is Beautiful” heralded a moment in the 1960s when African Americans pointedly attributed positive values to black physical features (Anderson and Cromwell 1977). Body politics during that time included wearing hair in a natural, unprocessed “Afro” and donning African-inspired clothing.

Samuel A. Chambers maintains that “a body is dependent upon others and subject to violation by another, by others. Throughout bodies we always remain
exposed to others, and our vulnerability ties us to others” (49). Thus, the discussion in this chapter reveals the role played by and on the body of female characters, concentrating mainly on two novels by each of the novelists in hand, though cross-references are also made to their other novels. Bessie Head’s novels, *A Question of Power* and *Maru*, are investigated vis-à-vis Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*, pointing out how both the writers projected female body as a site of subjugation, resistance and emancipation, and as a locus where such crucial factors as race, sex and gender are all at play. In this regard, it is obviously relevant to shed light on critical race theory to relate to the dynamics of oppression and, hence, emancipation of women of colour.

Critical race theory developed in the 1960s and early 1970s in a period when fresh approaches were essential to deal with new types and subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground (Delgado & Stefancic 4). The Civil Rights Movement in America was at its peak when critical race theory originated. This movement strove for basic civil rights for all Americans, regardless of race, thus empowering the people of colour in society (Morris 518). The Civil Rights Movement echoed the objectives of The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured people (NAACP), ensuring the political, social and economic equality of minority group citizens of the United States. Primarily they aimed to eliminate racial prejudice and eradicate all barriers of racial discrimination in society (Morris 518). This theory altered the preconceived thoughts of racism by providing a fresh angle in addressing the “ordinariness” of racism and racial differentiation within a society (Delgado & Stefancic 7). What is meant by “ordinariness” is the fact that racism is often regarded as a very ordinary and normal issue in society, demonstrating the usual, accepted way of life and representing the common experience of individuals in society, whether they are of colour or not. In
addition, it is also commonplace for people to be both governed and divided by race creating racist members of society who detest people from diverse races. Critical race theory also examines how society has constructed and stereotyped the black individual in society (Delgado & Stefancic 7). It, therefore, focuses on how racist attitudes and behaviours are societally instilled and investigates how this problem can in fact be changed.

The core principle of critical race theory is the notion of the social construction of race. To elucidate, the emphasis is on the fact that race and racism are considered to be products of social thought, eliminating the conception that races result from biological or genetic differences (Delgado & Stefancic 7). Critical race theory further provides an account of how stereotypes develop in society and how these stereotypes can change over time (ibid.). These racial inequalities and ideologies are perpetuated in literature. The selected texts of Alice Walker and Bessie Head reflect and emphasize the unjust and divided societies of the US and South Africa/Botswana. In these societies, the power and authority of race is of significance as human fate was dictated and manipulated by a person’s ancestry and appearance. The characteristics of a person’s hair, complexion and facial features mediated every aspect of the Afro-American and South African person’s life. As is seen in the novels in both Walker and Head, people were judged solely on external biological aspects of race, and these determined their standards of living, and ultimately their destiny and fortune. It was these physical characteristics that had an immense influence on whether a person was figuratively free or enslaved in society.

Unlike the black African people, who were a race and ethnicity of their own, the coloured people (e.g. Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* and Margaret in *Maru*) felt as if they did not have a specific position in society as they were regarded as neither black
nor white. The white community deemed them to be too dark in skin colour whereas the black community considered their skin colour to be too white; thus they acquired the label of half-breed. Bessie Head is a prime example of the complex position faced by the coloured people in the social order as she resided in a few homes to find her correct place in society. After birth she was first given to a white family for adoption, however, after realizing that she was not white, the family returned her where she was placed in the home of the Heathcote family, a coloured couple who were devout Catholics: hereafter, she was sent to St. Monica’s home, a school for coloured girls situated near Durban (Gray 99-102). Consequently, Head, as a coloured, had no sense of belonging and felt as though she lacked an identity in society, problems which resulted from continuous social ridicule. The dramatic impact of society on Head is evident even after she left South Africa and started living in Botswana.

In the racially afflicted literary context in question, particularly with reference to Head’s novels, the differences between the white characters and the black characters may actually be minimal compared to the differences between the members of the same group. In Head’s texts under examination, gender inequality, rather than inherent biological differences, can be argued to be the result of the intra-group conflict resulting from the differences in the beliefs of the female and male characters pertaining to patriarchy and the treatment of the female characters in their society. Netherland theorist Teun van Dijk in his extensive work on critical discourse studies, advances a theory of ideology. He defines dominance as “as the exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial and gender inequality” (van Dijk, 1993). Elsewhere he (2008: 155) maintains that “the differences between man and women should (also) be interpreted in terms of the dominance of men in a patriarchal order.
Such power abuse also shows in many other ways in male discourse”. With his view of narratives “as special kinds of action descriptions following some specific rules and constraints” (1975: 274), van Dijk (1979: 144) stresses that “we should no longer try to define ‘literariness’ in terms of literary discourse structures by themselves, but rather in terms of the role of such discourses in processes of socio-cultural interaction” and, therefore, the narrative discourse is defined “by the specific participants and their various roles or functions” (1979: 152).

Frantz Fanon was interested in racial differences, “and his thinking brings together insights into psychology and a concern for the effects of domination on subjugated peoples” (Rivkin and Ryan 462). His work examines the effects of white authority on the subjugated black people of society by incorporating his knowledge of psychology and the working of the human brain into the argument. Fanon affirms that “there are close connections between the structure of the family and the structure of the nation” (Fanon 141). It is for this reason that the characteristics and qualities of the family are projected onto the social environment in which they reside. Fanon begins his argument by considering the difference between the childhood of a white person compared to the childhood of a person of colour. He maintains that “a normal child that has been raised and has grown up in a normal family will be a normal man” (142). However, he notes the opposite in the childhood of a person of colour, “a normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world” (143).

Fanon explains this phenomenon by emphasizing the racial differences between the white and the black child. He argues that the white family is the agent of a certain system and acts as the workshop in which a person is shaped and trained for life in society (148-9). Thus, this family structure is internalised in the superego and projected
into political and social behaviour. Fanon further argues that when the child of colour makes contact with the white world, a certain synthesizing action takes place. In this process the child of colour’s own “unacceptable” family structure is cast back into the id (unconscious) where it is repressed (151-3). Furthermore, according to Fanon, if the child of colour’s psyche is weak, there will be a crumpling of the ego (the conscious), where the person of colour will stop behaving as an “actional” person, in a way that is well-known and unique to him/her (154). It is at this point that the child of colour adopts a white person’s attitude and behaviour through a process of identification (152-3). The goal of his/her behaviour now turns to that of the white person in society, to “The Other” which is in the semblance of the white person (154-5). It is through “The Other” that the person of colour will gain worth and self esteem in society as the whites were the only admirable and respected citizens in society (154).

This transformation of behaviour in the person of colour can be used to explicate the mistreatment of black African women by the African men in society. The white population, in the racist regimes of South Africa and Botswana, were known to portray aggressive and violent characteristics towards the black individuals in society, abusing them physically and emotionally. The black African people had contact and relations with the white world as they provided domestic labour and labour forces for these cruel people. As a result of this, the blacks were subjected to the vindictive attitudes of the whites, thus, reinforcing this behaviour in the psyche of the blacks. It is for this reason that the blacks adopted the hostile attitude of their superior counterparts – it also appears that the same case is applicable to the blacks in the US, as portrayed in Walker’s *The Color Purple* and, more emphatically, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. 
The intimidating and brutal attitude of “The Other” is then incorporated into each facet of the black person’s life, as it is through the disguise of a white person that offers the black person a feeling of importance and worth. A black male’s attitude and power, in the imitation of a white man, is then reinforced in his conduct towards the black women in his society where he portrays his mimicked violent and aggressive attitude. This results in the mistreatment, oppression and abuse of the black women by the black men in their lives, mirroring the poor manner in which the black men themselves were treated by the white citizens in society. By scrutinizing the psychological stress experienced by the non-whites during the imbalanced society rife with power and discrimination issues, it is possible to understand the troubled characters of the selected texts by Walker and Head.

The fact that the black characters are discriminated against by the racist characters of power, causes them to be exposed to extreme stress and trauma. However, some black characters develop a more adequate coping mechanism in dealing with trauma than others; therefore, these characters can effectively deal with and adapt to the appalling way in which they are treated. In other instances, the black and coloured characters in the texts are unable to heal up completely from the traumatic events experienced. These psychologically marred characters are thus portrayed as being mad or irrational, illustrating their inability to deal with the trauma endured. Such character can be exemplified by Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*, Meridian in *Meridian* and Sofia in *The Color Purple*. Elizabeth represents a mentally ill person as she suffers from hallucinations in which she is tormented by sexually deviant or perverted creatures and phantasms that continuously try to destroy her; Meridian’s reconciliation with the self is never complete; Sophie is never able to lead a normal life.
In a closer examination of the ordered Southern African society, attention also needs to be paid to the repressive roles thrust on women in society. Judith Butler (1998) shows particular interest in the notion of acquiring a specific gender in a society. In exploring this, it is vital to differentiate between the similar concepts of sex and gender. According to Butler, the sex of a person is determined by their chromosomal constitution; thus it is their biological form that is significant in determining their sex (1998: 902). Conversely, the term gender refers to the cultural interpretation or signification of the person’s sex. More specifically it is the display of masculine and feminine behaviour associated with the notion of the sex (ibid.). In her theory, Butler pays specific attention to the construction of gender identity in a society. She utilizes the idea presented by Simone de Beauvoir which claims that one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes a woman: “We are exhorted to be women, remain women and become women” (de Beauvoir 2).

Considering the body as an active process of symbolizing certain cultural and historical possibilities, Butler focuses on the construction of the female gender in society and argues that to become a woman is to allow the body to conform to a historical idea of women and to persuade the body to become a cultural sign of women (1998: 902). In her book, Gender Trouble, Butler indicates that gender performativity is not a matter of choosing one’s gender, “the performativity of gender ... is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (xiv-xv, my emphasis). “The iterability of performativity is a theory of agency, one that cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility” (xxiv); yet at the same time “[a]s the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an ‘act,’ as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism” (187). In other
In other words, Butler hypothesises that the body of a woman becomes its gender “through a series of acts which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time” (1998: 900). A woman, therefore, gains her femininity by repeating the acts that she is expected to mimic from other women in society, hence represents a gender identity that is accepted by the hegemonic gender, men. However, this process of performing a gender can also transform the expected behaviour of a gender in a given society. Thus Butler argues that the ideas concerned with masculine and feminine behaviour can be altered. It is the women in society that can change their expected gender roles and social order by performing roles equating them to men, instead of performing the expectations of the men in society.

Similar to Butler’s theory where gender identity is constructed and differentiated by means of different performances by men and women fulfilling their specific gender roles, social constructionists hypothesize that knowledge is sustained by social processes (Burr 4). For example, it is through daily interactions between people in their everyday lives that social knowledge or shared versions of knowledge are constructed. Thus, gender roles in society are products of the culture and the history prevalent at that specific time. This is apparent in the texts of Head and Walker that are of significance to this study. In the era that their black characters were created, great importance was placed on the gendered and racially differentiated distinction between human beings, to such a degree that these categories of personhood influenced every characters’ economic, social and psychological well being (Burr 4). With this said, the characters’ understanding of the South African and Afro-American worlds and their knowledge of society are understood in terms of racial and gendered categories where each character’s identity is determined by these pertinent societal issues.
In the same line, Barbara Risman (2004: 429) acknowledges the theory of gender as a social construction where a person’s gender is embedded in the individual, and in the interactional and institutional dimensions of society. She maintains that the creation of difference between men and women in society provides the foundation of gender inequality (431). As a consequence, the differences in gendered behaviour justify the construction of women as a group which is forced to be subordinate to men as a group. Luce Irigaray (This Sex 187) expands on the identity and worth of women as a group by examining the social roles imposed on them by men in society. She argues that women are assigned labels relating to sexual pleasure which contain certain expectations that are geared towards the fulfilment of male needs. In patriarchal societies, women are classed as objects; more specifically they are categorised as objects of desire used to perform sexual labour. Additionally, women also acquire labels from men that equate their worth and value to men in society. In discourse, women are restricted to these labels which limit their representation in literature.

Irigaray considers three main categories surrounding female sexuality into which a woman is placed (This Sex 186). The first category is woman as the mother figure where the woman remains confined to reproduction. This label is derived from a woman’s reproductive and nurturing abilities. Her main function here is to bear and raise children. Conventionally, the figure of the mother spells silence – just as Brownfield in The Third Life of Grange Copeland expects his mother to be. The mother, socially constituted as the place of nature within culture, as the matrix out of which the child’s subjectivity is developed, and as the object of the other’s desire, assumes a marginal position in culture, perpetually alienated from her own subjectivity. Thus, this category into which women are placed focuses on and maintains the submissive role of women in the patriarchal society.
The next category is that of “virginal woman” and describes a woman who is sexually pure and ignorant about sexual matters, perhaps even lacking interest in such pleasures (*This Sex* 186). Interestingly, women who belong to this category are valued more by the men in society. The fact that the woman is a virgin gives her more worth as she is deemed pure and innocent – consider, for example, Alfonso’s and Albert’s advances to exploit Nettie in *The Color Purple*, and the interest shown by Moleka and Maru in Margaret Cadmore in *Maru*. The last type of woman that is discussed by Irigaray is the prostitute. The prostitute defines a woman who passively accepts men’s sexual advances, offering her body, without demanding pleasure in return (186) – Margaret in *Grange Copeland* is viewed to fit in this group and, likewise, the seventy-one ‘nice time’ girls in *A Question of Power*. Though considered ‘productive’ in terms of work, women who are placed in this group have little or no value to men and exist primarily to be used by both married and unmarried men, simply for their sexual gratification – they conform to Kristeva’s theory of abjection.

In the novels Walker and Head, most of the black female characters are true representatives of a state described by Kristeva (1982) as ‘abjection’. According to Kristeva, abjection is “one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (“Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection” 1). In contemporary critical theory, abjection is often used to describe the state of often-marginalized groups, such as people of colour, prostitutes, convicts, poor people and disabled people. In this context, the concept of abject exists in between the concept of an object and the concept of the subject, something alive yet not. Black female characters in the novels of Walker and Head appear unable to speak of the horror they ‘live’ in: they are alive and not alive at the same time.
Most of the female characters in *A Question of Power* exemplify the labels discussed by Irigaray. In her state of madness, Elizabeth is haunted by Dan and Sello, characters who have no respect for women. These hallucinations provide insight into how the male characters objectify the female characters, treating them as their sexual property. Head’s character Elizabeth states: “All the men were like that, they had prostitutes in the background. A long story was to unfold about the women. Half of them belonged to Dan” (119). Head’s interesting choice of names for the women in her character’s hallucinations also substantiates Irigaray’s theory. These names relate to either character’s physical appearances or their sexual representation; for example, Madame Make-Love-on-the-Floor, Body Beautiful, The Womb and Madame Loose-Bottom signifying that the female characters are only important to the males for sexual purposes.

Similarly, Walker’s characters in *Meridian*, *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* fit in these categories. In *Meridian*, the heroine Meridian is valued by her lover Truman as a mother only; however, in her decision to have abortion and to cut every possibility of enslaving her body by the restrictions of biological motherhood she appears to rebel against this stereotyping, which she thinks is a stumbling stone in her way to have personal freedom. Shug in *The Color Purple* belongs to the third category since men are interested most in her body despite the fact that Shug is a liberator of herself and of others. Margaret (*Grange Copeland*) also belongs to the third category and is doomed to commit suicide, killing herself and her illegitimate son.

The injustices and struggles of black women in American and South African/Botswana societies are mirrored in the fictional lives and communities created by Walker and Head in their literary constructions. Racial oppression, hatred, prejudice,
detestation, intolerance, cruelty, subjugation, and brutality are a few terms that reflect the callous and cruel characteristics of these racially divided societies. Racism is the primary doctrine blamed for the weaknesses and severe suffering in Southern Africa’s disordered societies and the American chauvinistic society.

The society based on unequal opportunities in A Question of Power can be analysed according to institutional racism. The white characters in the novel acquire their wealth from the hard labour of the black characters whose minimal wages are barely sufficient to properly feed their families. Head illustrates the poverty of the black characters in the novel by providing a comparison between the reality of impoverished black children and the privileged white children:

They ate no breakfast in the early morning, and by midday their mouths were white and pinched with starvation. Other children had soft mounds of butter where their cheeks ought to be, and dimpled smiles. The children she had taught were stark, gaunt, thin like the twisted thorn-bush. (68)

In A Question of Power Head bases her fictional society on the world she experienced while living in South Africa. Consequently, the black characters were denied education as this could lead to their empowerment; however, the whites believed that education was the key to their power; thus they were the ones who were sent to well-resourced learning institutions. In addition, the white characters did not want the black characters to better themselves in any aspect of their lives, as this could potentially threaten the superiority of the white characters.

They conjured up in the minds of the poor and starving a day when every table would overflow with good food; roast chicken, roast potatoes, boiled carrots, rice and puddings. They felt in every way like
food and clothes and opportunities for everyone. It wasn’t like that in his
[Eugene, a white character] country, South Africa. 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 and skill. (57)

The notion of supremacy and the discriminatory attitude displayed by white characters
is projected by the way the black Africans experience many hardships as a result of
being of a darker skin colour. Firstly, it is believed that the black African is savage and
is a danger to society; secondly, the black person is deprived of education as it is
believed that this will empower him/her, creating a disturbance in the ordered society;
and thirdly, no matter how decent or honest a black person is, he/she is always the main
suspect in the event of a crime.

It was not only the black characters who were silenced and ill-treated by the
white characters; Bessie Head depicts this in the world of her coloured characters
facing a more traumatic existence and struggle than the black characters. A section of
the poem, “God” by D. H. Lawrence is quoted at the beginning of *A Question of Power*
by Bessie Head.

*Only man can fall from God*

*Only man.*

*That awful and sickening endless, sinking*

*sinking through the slow, corruptive*

*levels of disintegrative knowledge . . .*

*the awful katabolism into the abyss!* (qtd in Head, *Q of P* 8)

She includes this stanza from the poem in order to encapsulate the dysfunctional
fictional society of her novel and the immoral and brutal world in which she, as an
author, actually resided. Head frequently felt like an outcast in Southern Africa, which influenced the psychological viewpoint from which she examined the racist society.

Head’s exile in 1964 did not allow her to leave her racial prejudice behind her, for in Botswana, she came to feel as marginal as the Masarwa underclass and to identify with them. Her ‘coloured’ looks made the Batswana believe that she and her son, Howard, were, indeed Basarwa. As a result, they were treated like outcasts. (Starfield 660)

Head felt ostracised by her colouredness and gender, hence, her careful scrutiny of living in a society riddled with both biased black and male characters is illustrated through the character of Elizabeth in A Question of Power. “It was much worse from her side, she wasn’t a genuine African; she was a half-breed” (104). Elizabeth, Head’s fictional self, feels as if she has been brutalised, dealing with the constant social ridicule and derision. “Elizabeth listened to the words alertly. How they fitted her own circumstances! Maybe Dolly had been to hell and back” (111).

However, Head provides an alternative perspective into the lives of the characters and their inner turmoil. Instead of focusing on the mental effect on the black characters in society, she focuses on a character, like herself, of mixed descent, who is depicted as even worse off than the subjugated black people. “You are inferior as a coloured” (A Question of Power 127). Another example that substantiates this poor treatment of the coloureds is: “The poor man had been sent into the job with a leprosy-like fear of coloureds or half-breeds. That was one of his favourite records. He was afraid he might have to touch the half-breed at some point and contaminate his pure black skin” (127).

Elizabeth is the fictionalized representation of Head’s subjective experience where even though half of Elizabeth’s genetic composition is from a white character,
her mother, she is still discriminated against because of her black genetic composition. Illustrative of this is Elizabeth’s childhood when she is sent from one foster home to the next in order to try and find her a suitable place in society. It was deemed unacceptable for her to continue living with the white family with which she was initially placed as she was not regarded as a white person; however, she was also not regarded as a black person, thus she felt no sense of belonging in apartheid society.

First they received you from the mental hospital and sent you to a nursing home. A day later you were returned because you did not look white. They sent you to a Boer family. A week later you were returned. The women on the committee said, ‘What do we do with this child? Its mother is white.’ (17)

Head’s examination of oppression and racial prejudice is based on Elizabeth’s exiled perspective of the Southern African world. With regard to power, Head does not just portray the battle for power between the races; she also pays attention to the power battle between people of similar ethnicity. Interestingly, the black characters in A Question of Power resent and ridicule other characters of the same race that hold more power or those who are deemed more powerful than them.

The intra-group conflict is more widespread than the inter-group conflict. This mindset of the black characters is evident in the statement: ‘People there had an unwritten law. They hated any black person among them who was ‘important’. They would say behind a person’s back: Oh, he thinks he’s important, with awful scorn” (26). This is reiterated in the quote: “The reasoning, the viciousness were the same, but this time the faces were black and it was not local people. It was large, looming soul personalities (57). In A Question of Power, white characters as a race compare and compete with the black characters as a racial entity. These white characters are
responsible for the creation of this racism as it has been found that there are no genetic
differences between white and black people, the only differences between the two
groups are in fact physical – their skin colour. The actual characters in the novel
reinforce the physical differences in order to elevate their particular race or themselves
in society. The manner of how racism is created is evident in the quote: “Knowing that
Elizabeth was more literate than the students, she thrust her down too. She flung
information at her in such a way as to make it totally incomprehensible and
meaningless, subtly demonstrating that to reach her level of education Elizabeth had to
be able to grasp the incoherent” (76). This proves how the white characters always
make sure that they are in a better position than the black characters which ultimately
directs them to the success and triumph of their own race.

Education is also a key factor to ensure the success of the white characters in
Head’s fictional world. The white characters prefer the black characters to be
uneducated, thus guaranteeing minimal opportunities for the blacks. However, if some
black characters are fortunate enough to attend school and receive an education, they
had teachers who were not as qualified as the teachers in the white schools. An example
of this is Elizabeth’s son’s teacher who cannot even spell properly. “Tom shook his
head: ‘You must have made a mistake, Shorty. It’s wrong.’ ‘It’s right,’ insisted the
small demon. ‘My teacher spells it like that’” (125).

Teun van Dijk’s theory of racism and ideology can be used to further explain
the relationships between characters in the novel as the white characters’ deliberate
hatred for the black characters validates them to strategically place themselves in a
powerful position in society. Thus, it was this intense hatred that they used as a tool in
order to oppress them economically and socially. Interestingly, the Batswana also
despise the Masarwa characters, but this did not provide them with an elevated position
as they are not as economically and politically advanced as the white characters. The organized attitudes of the white characters then help them with the furtherance of their own goals and interests in their fictional world as once the white characters have the black characters in the position that they want them, they make certain that it is here where they remain. The whites, therefore, have it in their minds that the black characters are repulsive and do everything in their power to substantiate this warped view of the black characters. Furthermore, the black characters are constantly reminded of this intense hatred by the white characters as this was explicitly displayed at every possible opportunity. The racist attitude that oppressed her from youth is evident when Elizabeth feels as if she has a record playing in her mind, constantly reminding her of her inferior status: “Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death. Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death” (46).

To elaborate on van Dijk’s argument and his discussion of cognitive frameworks, when a white child is born into this society, he/she is conditioned to conform to the white people’s social identity and their social position – Fanon also supports the same. Thus, prior to the acquisition of knowledge and subsequent development of the child, the mere fact of his/her skin colour is essential to his/her attitude and overall advantage in life. Consequently, a white child is expected to detest blacks and to treat them in a derogatory way. Elizabeth emphasizes this particular point when she exclaims:

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

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

Another effective tool the white characters use in order to keep the black characters in their desired place in society is the way the white characters use language and speak to these characters. It is important to note that language varies according to the context in which it is used. The term register is used by linguists to describe the fact that the kind of language we use is affected by the context in which we use it to such an extent that certain kinds of language usage becomes conventionally associated with similar situations (Montgomery et al. 67). Thus, the register used by both the white and black characters in A Question of Power is influenced by the social relationships of the participants in that specific situation. 18

Frantz Fanon in his theory of “The Negro and Psychopathology” showed interest in racial differences and how these differences affect a person of colour and his/her view of the world. In his investigation of the effects of oppression on the subjugated people of society, he places importance on the families in society, which he argues subsequently constitute the nation as a whole (152). Moreover, he claims that the white family structure is the agent of a certain system and acts as a workshop in which a person is shaped and trained for life in society (152). This socialization process is then transferred into the nation as a whole. As a result, a white child growing up in South African society is expected to benefit economically, socially and politically; however, Elizabeth, who is not regarded as either white or black, finds herself in quite a complex situation in this regard. According to Fanon (154):
when the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If this psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal of his behaviour will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth.

As a consequence the child of colour will adapt to a white person’s attitude and behaviour through a process of identification (151). Homi Bhabha expands on Fanon’s theory by arguing:

In order to understand the productivity of colonial power it is crucial to construct its regime of truth, not to subject its representations as a normalizing judgement. Only then does it become possible to understand the productive ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse – that ‘otherness’ which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity. (*The Location of Culture* 67)

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

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

Elizabeth, while living with the white family was encouraged to discriminate against black characters; however she also felt a sense of hatred towards the white people because of their actions and her having a black father. This attitude is apparent when she compares Dan’s oppressive manner of living to the terrible ways of the white people: “Once you stared the important power-maniac in the face you saw people, humanity, compassion, tenderness. It was as though he had a total blank spot and only saw his power, his influence, his self” (19). Therefore Elizabeth was not comfortable living as either a white character or a black character.

Head likens the white characters to animals in A Question of Power. She compares the white characters to carrion-feeders. “What did they gain, the power people, while they lived off other people’s souls like vultures” (19). By using this comparison, Head illustrates how, like vultures that feed off their prey, the white people live off the black characters, negatively instilling them with their fuelled aggression. Jacqueline Rose (402) points out the psychological effects on Elizabeth in Head’s work: “At the borderline of fiction and chronicle, A Question of Power recounts, close to the detail of one episode of Head’s life, the breakdown and cure of its central woman protagonist, Elizabeth, in the village of Motabeng – formally from outside her consciousness, effectively from inside her mind”. Elizabeth is portrayed as a character that is not mentally sound. Throughout the novel Elizabeth battles to distinguish between stark reality and the nightmarish vision of her inner world, eventually confusing the difference between the two: “She was not sure if she were awake or
asleep, and often after that the dividing line between dream perceptions and waking reality was to become confused” (Q of P 22).

Elizabeth’s strange behaviour results from her unsuccessful coping mechanism and inability to deal with racial issues in her world. Elizabeth continuously experiences trauma as a coloured, and feels like an outcast. “In South Africa she had been rigidly classified Coloured. There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality. There wasn’t any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. There were races, not people” (44). Thus, the endless social ridicule and forced isolation causes damage to Elizabeth’s mind. Elizabeth is a character that cannot cope with the traumatic events of abandonment and rejection she experiences; instead she becomes fixated on the actual trauma experienced. This is evident when she cites: “In fact, I’m astonished to see the blue sky today. And you know what sort of world I live in? It’s midnight all the time” (58). For Elizabeth, this trauma becomes inescapable and the centre of her world, as she obsesses on her racially based suffering. The fact that Elizabeth’s life is based on her disconnection to other characters and inner turmoil is evident in Head’s portrayal of Elizabeth as psychologically unstable and her display of madness in the novel. Ironically, according to Jacqueline Rose (404), it was widely believed by colonialists in Africa that African women did not go mad as they were said to have not reached the level of self awareness required to go mad. Thus, Head’s portrayal of the psychological effects on Elizabeth is meant to be seen as a reaction against the stereotypes prevalent in the society at that time and challenges the stereotypes reinforcing the psychological trauma experienced by women of colour.

The fact that Elizabeth hears voices inside her head, and lives in a world governed by these internal voices illustrates her inability to effectively navigate the circumstances in which she lives. “What was she to do with this record inside her head?
It was more real because it had feeling behind it too, a cringing, deep shame” (117). Therefore the continuous rules, instructions and racial slurs recited to her on a daily basis incite the paranoia she depicts. Theorists have identified this as posttraumatic stress disorder resultant from the racial war and the victim’s sheer helplessness in dealing with colonialism (van der Kolk and McFarlane 488).

American feminist theorist, bell hooks, argues that black women as a group find themselves in an unusual position in their society as their overall status is lower than other social groups, resulting in sexist, racist and classist oppression. She also notes how white women and black men can have dual roles as both oppressor and oppressed in society. Black men are victims of racism; however, their sexist behavioural attitude allows them to have power over the women in society. Similarly, white women face oppression by the males in their society while racism allows these white females to hold power over both black men and women in society. This theory effectively describes the position of the women of colour in the Afro-American and African fictional worlds who find themselves more subjugated than the black male characters as their lives are not just governed by racial inequality, but they are also deeply affected by gender inequality. Women of colour have a history of oppression within Afro-American and African cultures, which are rooted in patriarchal custom and tradition. Men are often shown to be the victims of their history and tradition with no choice to transcend this tradition as they face ostracism by other members of their culture or by their ancestors.

In South Africa, the black women experience oppression because of their gender, race and class. In the African society women did not have equal rights to the men in society. Furthermore, the women of all races were often subject to men for financial support and release to secure employment; therefore it was very difficult for
them to alter their position. Head again reinforces the psychological effects of double oppression when she allows Elizabeth, her literary self, to state:

The second social defect is a form of cruelty, really spite, that seems to have its origins in witchcraft practises. It is a sustained pressure of mental torture that reduces its victim to a state of permanent terror, and once they start on you they don’t know where to stop, until you become stark, raving mad. Then they just grin. (137)

Elizabeth, in this quote, discusses how the blame for her madness or voices inside her head is primarily on the men in society who are continuously speaking down to them as women and demanding submission. The fact that Elizabeth’s life is harassed by the imaginary male characters of Dan and Sello, illustrates how patriarchy is an inescapable part of her life. These men are ever-present and communicate with her in every situation she faces. She appears to feel totally trapped by Dan and Sello and their constant governance. Her sense of entrapment is reiterated in the quote:

. . . the fearful thing was that Dan had decided that he was a much better manager of the universe than Sello. What was eating him was that no prophecies had preceded him; and yet in some way he had gained directorship of the universe in 1910. 20 (25)

Elizabeth’s choice of lexis in this quote is also noteworthy as she uses words that indicate leadership and control like the word “manager” and “directorship”. Firstly, the word “manager” depicts a person who is deemed more powerful than other people in a company. Similarly, the word “directorship” is also a word that denotes power and authority as a director is a person who is in charge of the actors in a movie or people in a company. Thus Head uses this specific lexis to reiterate how it is the men that are in charge of the universe and more importantly of the female characters. The use of the
word “universe” is also interesting as Head illustrates the extent to which men have power as the universe is the broadest representation of a geographical area.

Elizabeth emphasizes the oppression of women by making an interesting comparison between Hitler and Dan. “He had not yet told the whole of mankind about his ambitions like Hitler and Napoleon, to rule the world” (14). In this way she illustrates exactly how much power Dan, and the male characters in general have or believe they have in her fictional society. Hitler, a German political and military leader was one of the twentieth century’s most powerful dictators and, in his pursuit to conquer the world was responsible for the suffering of millions of Jews: “The Hitler Youth did this to the Jews. They were so demoralized by the propaganda, they cringed like this man. They began to believe they were inferior” (47). Elizabeth likens Dan to Hitler as his actions and that of his followers and the male characters in general share Hitler’s ruthless attitude towards people and power. They mercilessly inflict distress on their victims in their pursuit and maintenance of power. Through this comparison Elizabeth substantiates the point that men will do anything to rule the world; no matter how much destruction they cause, their aim is to gain and retain power over other members of society they deem weaker or inferior, particularly women. The damage propagated by the male characters is further emphasized when Elizabeth compares the destruction of men to the damage of a windstorm: “He came rushing towards her like a violent windstorm, full of sand and swirling dust. Everything seemed about to disappear under the impact of the storm” (147).

Male hegemony begins at an early age as revealed by the relationship between a mother and her son in the novel. Even though the son is a child, he shows no respect for his mother, an elder, by speaking to her as if she is of an inferior status to him. This is evident when he reprimands her because the food is not ready:
She heard the other small boy set up a loud argument with his mother in
the kitchen. He was very domineering. He moaned: ‘You haven’t any
lunch for me, and I’m so hungry.’ ‘Lunch will be ready in a few
minutes, Jimmy’, his mother said. ‘Well hurry up about it,’ Jimmy said
offhandedly. (59)

In a similar vein, Elizabeth can easily relate to this relationship between parent and
child as this was a replica of her fictional relationship with her own son who is also
domineering and demanding, resembling the adult male characters in their fictional
society. Male children mimic the behaviour of male adults and thus act like the
domineering male adults. Elizabeth compares Jimmy, the bad-mannered child to her
own son: “Elizabeth could see that this little Jimmy, like her own son, was an imitator
of some other adult in that household” (59).

This behaviour and the roles imposed on men and women can be investigated
using the theory of Judith Butler, who argues that gender is performative and men and
women perform the roles that are applicable to their specific gender. Butler claims that
to become a woman is to allow the body to conform to a historical idea of women and
persuade the body to become a cultural sign of women. With this said, women perform
the certain gender requirements that they are expected to perform in a given society; for
example, they are expected to be submissive. In Head’s fictional gender-biased society,
the women are forced to serve and obey the instructions of the men in their lives. For
example, it is a requisite to do the housework, prepare the meals and provide adequate
care for the children. These expectations of the female characters is apparent in the
novel’s reference to the lifestyle of Elizabeth’s friend, Kenosi: “She was really the
super-wife, the kind who would keep a neat, ordered house and adore in a quiet,
undemonstrative way both the husband and the children” (90).
Head depicts the male characters as sexual predators whose behaviour is driven by their sexual urges that they even resort to raping young females in order to satisfy and empower themselves. "It was the nightmare of the slums she had grown up in South Africa, but it never dominated her life. Usually small girls got raped, but the men were known" (117). This representation of males is not different from Walker’s portrayal in *The Color Purple* where Walker presents her protagonist, Celie, as a true representative of the theme of the exploited female body in its strongest manifestation.

As the subject of repeated rapes and beatings, Celie tries alternately to ignore and to annihilate her body – i.e. relegating it to the position of the abject. The latter is her strategy for coping with the trauma of incest and as defence against her husband’s assaults: “He beat me like he beat the children... It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (23). But Celie’s ignorance of her body is even more shocking than her desire to annihilate it, as her language makes it clear. She describes her own hysterectomy in the words of a child: “A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don’t bleed no more” (7). Even this knowledge, personal as it is, comes to Celie second-hand. Celie has no desire to get to know her body until the arrival of her husband’s lover, Shug Avery. While serving Shug in the traditional female capacity of nurse, Celie feels her first erotic stirrings and associates them with a new spirituality: “I wash her body, it feel like I’m praying” (47). The process of discovering or developing desire begins with the re-appropriation of her own body, which was taken from her by men – first by her brutal stepfather and then passed on to her husband, Albert. The repossession of her body encourages Celie to seek selfhood and later to assert that selfhood through spoken language and through independent decisions and actions. During this process Celie learns to love her self and others and to address even her written language to a body,
her sister Nettie, rather than to the disembodied God she has blindly inherited from white Christian mythology. Shug seems to play the role of a catalyst here inasmuch as Celie is concerned, especially in reconciling Celie with her own body. (But Shug also appears as a men tantalizer: with her interests in fashion and cosmetics she is portrayed as a female body that men run after.)

Butler’s theory of gender performativity can be invested to highlight the oppression of the female body in this novel. The character of Sofia one can see the torture that a black female body may incur if it opposes the deep-rooted ‘tradition’ and roles assigned for men and for black folks in general. For example, that Sofia possesses a much larger body than her husband Harpo is a source of great conflict for him: it is exactly when a female is seen to possess one of the features traditionally allotted to males. Sofia is a large woman who would rather fix the roof of her house while her husband takes care of the children (56-57). Independent and strong, she has interests that are traditionally male, such as wanting to be a pallbearer at her mother’s funeral (196). Harpo is a small man, who throughout the novel is depicted as the more domestic of the pair. That the small-large opposition weighs on Harpo’s mind is evident when at one point he eats obsessively in order to make himself as large as Sofia (56-57). Although the pair clearly cares for each other, Harpo is disturbed that he does not fit the traditional male expectations of large size and physical and mental dominance of his wife. Sofia physically fights with Harpo after he first attempts to beat her into submission. Harpo’s binge-eating is an unsuccessful attempt at achieving physical dominance over Sofia. When Sofia eventually moves out, Harpo begins a relationship with Squeak, a small woman, not outspoken (as her name indicates), and one whom he can dominate, at least for a while.
Sofia is a threat to the traditional paradigm not only for gender, but also for race. She has the traditional qualities of the male gender which cause her problems in her own race, but because she is “bound to live her life and be herself no matter what” (244), those same traditionally male qualities which lead her to resist sexual oppression in the private sphere accompany her as she resists racial oppression within the public sphere (Berlant, 1988: 462). Sofia is unsuited for the “mammy” role in her own home and in the home of the Mayor (Selzer, 1995: 74). Sofia replies, “Hell no,” at the mayor’s wife’s inquiry as to whether she would like to be her maid and care for her children (The Color Purple 81). The mayor and his men savagely beat Sofia for her lack of ‘subservience’. They further dominate her by giving her a fifteen-year jail term. She is released from her imprisonment only to become the maid of the mayor’s wife. Because Sofia so blatantly breaks traditional gender and race paradigms, she suffers tremendously. Men and women of her race seek to oppress her for her “manliness” while the whites essentially make her a political prisoner whose spirit they attempt to crush (Berlant, 1988: 462). Thus, the mapping of race and sexual oppression is easily perceived through the polar opposites of Sofia’s character. Alice Walker, therefore, shows that black women in the US suffer at the hands of the whites and the black males alike.

Bessie Head also shows the same, where African women have to bear with classist marginalization and bias. In Maru, the story of Margaret Cadmore, a Masarwa girl who has been brought up like an English girl by her foster mother and namesake, explicates how body politics are racism impinge on the life and psyche of the heroine and determine the society’s view of her. When her foster mother retires and goes back to England, Margaret finds work as a primary school teacher in the Botswana village of Dilepe. Everyone who meets her assumes that because of her complexion, she is
coloured, not realizing that she is in fact one of the despised Masarwa they have condemned to perpetual servitude and whom they consider the lowest of the low. Yet it is against this background that Margaret firmly declares her tribal identity: ‘I am a Masarwa’ (Maru 5). It is a declaration that sends tremors whose ripple effects double-back and largely affect the focus of Margaret herself and of course those around her. There are however shock waves which the quiet but resolute Margaret withstands with the aid of her friend Dikeledi and would-be love interests, Maru and Moleka.

Brought up by her English foster-mother and namesake Margaret Cadmore, Margaret therefore confirms her identity as a Masarwa by inheritance: it is, however, only her biological composition and nothing else. Otherwise, Margaret’s identity is not indeed her own but a composite legacy derived from her natural mother and from that which is created for her by her foster mother. Margaret is thus a fluidity and hybridity of identities: “There seemed to be a big hole in the child’s mind between the time that she slowly became conscious of her life in the home of the missionaries and conscious of herself as a person. A big hole was there because unlike other children, she was never able to say, ‘I am this or that’” (Maru 15; my emphasis). The reiteration of ‘a big hole’ implies incompleteness and a felt absence of identity. Furthermore, although she acquires a strong sense of self-worth from her adoptive mother, ‘…the only part of her life that could be [called] hers, [was] her mind and her soul’ (15). As stated in the novel, however, Margaret Cadmore senior’s treating the child Margaret like ‘a real, living object for her experiment,’(15) meant to prove the capacity of an educated Motswana. However left all alone after the departure of her guardian, the younger Margaret sets out to exonerate herself from her ‘experiment’ label.

On arrival at Dilepe, Margaret’s firm and confident answer to Dikeledi’s inquiry whether she is coloured, marks her coming into her own, her sense of self-identity.
Ebele Eko (1986:143) notes, ‘[with] her one sentence identification, Margaret confronts her self, her past upbringing, her future and her society…. bursts out from the walls of her white foster mother’s protection and stands aloof and vulnerable.’ Like Makhaya in *When the Rain Clouds Gather*, her cultural pride not only gives a renewed identity to her despised people’s identity, but also challenges the myths of racial and tribal superiority. She thus learns to take control of the ‘only part of her life that is hers, her mind and soul’ (16). Indeed she sees that ‘nothing can un-Bushman her’ (18). Unlike her fellow Masarwa who have been made to see only inferiority in their identity, Margaret proudly claims her own. The reason for this is perhaps because she had grown up sheltered from the full blast of the tribal prejudice often suffered by her fellow Masarwa. In fact, “not one thing about her fitted another and she look[ed] like half a Chinese and half like an African and half like God knows what” (23). Moreover, if in spite of her near perfect English, Margaret still retains her Masarwa identity, then it is implied that racial characteristics and not language primarily determine identity. In the end, it is the western education she received at the hands of her benefactor, which becomes the basis of some individualized/personalized identity. Margaret’s qualifications prove that education and not social or racial background can and should without prejudice give one an identity that serves as an indicator of personal potential.

Inasmuch as the Masarwa come to be symbolized by Margaret, the story of the Masarwa oppression is told through her. By definition, “Masarwa is the equivalent of ‘nigger;’ it is a contemptuous term and means, obliquely, a low filthy nation” (*Maru* 12). The Masarwa are the most downtrodden and despised of the black people; they are even reduced to the status of non-human beings. They are at the bottom of the ‘hierarchy’, as Head’s narrator describes it: “If the white man thought that Asians were a low, filthy nation, Asians could still smile with relief – at least, they were not
Africans. And if the white man thought Africans were a low, filthy nation, Africans in Southern Africa could still smile – at least, they were not Bushmen” (Maru 11). The circumstances of Margaret’s birth in the open desert air are symbolic of the oppressed status of her ancestors, who tend to live on the periphery of society, on the outskirts of villages. Thus from her birth onwards, Margaret becomes literally and practically an outsider amongst other black people not of her own tribe. Ironically though, despite her rejection by people of her own skin colour, Margaret is accepted by the philanthropic white woman Margaret Cadmore.

Whilst at school, the other children had, ‘spat on [Margaret], they punched [her], they danced a wild jiggle with tin cans rattling: Bushman! Low Breed! Bastard!’ (10-11). Thus on the basis of her tribal identity, Margaret suffers the rejection of her Batswana schoolmates who in addition to mocking and chiding her, refuse to sit next to her, and harass and spit on her, offering tribal slurs: ‘You are just a Bushman…. Since when did a bushy go to school?’ (17). Moreover, she has to put up with the racial discrimination stemming from her being the adopted child of a white woman who also happens to be the school principal. Margaret is therefore doubly discriminated against both on the basis of her tribe and because of her association or identification with Margaret Cadmore senior.

Unfortunately, this double discrimination becomes triple when it leads to a self-effacement as Margaret completely withdraws into herself and turns into an intensely lonely and self-pitying figure who enacts on her own life aspects of the oppression she suffers under. She thus internalizes her oppression: “What was a Bushman supposed to do? She had no weapons of words or personality, only a permanent silence and a face which revealed no emotion, except now and then an abrupt tear would splash down out of one eye” (12).
In adulthood Margaret ‘inherits the stigma of Tswana conventions [that had plagued her natural mother to death] and constantly fluctuates between a sense of self-worth and a deep inferiority complex’. Thus while she confidently declares her Masarwa identity, when anyone approached her, ‘she slowly raised her hand as if to ward off a blow. Sometimes she winced, but the raised hand was always there as though she expected only blows from people’ (71). Moreover, the psychological scars of Tswana discrimination are manifest when Margaret, on realizing that both she and Dikeledi have the same love interest in Moleka, readily gives him up. She is convinced that ‘Moleka can’t possibly love me’ (113-4). Pitifully therefore, her inferiority complex tells her, ‘… [you are] not any other woman. [You are] a Masarwa’ (113) and as such, Moleka ‘will never approach [you] because [you are] a Masarwa’ (115). What, then, becomes clear is that Margaret is not always discriminated against but that like Makhaya (Rain Clouds) and Elizabeth (Question of Power), she has internalized oppression and will not pursue her wishes and personal desires. She limits herself to behaviour that others think a Masarwa should display and quietly wastes her life away because she is a Masarwa.

Her isolated existence and social rejection ‘reduce her significance in the village to the level of obscurity’. Symbolically, she lives in her isolated little house on a hilltop and fearfully watches the rhythm of village life as an outsider. Thus while she sorrowfully and quietly pines away, ‘in the distance a village proceeded with its own life but she knew not what it was…’ (93). Margaret’s feelings of abjection and her enactment of subaltern status are to a significant degree of her own construction. In a situation in which the victim seems to collude in her own oppression, Margaret readily plays the role of the disempowered protagonist in her own tragedy, quietly fulfilling the prophecies of Dilepe about her.
Aside from the masculinist prejudices associated with Margaret’s position as a female teacher in a male-dominated school system and community, Margaret particularly has to contend with the Principal Pete’s tribalism. On discovering that Margaret is Masarwa, Pete is so horrified that he becomes determined to have her dismissed. Here the arbitrariness of tribal discrimination becomes evident in Pete’s sudden change in attitude towards Margaret. Thus after her declaration of her Masarwa identity: “The shock [had been] so great that he [had] almost jumped into the air. The whole day he fretted…. He kept noting out of the corner of his eye that the Masarwa (she was no longer a human being)…. ‘There’s been some chicanery,’ he muttered over and over again” (40). Thereafter, Pete curtly objectifies her by calling her an ‘it’ (40) and impersonally makes reference to her in terms such as ‘I have a Masarwa on my staff’ (41). By acting oppressively towards Margaret on the basis of cultural prejudice and tribal assumptions, Pete shows tribal discrimination to be based on mere myths, ideologies and structures of thought unbecoming of a supposedly educated principal of a community school. Perhaps this goes to show the indiscriminate nature of tribalism.

Pete being the undignified, unprofessional, unprincipled principal that he is, takes it upon himself to inform all and sundry of Margaret’s identity and as often happens in small communities; children also get to find out. When Margaret’s pupils find out her tribal identity, being impressionable, their reaction is that of their prejudiced parents: ‘Now they all stared at her with fascination and attention’ (Maru 45) until one of them finally gathers enough courage to ask insolently, ‘Since when is a Bushy a teacher?’ (Maru 45). This proves that even children, the proverbially innocent and pure babes, are taught to maintain such hurtful and hateful discrimination. However, the vitriol of discrimination that the children proceed to spew has not originated from themselves and Margaret’s Masarwa identity per se, but rather has
been influenced and moulded by the discrimination and bigotry of their parents and other adults like Pete and even Maru himself.

Margaret, like many women of colour, suffers the double yoke of discrimination based on both ethnicity and her engendered sex. Despite Margaret qualifying as a primary school teacher at the top of her class, her identities of Masarwa and woman make her ‘vulnerable’ to an array of discrimination. Upon discovering that Margaret is in actual fact Masarwa and not coloured as he had thought, Pete in addition to previously objectifying her, further reduces her to ‘that Margaret Cadmore woman’ (Maru 41). Margaret’s personal identity, however, reflects an apparently assertive and proud Masarwa. Such attitude, it appears, makes Dikeledi feel a sense of lack. Thus wistfully Dikeledi declares: ‘I wish I was like you Margaret…. You look as if you could live like this forever…. I feel so restless’ (113). Dikeledi’s sense of self is thus seen as arising from her comparison with Margaret’s seemingly stable identity. Aware of her ‘lack’, she establishes a relationship with Margaret in order to complement her own ‘unstable’ identity with Margaret’s seemingly more ‘stable’ one. Homi Bhabha’s (1994: 40-65) re-reading of Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin White Mask, reveals not only how identity is formed in relation to others but also how the identities of both colonizer and colonized are caught up in an especially insidious ambivalence, a Freudian knot of identification and repudiation’.

Margaret effects internal change of personality not only in Dikeledi, but also in the two major male characters in the novel, Moleka and Maru, hence bringing about drastic social change in the community. As with Dikeledi, Moleka’s encounter with Margaret also enables him to be true to himself, to be true to his real self. Thus the encounter’s effect is described as being ‘like finding inside himself a gold mine he’d not known was there before’ (32). Margaret thus becomes his better half as, all along,
he had been ‘only half a statement of his kingdom. Someone else makes up the whole. It is the person he now loves’ (58). Margaret becomes something of a medium, able to crystallize the feelings of others and bring them out in their true form. Margaret transforms Moleka’s inner self and by doing so, changes also his attitude towards women. Now, instead of concentrating only on physical attraction, Moleka searches also for spiritual affinities, as Maru does. When he meets Margaret for the first time, he cannot understand how he can be in love with someone with no particular attractive features: “What were her legs like? He could not say.... [In fact] he had communicated directly with her heart ... [and] all the force of her life was directed to her eyes, as though that were the only living part of her” (32).

However, while she is able to crystallize the feelings and identities of others, it is only fair to say that others equally crystallize her own, as Moleka has an equally invigorating effect on Margaret and seems to stabilize her. This is evident in that until their meeting, “there had been no backbone to her a short while ago, now something had stabilized her. He seemed to have said silently, ‘You see you don’t have to be afraid anymore. First there was one of you. Now there are two of you” (30-31). One can thus safely conclude that in Maru, the characters’ personalities tend to strengthen and stabilize each other’s identities.

When he appears first in the novel, Maru is seen to be not only an instigator of tribalism but as a violent chieftain also. This violence by Maru is not however directed against Masarwa women like Margaret alone. The novel shows how Maru directs discriminatory violence towards all the women in his life, including his sister. The novel also tells of how of the women that had come into Maru’s life, but proved only interested in the socio-economic gains that would accrue to them from the liaison, Maru had ‘killed them all because of their greed’ (69). His is a violence that mirrors that of
hegemonic patriarchy that contemptuously discards women after manipulating and abusing them.

In addition, when Maru becomes romantically interested in Margaret, upon realizing that he might lose her, he thinks to himself: “What will I do if she does not love me as much as I love her?” A terrible reply came from his heart ‘Kill her’” (110-111). Antithetically therefore, given the size of Maru’s ego, violence is here seen as stemming from self-pride disguised as love and not necessarily discrimination, though perhaps because Margaret is a Masarwa woman, he thinks he can just murder her without any legal repercussions. The issue thus becomes that of one’s power and identity; especially so since Maru is a man of some tribal stature as paramount chief. Consequently, added to Maru’s personality, he ‘loves’ violently and once in love, becomes so obsessed with such a murderous jealousy that he thinks to himself that ‘one day [he] would be forced to kill Moleka, one way or another’ (8). Short of doing this, Maru violently breaks the unspoken sentiment of love between Moleka and Margaret by forcing the former into a marriage with Dikeledi and abducting Margaret to marry in a distant land, away from any possible violent recriminations by his subjects. Thus, Maru’s marriage to Margaret enables him to find his own psychic balance and makes his dreams come true.

Margaret’s resolution to retain her Masarwa identity defies all assumptions, and confronts her past, her future and her society, for nothing can ‘un-bushman her’ (18). So great is her impact on Dilepe that apart from an individual identity, she also helps change Batswana attitudes and myths of Masarwa inferiority. The utopian result is that Moleka, to show his newfound respect for the Masarwa, dines with his Masarwa slaves while Maru also opts to marry Margaret and abdicates the paramount chieftainship of his tribe. The revolutionary transformations that both Maru and Moleka initiate are a
result of the changes they themselves have undergone with their encounter with Margaret (Veit-Wild and Naguschewski 2005; Ogunyemi 2005). Thus inasmuch as it has already been noted that the womenfolk in Head’s novels (particularly Mare and When the Rain Clouds Gather) play a pivotal role in the establishment of the selfhood of their men folk, Maru, like Moleka, had felt incomplete until his encounter with Margaret. So vital does she become to his life that apart from dreaming the same dreams as hers, he feels he cannot live without her and he renounces his chieftaincy in order to be with her always.

Maru’s marriage to Margaret, especially in the context of her descent from a tribe of so-called untouchables, hopefully puts an end to discrimination and violence through the exemplary cultivation of tolerance and peace in tribal affairs through intermarriage. Of the Masarwa reaction to the marriage we read:

> When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru’s marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. *The wind of freedom,* which was blowing throughout the world for all people, *turned and flowed into the room.* As they breathed in the fresh, clear air their humanity awakened. (126; my emphasis)

Instead of ceding power to his brother, Maru makes arrangements for his sister to succeed him. A memorable image of final harmony in the novel is of the abdicated Maru living a settled and contented life of growing yellow daisies, as ‘they [are] the only flowers which resemble the face of his wife and the sun of his love’ (5). In Head’s novels, we see this same unity of purpose to end tribal conflict and racialism. It is such harmonious utopian unity and co-existence that Head reaches towards in her trilogy.
(Pangmeshi, 2009), envisaging its possibility after resistance to discrimination and violence – a vision of a utopian future that transcends race, discrimination and violence.

Walker, however, does not share this utopian attitude in the way Head imagines it, though both share a lot in terms of emancipating women and eradicating violence against them. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker delineates through narrating the stories of the characters a period of the history of the Afro-Americans in the U.S., revealing how the oppression and subjugation of the blacks not only affected the bodies of the suppressed group but also infiltrated into their psyches disturbing and damaging their familial relations and depriving them from leading normal lives. Sandra Gunning (1996) states that American literature on racial violence – particularly between 1890s to early 1900s, a period of unprecedented rise in the number of lynching and white race riots directed specifically at African American communities – should be read as a broad construct that must include black and white, and male and female writers (11). Gunning’s argument that literary representations of racial violence need to be re-imagined as men and women writing “in different tonalities, with different strategies, and with different concerns” (11) can illuminate Walker’s selection of the black family to narrate racialised economic violence in the South in the aftermath of slavery. The focus on black gender and familial relations to explore ongoing racial domination is a significant contribution to this area. In this regard, Walker narrativizes the pained black female’s body as the site where the persistence of racial and patriarchal oppression can be most keenly experienced. Female (as well as male) characters in the novel are in ceaseless physical pain. Basic survival for them demands continuous subjection of their bodies to strenuous labour and exposure to deadly chemicals. Both conditions lead to their severely damaged health. Moreover,
exploitative economic arrangements bind them to ongoing suffering in poverty, extreme hunger, suffocating heat, and daily existence in appalling living environments.

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the oppression of the whites on Grange Copeland is echoed in his behaviour towards his son and his wife, Margaret, and the repercussions of his behaviour extend to affect the lives of his son’s wife and children. Bogged in debt to the white capitalist exploiters, and coming to know of his wife’s illegitimate pregnancy by one of Shipley’s white men, Grange Copeland decides to desert his family and leave for the North. Trapped in her dilemma, Margaret kills her own self and her illegitimate son. In Margaret’s relationship with Grange, Walker reveals how a black woman’s recognition of her inescapable entrapment in a racist society leads to her acceptance of subordinate gender relations. Walker writes that Brownfield “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” (6; my emphasis). The novel’s emphasis on Margaret’s subservient behaviour should not be simply taken as her compliance to hierarchical gender relations. Instead, it needs to be understood as the predicament of those in overwhelmingly oppressive situations. Margaret recognizes that both black men and women confront the powerful force of white society. For instance, she is not impressed by her sister from the North, Marilyn’s “new clothes and her children’s fancy learnin’” (22). Rather, she says to Brownfield: “I bet the Norse is just as much a mess as down here” (22). Margaret is not unreflective, or naive. Her comment to her son reflects her awareness of how black lives are rigidly controlled in both places.

Though the sources of their individual suffering may be dissimilar, Margaret’s response to oppressive situations such as domestic abuse, or racialised economic arrangements is similar with Grange. Grange’s violent behaviour is delineated as
personal anguish, rather than calculated attempts to exert authority and cruelty. Margaret’s willing submission to Grange suggests that her understanding of overwhelming external constraints results in her desire for individual self-preservation. But, as Margaret realizes that her patience or silent suffering does not transform Grange, nor stop him from seeing another woman, she turns to a destructive life pattern as well. She wastes money on feminine products – “fragrances,” “store-bought perfume” – and resorts to sexual promiscuity and alcoholism. Margaret’s alteration from a mother who had sought to protect her child from her husband’s abuse, to her eventual disruption of her relationship with Brownfield is not depicted as an inevitable process. However, the connection between the dominant social order and a black woman’s search for reprieve from her suffering through sexual and material gratification and rejection of social mores, is elaborated in Walker’s description of Brownfield’s perception of his mother:

she [Margaret] had grown restless about her own life, a life that was as predictably unexciting as last year’s cotton field. Somewhere along the line she had changed. Slowly, imperceptibly. Until it was too late for Brownfield to recall exactly how she had been when he had loved her. It seemed to Brownfield that one day she was as he had always known her, kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk; and the next day she was a wild woman looking for frivolous things, her heart’s good times, in the transient embraces of strangers.

Brownfield blamed his father for his mother’s change. (26)

The passage also illuminates a child’s gender-inflected understanding of womanhood. A mother’s patient endurance of exploitative contexts such as racialised economic conditions or unequal gender relations in the family becomes valorised as predominant
aspects of female identity. Brownfield’s affection for his mother is dependent on a mother’s proximity to gendered norms and acceptance of patriarchal relations. Brownfield identifies characteristics of a mother “when he had loved her” as “kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk.” Walker thus illustrates how patriarchal constructions of female gender give a structure to a child’s understanding. Even while Brownfield attributes a mother’s damaging transformation to male domination, he reproduces male-centred definition of women as naturally inclined for nurturance, self-sacrifice, and patience.

After Grange’s departure to the North, Margaret poisons herself and her illegitimate baby. Walker addresses the difficulty of sustaining stable family relations as long as black men or members of the racial family/community include others in their victimization. Margaret’s dissipation and suicide can be traced to a husband’s abusive behaviour and abandonment of his family. Grange’s heading for North can be read as his search for more empowering contexts for himself – at the expense of further economic destitution of his family, and infliction of greater emotional pain on them. For Margaret, as a black woman with a half-white baby from adultery, and who does not believe in alternatives for black people elsewhere, suicide may have been perceived as the only cessation to her pained state.

Brownfield grows with a dream to create a stable family, determining not to repeat his father’s mistake of deserting the family. He resisted the offers of Shipley, a white landlord, to work for him in the fields. In getting away from Shipley, Brownfield meets Josie, an owner of an inn who had been involved with his own father, and her “adopted” daughter Mem. Mem’s biological father had been a Northern preacher with a “large legitimate family” (62), who at the time Mem was conceived, had his own family. Mem’s mother, after her involvement with the preacher, had been put out of her
father’s house. She dies shortly after giving birth to Mem. In her education, amiable personality, and respectable status (Mem is a teacher), Mem comes close to Brownfield’s idealized image of wife. Since Mem also “cared for” Brownfield, the two marry.

In the first few years of their marriage, despite Brownfield’s work on shares and being burdened with debt, the two maintain affective relations: they are “passionate and careless” (73). The early stage of Brownfield’s marriage with Mem thus presents the possibility of disrupting the enactment of oppressive relations in black spaces. However, as with Grange’s despair at his failure to function as a husband and father within the definitions of a capitalist society, it is Brownfield’s recognition of his inability to provide the economic means for his daughter’s eventual maturity into womanhood that triggers his abusive behaviour. Walker describes in detail the scene of Brownfield’s five-year-old daughter Daphne struggling to labour in the cotton fields, and the physical pain inflicted on her little body.

It was a year when endless sunup to sundown work on fifty rich bottom acres of cotton land and a good crop brought them two diseased shoats from winter meat, some dried potatoes and apples from the boss’s cellar, and some cast-off clothes for his children from his boss’s family. It was the summer that he watched, that he had to teach, his flail five-year-old daughter the tricky, dangerous and disgusting business of handmopping the cotton bushes with arsenic to keep off boll weevils. His heart had actually started to hurt him, like an ache in the bones, when he watched her swinging the mop, stumbling over the clumps of hard clay, the hot tin bucket full of arsenic making a bloodied scrape against her small short leg. She stumbled and almost fell with her bucket, so much too
large for her, and each time he saw it his stomach flinched. She was drenched with sweat, her tattered dress wringing wet with perspiration and arsenic; her large eyes reddened by the poison. She breathed with difficulty through the deadly smell. At the end of the day she trembled and vomited and looked beaten down like a tiny, asthmatic old lady....

(77-8)

The violent revulsion of a five-year-old girl's body to arsenic illustrates that racial domination signifies little control and protection of one's body from physical suffering. As a child, Brownfield's body had become shrivelled like an old man from malnutrition, and continually scarred by cuts and sores from being left alone. Through Brownfield's childhood memories of eating bark from hunger before his mother's return from work, and a young girl's body "beaten down" like a "tiny, asthmatic old lady," Walker narrates extreme poverty and exploitative economic arrangements as confounding the possibility of natural, progressive physical growth for children. The grotesquely transformed bodies and severely damaged health of Brownfield and Daphne as children reveal that racist power functions as the deprivation of life-nurturing contexts. The prioritizing of labour in parent-child relationships – visibly presented in Daphne's exposure to toxic chemicals – also demonstrates how material pressures of racialization undermine the possibility of family as a protective environment for children.

As a father who witnesses a daughter living a life far removed from one he had imagined for her, of her "carr[ying] parasols and wear[ing] light silks" (78), Brownfield realizes his profound helplessness to alter his condition. Brownfield's recognition of his lack of control over his own life, and his demoralized self-perception are heightened by the incident of his daughter's struggle in the fields: "That was the year he first saw how
his own life was becoming a repetition of his father’s” (78). Grange and Brownfield’s identical condition of being consumed by debt “full to the hatbrim” indicates that black people’s freedom from slavery is experienced as constraint: the capacity to participate in economic relations that further bind them to their subordinate status. In addition, Brownfield’s cruelty towards his wife Mem suggests that it is from Brownfield’s own pained situation of being overweighed by debt that he resorts to destructive behaviour.

His [Brownfield’s] indebtedness depressed him. Year after year the amount he owed continued to climb. He thought of suicide and never forgot it, even in Mem’s arms. He prayed for help, for a caring President, for a listening Jesus. But like all prayers sent up from there, it turned into another mouth to feed, another body to enslave to pay his debts... That was the year he accused Mem of being unfaithful to him, of being used by white men, his oppressors; a charge she tearfully and truthfully denied. (78, my italics)

Brownfield’s abuse of Mem erupts at a moment of his intense desperation mired in a tyrannical economic structure. However, Walker resists one-to-one correspondence between racial oppression and baleful male behaviour. She reserves the possibility of transforming relations in domestic spaces, by drawing black male characters’ inclinations to brute force as their individual responses to agonizing situations. Walker does not seem to want to interrupt the pattern of abuse in her characterization of Brownfield. Yet, it is precisely through Brownfield’s horrifying cruelty that she envisions difference. Brownfield’s extreme brutality suggests that responses of individuals to exploitative circumstances cannot be equivalent. It is evident that though Brownfield’s ferocity is conditioned by external conditions, it is characterized as one black man’s demented attachment to gender roles.
Since Brownfield perceives no agency to his existence, a wife who endeavours to improve the material conditions of the family threatens his embattled masculinity. Mem’s education, as opposed to his own illiteracy, intensifies his sense of inadequacy and incompetence. His complicated state of mind is described as follows: “...but he could not forgive her [Mem] the greater knowledge. It put her close in power, to them, than he could ever be” (80). Brownfield attempts to salvage his manhood by depriving Mem of better resources over him in functioning as a provider. He makes Mem give up her job as a schoolteacher and work instead as a domestic.

Brownfield’s obsessive concern with “his crushed pride, his battered ego” as a man, and “his rage and his anger and his frustration” result in him “blam[ing] everything” (79) on Mem. Unlike Grange’s struggle with his pain, which takes the form of threatening language and self-destructive behaviour, Brownfield becomes physically aggressive. Moreover, because of his distorted male self-perception, he directs violence specifically at his wife. Mem fiercely notes, nine years into their marriage – “and just think of how many times I done got my head beat by you just so you could feel a little bit like a man” (136). In her characterization of Grange’s wife Margaret, Walker presents one response to black male abuse, i.e. submissiveness. Through Mem’s fervent confrontations with Brownfield, she delineates a black woman’s more direct engagement in oppressive contexts. Mem retaliates against Brownfield verbally and physically. On one instance, she deftly swings the stock of a gun with her hands and “lay[s] a gash an inch wide” (136) right across Brownfield’s forehead, just enough so as to communicate her refusal to withstand his abuse. Ann duCille (565) marks, “Mem eventually effects a shift in the balance of power within her marriage by attacking her husband below the belt with a shotgun strategically aimed at his genitals” – duCille points to the suggestive sexual codification of Mem’s act.
Mem also confronts racial constrictions. Her struggle against racialised economic violence takes the form of her intense desire to create a safe, nurturing environment for herself and her children. In her description of appalling conditions of human life in a sharecropper’s cabin, Walker emphasizes the painstaking efforts of a mother who seeks to resist racist incursions on the lives of her children.

Being forced to move from one sharecropper’s cabin to another was something she [Mem] bated. She hated the arrogance of white men who put them out, for one reason or another, without warning or explanation. She hated leaving a home she’d already made and fixed up with her own hands. She hated leaving her flowers, which she always planted whenever she got her hands on flower seeds. Each time she stepped into a new place, with its new, and usually bigger rat holes, she wept. Each time she had to clean cow manure out of a room to make it habitable for her children, she looked as if she had been death blow. 

*Each time she was forced to live in a house that was enclosed in a pasture with cows and animals* eager to eat her flowers before they were planted, she became like a woman walking through a dream, but a woman who had forgotten what it is to wake up. *She sloged along, ploddingly, like a cow herself, for the sake of the children.* (84-5, my italics)

To occupy a place which had been inhabited by animals indicates that sharecropping regime was a continuation of slavery: white society’s persistent inscription of black people as units of labour. Black people’s labour exploitation in the fields – their suffering bodies in stifling heat, and with toxic chemicals – extended into their private lives.
Writings by black women critically deconstruct the notion of “private” as a distinct realm of activity. As Walker illustrates through Margaret and Mem, their works examine the ways that material exigencies demand black women’s removal from private, gendered spaces: black women participate in reproductive labour outside their own homes. Yet, Walker also identifies in the passage above that to suffer from racialised economic exploitation – as poverty – is to be denied control over one’s actual living space and protection of one’s body from physical pain. Mem’s intense revulsion to her situation which leads to numb stupor – her becoming “like a woman walking through a dream” – is reminiscent of Grange Copeland’s crippling response earlier to the presence of a white landowner in the fields. Mem’s identification of each deplorable living environment as a “death-blow” demonstrates how racist domination is experienced through gender. As a mother, Mem confronts racial oppression as ruthless suppression of her desire for a habitable space for her children. In addition, through the family’s continuous displacement from one sharecropper’s shack to another, Mem suffers repeated assaults on the intense efforts she had previously made to modify unliveable places.

At the same time, in Mem “always” planting flowers “whenever she got her hands on flower seeds,” Walker imagines the possibility of altering, even in most dire circumstances, one’s oppressive situation. Familial relations are depicted in the novel as affected by individuals’ frustrations and anger that cannot be expressed in public contexts. Walker illuminates through Mem’s act of trying to improve her condition that relations and identities formed in sites beyond strictly regulated realms can also resist the pattern of racial subordination and demoralization. Mem’s desire to create a private, familial space becomes concentrated in her painstaking efforts to move into a house, rather than continue life in a cabin. Through her labour as a domestic over many years,
Mem is able to make the move into a house in a town: a “‘mansion’ of four sheet-rocked rooms, no holes, a grassy yard and a mailbox on the porch,” and “with an indoor toilet and a tub” (144). Black people in the South during this period slowly removed themselves from plantation regimes through both strenuous labour (managing to accumulate minimal amounts of capital), and through gradual transitions of capitalist development in the larger society. Life for the Copelands after their move to a town signifies lessened physical suffering. Brownfield’s new work in a frozen pie factory is a significant improvement from his previous work in the fields of dairying, and raising cotton and corn: Brownfield “enjoyed pouring the mixture for the pies into the big vats... and looked forward every day to washing up the big shiny, always new, utensils” (145).

However, Walker narrates the painful limitations to black mobility. Mem’s ability to acquire the means for better life conditions is at the expense of her severely damaged health from overwork. While Mem has managed to remove herself from unliveable spaces, she only has momentary control over her life. As a result of her weakened physical condition, she is unable to find any menial job in a factory, shop, or a kitchen. Mem’s situation, however, is not drawn as representative of black women in racialised economic arrangements. Her suffering is not simply about life-draining labour to earn minimal wages. It is Brownfield’s individual cruelty that viciously thwarts Mem’s hard-gained economic movement. In a calculated attempt to ruin her already fragile health, Brownfield twice impregnates her, “which completely destroyed what was left of her health” (147). In addition, interpreting the family’s improved condition as an indictment on his manhood, Brownfield refuses to lessen Mem’s burdens by himself paying the rent for the house when she is unable to. Brownfield’s
state of mind reflects that Mem’s effort to take charge of the family’s material conditions ultimately ends up assaulting his limited definition of male identity.

If he had done any of it himself, if he had insisted on the move, he might not have resisted the comfort, the feeling of doing better-ness with all his heart. As it was, he could not seem to give up his bitterness against his wife, who had proved herself smarter, more resourceful than he, and he complained about everything often and loudly, secretly savoring thoughts of how his wife would “come down” when he placed her once more in a shack. (145, my italics)

Brownfield’s brutality towards Mem indicates that to be preoccupied with race is particularly destructive to relations in the racial family and community. Without acknowledgment of other oppressions – such as the ways that racial women are brutalized in a racist economic structure as well – it can paradoxically lead to the displacement of intraracial support. Walker also makes apparent that to define oneself exclusively through race is to unwittingly accept the terms of racial hegemony that restrict and dictate one’s life possibilities: Brownfield’s personal need to restore his manhood results in the Copelands re-entering a sharecropper’s cabin “half full of wet hay” (150).

Mem’s married life with Brownfield is portrayed as ongoing assaults on her body and humanity: physical pain of labour; insufficient recuperation of her body after childbirths; and domestic violence. Yet, Mem’s suffering is aggravated by black male abuse: she gives birth by herself on a cold floor in a sharecropper’s cabin because of a husband who is too drunk to call a midwife. Mem’s weakened body destroyed from poverty, black patriarchy, and labour exploitation is literally the site of the convergence
of multiple oppressions. Walker thus foregrounds the extent to which black women are victimized in a society that functions through the exploitation of certain groups.

There has been no indication of any sexual relationship between Mem and her Jewish boss. She has never been guilty of infidelity that Brownfield has accused her of. Yet, the sight of Mem getting out of a white man’s car may have reminded Brownfield of his experience as a child of witnessing his mother climbing out of a white man’s truck, and his own feelings of rejection. It is largely from his sense of victimization and his deeply troubled view of self that Brownfield shoots Mem. Brownfield’s act also reveals that because in a racist social structure, whiteness is conceptualized not just as difference in skin colour but often signifies domination of others, a black man’s sense of his own suffering engulfs him as he sees his wife with a white man.

The link between racism, capitalism, and black patriarchy that Walker explores indicates that black women’s writing and feminist criticism are not just located in the concerns of black women. Her novel elucidates that any critique of black male violence must begin with an examination of racial formation in the US. In this sense, black men are not demonized in her narrative as prone to cruelty and sexual violence. In addition, in her depiction of Mem’s daughter Daphne attempting to warm her mother’s dead body, Walker powerfully relates that the collaboration of exploitative structures and institutionalized ideologies manifests itself as violence beyond gender relations. It severs a black child’s relationship with her mother, and ultimately denies her a context for positive individual formation. Walker writes,

And she [Ruth] 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 leg. She began to rub Mem’s feet to make them warm. (172-3)

A child’s hysteric response to her mother’s gruesome sight and her desperate efforts to protect her mother’s body illustrate the extent to which racial oppression destroys black life and violates privatized relations. Mem’s poorly-clothed dead body visibly expresses how the economic hegemony of racism mocks a black woman’s attempt to seize a chance for better life, and to transform conditions for her children.

Hope in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is symbolised by the character of Ruth. Upon his return to the South, Grange takes care of Brownfield’s youngest daughter Ruth. Grange presents to her possibilities of everyday survival through self-sufficiency. In addition, Grange informs Ruth the history of black people and white racial dominance that have been submerged in official histories: he recites “from memory speeches he’d heard, newscasts, lectures from street corners when he was in the North, everything he had ever heard” (197). Grange conveys to Ruth how capitalist development in the US – “wealthy mobsters called America” (196) – is a product of violence committed on coloured races. In identifying slavery and the genocide of Native Americans as “natural predatory tendencies of the whites” (196), Grange locates the history of black oppression in the US within the continuum of the subordination of non-white populations. Ruth’s dismay and disbelief at Grange’s lessons in black history – of her connection to Africa, the sufferings of black people in slavery, and brutal acts perpetrated by white people – highlight the powerful influence her relationship with Grange can have on her own understanding of her racial identity and relations in society.

Walker details Ruth’s positive response,
His songs were always his own; she never heard them sung over the radio. His songs moved her, watching him dance made her feel kin to something very old.... Grange taught her untaught history through his dance; she glimpsed a homeland she had never known and felt the pattering of the drums. Dancing was a warm electricity that stretched, connecting them with other dancers moving across the seas. Through her grandfather’s old and beautifully supple limbs she learned how marvelous was the grace with which she moved. (190)

In a novel where the body becomes a site of pain, and physical intimacy between husbands and wives and parents and children continually ruptured, Walker’s portrayal of Ruth feeling connection with her grandfather through dancing is suggestive. The body is reconfigured as a site of pleasure through African cultural practices that cannot be explained through privileged narratives of capitalist development, bourgeois gender ideologies, or nuclear mode of familial existence. In making Ruth, a black woman, the figure who may break both her family’s legacy of despair as well as her race’s pathology of oppression, Walker makes her novel both personal and political. Ruth can be seen as a stand-in for Walker herself, whose birthright is Walker’s own: “a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice” (In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens 21).
Walker deals with female sexuality and female genital mutilation in a number of her works. In *The Color Purple*, the African character Tashi has to undertake female circumcision as a part of her community’s rituals. Tashi also figures in several other novels by Walker – i.e. *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). This theme is also the main motif of Walker’s documentary and book *Warrior Marks* (1993). In her novel, *By the Light of my Father’s Smile* (1998) Walker symbolically elevates female sexuality to the level of worship. Head, on the other hand, does not pay as much attention to sexuality in her novels, and when she does, she shows it as a means used by patriarchy to suppress women.

2 How society looks at a woman’s body and how that “gaze” affects a woman’s relation to her body and how it should look like. Such point conceptualizes the body-as-object as a body that is subjected to others’ gaze. This gaze becomes a mechanism of control, as the individual internalizes the gaze and turns it in on herself (Bartky 1993).

3 Most research on the mind works within George Herbert Mead’s (1934/72) conceptualization that the mind is not a tangible entity, physically located within the parameters of the human body, but is a social construction that emerges through language.


6 A well-known representation of this is the Hottentot Venus exhibition of two Khoikhoi women in Europe in the 19th century.

8 cf. Judith Butler: ‘I wanted to work out how a norm actually materialises a body, how we might understand the materiality of the body to be not only invested with a norm, but in some sense animated by a norm, or contoured by a norm.’ Interview with Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, originally published in Radical Philosophy 67 (Summer 1994) 4 Apr. 2001 http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm, 28.


11 See Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. NY: Routledge, 1990 and Bodies that Matter. Butler takes issue with both Foucault and Irigaray, reading their work as depending on a notion of an essential or natural body.

12 This point is obviously evident in Head’s Maru and Walker’s The Color Purple. Compare also the character of Tashi in Alice Walker’s Novels The Color Purple and Possessing the Secret of Joy, where genital mutilation is seen as a sort of cultural self-fulfilment when it is in fact a cruel method of mitigating female sexuality. Walker’s documentary Warrior Marks deals with this point in detail.

13 Merriam Webster Dictionary.

14 See Reed, Lori and Paula Saukko, ed. Governing the Female Body: Gender, Health, and Networks of Power.

15 See Morris, Aldon D. “A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement”. More information can also be found in this link http://www.warpeace.org/article.php?story=20040120133928774.

16 Also available online in http://www.discourses.org/download/articles/.

17 Compare Elizabeth’s reaction in the asylum in her second nervous breakdown: she refuses to be “black”, A Question of Power.
This is also evident in Alice Walker’s novels as she uses certain aspects of register to imply certain attitudes and situations.

See hooks’ articles, “Essentialism and Experience”, “An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional” and “From Black is a Woman’s Color”. See also her books *Where We Stand: Class Matters* and *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*.

This is the year when the Union of South Africa was formed under British dominion, with Louis Botha and Jan Christiaan Smuts as the most prominent figures in this union.

The word ‘lynching’ is derived from Willy (William) Lynch, an American slave owner who had a specific perspective and innovative methodologies of how to ‘tame’ slaves.
Chapter IV: Bibliography

Primary Sources:


Secondary Resources:


Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. “Tête-à-tête With the Chief: Post-Womanist Discourse in Bessie Head’s *Maru*”. *Body, Sexuality, and Gender: Versions and"


