WRITING BLACK WOMANHOOD: FEMINIST WRITING BY FOUR CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AND BLACK DIASPORA WOMEN WRITERS

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Abstract

This thesis explores the concept of black womanhood and female identity in Africa and its diaspora. It examines questions of black womanhood in relation to cultural concepts of black women. It analyses the ways black women perceive and represent themselves and how they articulate their self-perceptions within and outside the traditional cultures of their societies. The problems of black women foregrounded in most postcolonial black women's texts reflect their marginal and oppressed position. The study will explore the textual voice, social and political agency, and how black women's experiences and histories are articulated in the writing of four contemporary black women writers from Africa and the Caribbean. Contesting and reacting against distorted and marginalizing constructions in black men's texts, Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, Erna Brodber and Olive Senior portray a black womanhood which challenges black women's marginality in literature and in society. I suggest that the writers' concerns, focus and narrative strategies contribute to an understanding of the ways in which black women perceive themselves.

The four writers create a variety of characters who illustrate individual as well as communal gender and class-specific conflicts produced by their socio-historical realities. The writers' perceptions and sensibilities as women are informed by their different backgrounds and relationships to their societies. Their narrative points of view which are grounded in history and which involve use of the oral storytelling techniques of their societies reflect the diversity and complexity of black women's lives and experiences.

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Dedication

Dedicated to my mother

And to the memory of my father

INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the concept of black womanhood. It looks at how black women from Africa and the Caribbean write their experiences as women. For a long time the concept of 'blackness' has been geographically constrained. When people talked of 'black literature' they referred to literature by African-Americans while 'black music' referred to the jazz or soul music of African-American singers such as Louis Armstrong, BB King, James Brown, Aretha Franklin or Ray Charles. Black people from Africa and from the Caribbean have tended not to be part of this category. Those from Africa have been confined to the term 'African' while those from the Caribbean have been called 'Caribbeans' or 'West Indians'. Yet African-America people, as are the black people in the Caribbean, are descended from the black people on the African continent. Although blackness might not have social significance in the rest of the African continent, in apartheid South Africa and in the black diaspora such as the Caribbean as in the USA, blackness has immense social significance. It signifies one's identity in relation to class and social position. The aim of my thesis therefore is to bridge the gap between black people in Africa and those in the black diaspora. I want to demonstrate that by virtue of their African descent women from the Caribbean, and for the purposes of this thesis, specifically those from Jamaica, share similar positions of marginalization as black women from Africa. What differentiates them

is their geographic location, socio-historical circumstance and experience. In this thesis, 'black womanhood' shall therefore be used to encompass all women of African descent in Africa and in all of the African diaspora including the Caribbean.

In *Binding Cultures*, Gay Wilentz (1992) argues that the history of black women's literature, which started long before black women were finally allowed their right to literacy, was rooted in and conveyed through storytelling (xi). Yet since the oral word was never regarded as literature, what these women said 'about themselves' did not cross the threshold of their communities (Senior 1988, Aidoo 1967). Black men's portrayals of both men and women's experiences were offered as representations of the reality of *all* black people's lives. In an interview with Anna Rutherford after the publication of his *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Chinua Achebe concedes men's misrepresentation of black women and black womanhood when he says:

> we have been ambivalent, we have been deceitful even, about the role of the woman. We have...said all kinds of grandiloquent things about womanhood, but in our practical life the place of the woman has not been adequate...We have created all kinds of myths to support the suppression of the woman, and...the time has come to put an end to that...the woman herself will be in the forefront in designing what her new role is going to be, with the humble co-operation of men. (3-4)

When black women finally gained access to the written word their voices were stifled, not only through difficulties of getting published, but also through black men and western women's critical evaluations of their writings. Obioma Nnaemeka (1995) points out that one of the misfortunes of the currently proliferating analyses of African women's writing be it from black male critics or from western feminist theorists is the tendency to 'rename, misname, and silence' (80). Despite the 'awesome odds' (Owusu 1992) against them, black

women writers have persisted with their determination to correct distorted images of the black woman (Chukukere 1995) and to present reality from their own point of view. My study is an attempt to explore some of the ways black women writers have been or are contributing to the current debate on black womanhood. I examine the ways these writers perceive and portray their diverse and varied experiences as black women from their own geographical locations.

My study focuses on four contemporary African and Caribbean women writers. My choice is based primarily on the fact that they are concerned with similar issues vis-a-vis the oppressed situation of black women, but also on their shared belief and vision of integrated societies as the only way towards progress and development in their societies. I also take into account the women's significance and influence as writers. Bessie Head is a South African writer who, although her writing career tragically ended in 1986 when she was only 49, remains one of the most significant writers on the African continent. One of very few black female voices raised against apartheid when it was at its height, Head fearlessly challenges the exclusionary practices of the South African state based on race and gender as well as the patriarchal structure of her adopted home Botswana. Although she rejected the title of feminist, Head used her fiction to crusade for the equality of black people, especially black women.

Ama Ata Aidoo, a Ghanaian who is fondly referred to as 'Mama African Literature' by members of FEMRITE (a Ugandan women writer's organization), is one of very few prolific women writers on the African continent. With a writing career that defies generic

confinement and limitation and spans five decades, she is an influential figure and role model for many younger writers in Africa. A scholar and an activist who links education with development, including the development of women, she uses her writing to educate and to instruct on African history, traditions and culture, but also as a forum for campaigning for change in those African practices and attitudes that are oppressive to women and therefore detrimental to development and progress.

Erna Brodber is a Jamaican writer who is committed to the plight of all marginalized people in Jamaica, the bulk of whom are black. Linked to this is her concern with the position of black women and black womanhood, and she addresses these issues through both fiction and non-fiction studies of her society. A scientist and activist, Brodber uses her writing to teach about the traditional practices and beliefs of her African ancestors to her Jamaican people in order to engender black pride in her people. Olive Senior, the last writer in the thesis, also focuses on the predicament of the marginalized with whom she identifies. A social scientist and writer who has written extensively on the Jamaican situation through non-fictional works, poetry and short stories, Senior's focus is on the position of those on the fringes of society; children, black women and the elderly.

The first two chapters in the thesis are devoted to Africa. They examine womanhood from an African context in order to provide a contrast with the situation in the Caribbean. Chapter one explores the portrayal of black womanhood from a Southern African perspective. I examine how Bessie Head portrays black women's experiences in South Africa, her country of birth, and Botswana, where she lived first in exile before gaining

citizenship. I begin from her experience as a South African 'coloured' (a term for multi-racial people in Southern Africa) to demonstrate as Hall (1992a) points out that 'black' is a complex category which does not only refer to those who look black. Head's exploration of womanhood in South Africa shows it to be implicated in the politics of the apartheid regime. I show how race and class combine with gender to marginalize those who are not white. I show that Head identifies parallels between the patriarchal nation of Botswana and the apartheid regime of South Africa and how both structures use power to oppress the powerless of whom black women are the most vulnerable. Head repeatedly argues that such abuse of power stands in the way of recognition of the reverence of all creation, including black women. The chapter pays particular attention to Head's demonstration that even within the 'awesome odds' against black women, they illustrate resilience and a determination to survive. Head's conclusion is that all power is wrong unless it is used to help others.

Chapter two examines the writings of Ama Ata Aidoo. I start from Aidoo's belief in the importance of history for the development of the nation and continent. I explore how through the traditional female role of story teller, she uses stories to instruct and educate about African history and traditional practices. The only African woman writer concerned with the connection between Africans on the continent and the black people in the African diaspora, Aidoo's argument is that it is important for Africans to confront their history, including the history that dispersed some of its people, if the continent is to develop prosperously. The chapter particularly focuses on her portraits of women and her demonstration of the complex reality of their lives. Aidoo's argument is that although life is

difficult for all women and that society does not appreciate those women who seek individuality, the women have never given up their struggle for a better existence.

Chapter three looks at the writing of Erna Brodber who focuses on the importance of community and its role in engendering an integrated Jamaican society. Committed to challenging the divisiveness of race and the denigration of the practices of people of African descent, Brodber focuses on black identity and foregrounds black traditions and beliefs. The chapter explores her portrayal of practices such as spiritual healing and exorcism and the role of black women in these vital traditions. Brodber's argument is that rather than being antagonistic to western beliefs, African spiritual beliefs and practices are alternative to them and should therefore be acknowledged and accepted. Black women are a major concern in Brodber's writing. She illustrates the complexity of their existence and concentrates on their 'affirmative attitude towards life' (Owusu 1992: 46).

Chapter four is devoted to Olive Senior, another writer who demonstrates a concern with the plight of those on the border of Jamaican society such as black women, children and the elderly. In this chapter I demonstrate that Senior also views black womanhood to be a complex subject entangled in issues of race and class. I show that Senior's portraits of the reality of black women's lives focus on their ability to challenge their oppression and survive not only as individuals but also as mothers determined to ensure that the lives of their children will be better than their own.

My argument in this thesis is that these four writers illustrate that all black women share a

similar position of oppression and marginalization. This border experience has rendered black women a silenced and therefore voiceless category. Whether they are in Africa or the black diaspora, black women's experience of oppression has been socially reinforced through society's trivializing and/or refusal to listen to and take seriously the stories and songs through which black women have traditionally articulated their experiences of womanhood. As writers, these four women demonstrate a determination to contest black women's oppression and subjugation. Through their narratives, they claim a space for black women by challenging and rewriting the distorted misrepresentations of black womanhood through portraits based on the life experiences of black women. The writers present a reality which conveys not only the diverse and varied experiences of women, but also the complexities that daily make up the lives of black women. Throughout the stories I studied, there is a persistent refusal by the writers to dwell on the victimhood of black women. Although their stories identify and acknowledge black women's oppression and suppression, the emphasis of the lives these writers portray remains positive. Their focus is black women's survival and unfaltering determination to change their circumstance of marginality. In my view, the portraits of black women's resolve to change the situation of their lives, is a celebration of black women's determination and capacity for survival.

CHAPTER ONE

BESSIE HEAD

> The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life. To this day, women still suffered from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life (*The Collector of Treasures*: 92).

> People's souls and their powers were like sky birds, aeroplanes, jets, boeings, fairies and butterflies; [that] there'd be a kind of liberation of these powers, and a new dawn and a new world (*A Question of Power*: 205).

In this chapter I look at black womanhood in a Southern African context. I examine how Bessie Head, a South African woman who lived in exile in Botswana, writes the experiences of black women in Botswana and South Africa. Head's interest in the lives of black people who were victims of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and more specifically, black women, whose added marginalization on the basis of gender is a phenomenon they share with women in Botswana, makes her work suited for an examination of black womanhood from a Southern African perspective. Bessie Head was a prolific writer who produced fiction and non-fiction works. Her career as a writer which

started at St. Monica's Anglican high school, flourished in Botswana where she settled as an exile in 1964. Head's work includes *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1973), *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977), *Serowe Village of the Rain Wind* (1981), *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* (1984) and, published posthumously, *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989) edited by Gillian Stead Eilersen, *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings* (1990) edited by Craig MacKenzie, a compilation of her letters to Randolph Vigne, *A Gesture of Belonging: Letter from Bessie Head, 1965-1979*, and the only collection set in South Africa, *The Cardinals: With Meditations and Short Stories* (1993) edited by M.J. Daymond. In addition to this, Bessie Head wrote numerous stories and articles, which were published in a variety of newspapers, journals and magazines in South Africa and abroad.

The comparative nature of my exploration of black womanhood makes it impractical to examine all of Bessie Head's works. I therefore propose to concentrate on the two novels that have received the most critical response, *Maru* (1972) and *A Question of Power* (1974). In addition, Head's foregrounding of black female experience through the female protagonists in the two novels and the nature of the lives her characters experience makes these texts a pertinent choice. However, as a result of the link between the three texts, reference will also be made to her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), throughout the chapter.

The chapter opens with an outline of Head's life, and charts the displacement that characterised it. In Homi Bhabha's language, because she was multi-racial and

consequently regarded as not belonging in both South Africa and Botwana, Head existed in an 'in-between' space of race and geographic boundary (Bhabha 1994: 2). The chapter traces Head's life as 'coloured' from her place of birth, South Africa, to Botswana where she first lived as a refugee but which she later adopted as her homeland. Thereafter Head's views on the crucial issue of race in South Africa and its effect on the South African individual are explored. This is contrasted with life in Botswana as portrayed in her novels. The painful experience of apartheid for black people is demonstrated through the centrality of the theme of race for many black South African writers as well as white writers opposed to apartheid. Writers as diverse as Denis Brutus, Es'kia Mphalele, Miriam Tlali, Lewis Nkosi, Peter Abrahams, Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, Laureta Ngcobo and, more recently, Sindiwe Magona, all variously explore the theme of racial discrimination in their writing.

In addition to the issues of race and displacement, I look at Head's other main concerns in her texts; namely power, patriarchy, spirituality and black women. I examine Head's views on how power has been used for social and individual control. Head's work suggests that the desire for power is the driving force behind apartheid's policy of racial exclusion in South Africa and is responsible for the evils perpetrated on minority ethnic groups in Botswana. Head then illustrates the psychological effect such practice has on oppressed individuals. The exploration in issues of power leads Head into the complex area of spirituality. Ideas of God, the supernatural, witchcraft, dreams, and visions weave through her work. Beliefs and philosophies of world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, African traditional religions as well as Christianity contribute to Head's demonstration of

the marginalized condition of black people. The issues of good versus evil and God and Satan, shown as a source of constant power struggles in the novels permeates her work, and are examined in relation to her concern for human dignity and reverence for human life.

Head's socialisation, which I suggest is based on patriarchy, the organizing framework of most Southern African societies, and which she sometimes demonstrates through, for instance, a romanticising of the male figure, is examined in relation to her ambivalent stand on feminism (*A Woman Alone*: 95). My own position is in agreement with women critics such as Gloria Chukukere, Sara Chetin, Huma Ibrahim, Jane Bryce-Okunlola and Caroline Rooney, who in spite of Head's reluctance to accept the title feminist, following her concern with black womanhood, read her work from a feminist perspective.

In this chapter my argument is that because of her South African experience of exclusion, Head is committed to demonstrating the possibility of a world in which love and human dignity prevail over racial difference, gender and class. Through a focus on black women, who according to Head's fictional characterisation include female 'coloureds', and constitute the most subjugated category of humanity, Head illustrates the extent of the damage evils such as apartheid, racialism and sexism can inflict on humanity. Head's explorations point to misuse of power as the prime source of the social imbalance that causes human suffering. Head suggests that power, such as that expressed in apartheid policies, some traditional Botswanan practices and Christianity, has played a huge role in the suffering of black people, especially women, in Southern Africa. In the final analysis however, Head's texts illustrate the strength, determination and capacity for survival of

black women in oppressive and marginalizing situations such as those created by South African and Botswanan social conditions.

Broken Bonding

Bessie Head was born to Bessie Emelia Emery, nee Birch on 6 July 1937. At the time of Head's birth, Bessie Emery was admitted at Fort Napier Mental Institution, Pietermaritzburg in Natal, South Africa. However, because of the prevailing policies in South Africa at the time, the birth of her daughter who was 'not white', complicated Bessie Emery's hospitalisation. Eilersen (1995: 7) documents that no one knew that Bessie Emelia was pregnant until after she was hospitalised. It is worth noting that one of the myths that colonialism encouraged and on which apartheid thrived, related to black men's sexuality. In my opinion, and here I agree with McKenzie's (1991) suggestion and also Head's interview with Lee Nichols (1981), Bessie Emery could have been institutionalised because the family realised that her pregnancy meant the possibility that she had breached the racial and sexual regulations on which apartheid was founded. In the light of the Boer's views of black people, the society probably believed that only madness could induce a white woman to indulge in an intimate relationship with a black man, hence their leaving Bessie Emery at Fort Napier Institute. Though the Mixed Marriages Act and Immorality Act were formally passed in 1949 and 1950 respectively, from 1927 sexual relationships between black and white people were regarded as a criminal offence (Eilersen 1995: 7). The possible stigma of having a family member bearing a multi-racial or 'coloured' child, may have led the Birch family to leave Bessie Emery in the mental home. That way, her

behaviour could safely be explained as a consequence of mental imbalance. In the apartheid climate, the fact that Bessie Head was born multi-racial was probably seen as justifying the family's action.

After Bessie Head was born and because her mother's family did not want her, she was put up for adoption. The white family that originally adopted her immediately returned her because she looked 'strange', or, as Gillian Eilersen (1995) puts it, 'quite black' (8). According to Eilersen, White South Africans have 'a piercing and well-trained eye' for differentiating between white and multi-racial people (8). As a result of her rejection by the two white families, Bessie Head was finally given to George and Nellie Heathcote, a multi-racial couple whom Bessie Head grew up believing to be her real parents. An outstanding aspect of Head's life that was clearly grounded in her childhood with the Heathcotes was her ability for hard work. Nellie made sure Bessie prepared for adulthood by doing her share of the household chores. This training was reinforced at the Anglican Orphanage of St. Monica's where Bessie spent most of her teenage years. George Heathcote's death when Bessie Head was six left Nellie without enough money to support the family, and at thirteen Bessie was taken away from Nellie by Social Welfare and placed at St. Monica's Diocesan Home for Coloured Girls.

The establishment of institutions such as St. Monica's on the basis of race demonstrates the significance and role of race for purposes of identity in South Africa under apartheid. In addition it points to the fact that even though South African law prohibited interracial relationships, they nonetheless existed. The result was a society broadly divided into three

racial groups categorized hierarchally into white, coloured (including Asians) and black. In his book, *A Garland for Ashes* (1960), R.A. Yates notes that schools such as St. Monica's were established specially for coloured girls 'who on account of their colour and poorness of clothing' were 'not welcomed' at the state schools that catered for white children (11). In spite of the trauma of being forcibly taken from her foster mother, Head excelled academically at St. Monica's. A contributing factor to this academic excellence was her love of books and knowledge. The well-stocked library at the school and later the books she was lent by her teachers satisfied her hunger for knowledge and helped in the formation of the creative person Head became. The large grounds of the home where Head observed and nurtured nature through gardening activities that were a part of the mission activities for the girls also played a role in the development of Head's character. After her Junior Certificate, a qualification obtained after passing the national examination in second year of high school in Southern Africa, Head was enrolled at Bechet High School where she trained as a teacher (Eilersen 1995: 30).

Bessie Head took up her first job as teacher of an infant class at Clairwood Coloured School in Durban in January 1956. An aspect of South African society which contrasts with the Caribbean situation relates to the social position of multi-racial people. As a number of scholars note, because of their light skin, coloureds in South Africa and the rest of that region generally considered themselves better than black people (Chabaku 1984; Eilersen 1995; Rasebotsa 1993; Uledi-Kamanga 1987, 1999). The apartheid policy of privileging light skin clearly played a role in this self-perception. Such a position contrasts with the Caribbean situation where, regardless of what they felt about themselves

multi-racial people were regarded as black by the white plantation owners and overseers. The need for cheap labour in the sugar plantations which the plantation owners tried to achieve by raping and/or using slave women as breeders, resulted in many multi-racial children who then became part of the much needed labour force. I am aware that this is a simplification of the colour issue because even within the Caribbean and South Africa there are nuances of colour difference and awareness amongst the people. Nonetheless, the South African situation is clearly a result of different circumstances and there are two basic reasons for the different feeling amongst multi-racial people. In a society that regarded blacks as inferior beings only equal to animals, the claim of one's white heritage amounted to a claim to humanity. In addition multi-racial people's receipt of small social privileges such as relatively better schools and chances for training in areas such as teaching, shop work, clerical work and motor mechanics reinforced their feelings of superiority to blacks. Unfortunately, because it served the apartheid agenda, the South African government encouraged this attitude.

The position of the coloureds was nonetheless ambiguous in the sense that even though they were encouraged and made to feel superior to black people, their situation was not much different. Their education, for instance, was of an inferior kind when compared with white education. And even though some worked as clerks in offices and shops, many were unemployed and endured severe poverty. In terms of remuneration, coloureds earned very little for their labour, as the conditions of their lives demonstrate (Yates 1960). Though Bessie Head worked as a teacher and later as a journalist, Eilersen (1995) documents numerous occasions when she could not afford the basic things of life. Another point that

also illustrates the ambiguity of the position of coloureds is that while she was teaching at Clairwood School, Bessie Head had no access to the municipal library in Durban. It had a 'Slegs Blankes' (No Blacks) sign posted outside (Eilersen 1995: 33). Although according to apartheid ideology Head's multi-racialism made her better than black people, her treatment by the state was similar to that given to black people. Both were barred from using the municipal library. This exclusion forced Bessie Head to patronise the M. L. Sultan Library which was established for the Indians of Durban city. It was at this library that Bessie Head first came in contact with the Eastern religions and philosophies of Buddhism and Hinduism that influenced her writing.

Dissatisfaction with her teaching job compelled Head to pursue a career in journalism. Between 1958 and 1964 when she left for Botswana, Bessie Head worked and moved between District Six of Cape Town and Johannesburg, working for different newspapers and tabloids such as *Golden City Post* and *Home Post* as a journalist. While she worked as a journalist Bessie Head met Lewis Nkosi, Denis Brutus and Can Themba, reporters for *Drum* who challenged the apartheid regime by writing about urban life as experienced by black people. During her time in Johannesburg, Bessie Head also became involved with Pan Africanism and joined the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) headed by Robert Sobukwe. Like the African National Congress (ANC), the PAC was opposed to suppression and oppression of black people. But while the ANC was liberal in its membership and therefore welcomed anyone who was opposed to repression of black people, the PAC was attracted by William Du Bois' philosophy and agitated for change under the slogan of 'Africa for Africans', excluding white people from membership. Coloureds were included in the PAC

definition of Africans because its leadership felt that 'they too were indigenous to the continent and suffered under white oppression' (Eilersen 1995: 44).

Unfortunately, like the ANC, the PAC became the target of the South African secret police interest. In 1960 Sobukwe and other leaders were imprisoned and Bessie Head and others, although not imprisoned, found themselves charged with furthering the aims of a banned organisation. In my opinion, the involvement with Sobukwe's imprisonment must have been a psychological burden on a sensitive mind such as Bessie Head's especially in view of her interest in community and commitment to the plight of the oppressed. I suggest that her being charged must have contributed to Bessie Head's decision to uproot herself from the community of other journalists opposed to black oppression in Johannesburg and move back to Cape Town. Additionally, all black people knew of the threat of the secret police and Bessie Head's brush with them must have concretized her fear of them. The constant fear of being watched, fear of being a possible target of the 'letter bomb', something the secret police were renowned for, must have played a role in her decision to leave Johannesburg and eventually South Africa.

Compounding this social problem however was a more personal problem, a failed marriage to her journalist husband, Harold Head. After moving to Cape Town, Bessie Head worked for a short while at *Golden City Post* before resigning to start her own newspaper, *The Citizen,* in which she challenged the apartheid regime by focusing attention on its oppressive laws and system. In Cape Town Bessie Head's new-found friends belonged to a 'large circle of political activists and writers' (*A Gesture of Belonging* 1991: 2). Writing on

the social significance of political parties, Bessie Head said in *A Woman Alone*: 'The fantastic thing about friendships in South Africa is that one always and only meets one's friends through politics. Every and any man, woman who ever thinks in this country gravitates to some political party. Outside this you may have friends but none that you could carry on a reasonable or intelligent conversation with' (15). It was within this group that she met and married Harold Head, and with whom she had a son, Howard. Bessie and Harold lived in District Six, a famous Cape Town location for coloureds, for a little while. In District Six, Bessie identified with the poor of the community not only as a result of her dark skin, but also because she felt 'happy in their carefree unsnobbish society' (Eilersen 1995: 40). Commenting on the sense of community, which is clearly important in her fiction, Bessie Head wrote that:

> No one has much of a private life in District Six. The neighbours make it their business to know all about you and they don't mind what your sins are. In fact, if it comes to the push they'll defend you even if the law considers you in the wrong. The only suspicious man in District Six is the man who doesn't show his face and keeps a closed door. We are the real good and jolly neighbours, minding each other's business the way neighbours should. We can't help it because we're all piled upon each other. (*Tales of Tenderness and Power* 1990: 17-18)

Despite the sense of community in District Six, Bessie Head had an unhappy marriage. She always maintained that Harold was unfaithful. Thus although she had at first moved with him to his new posts of appointment, when in 1963 he needed to leave Port Elizabeth for a post as Editor of *Contract* in Cape Town, Bessie did not go with him. She stayed on in Port Elizabeth. Whatever minimal bond was remaining between husband and wife, eventually collapsed as a result of the separation. In an interview with Jean Marquard (1978) published in *London Magazine*, Head admits that what precipitated her move to Botswana was the break up of her marriage. Bessie Head's unhappiness and dissatisfaction with her

marriage, the desire for peace and a sense of community, clearly contributed to her application for a teaching post in Botswana. However, as many black South Africans were aware, apartheid did not let go of its victims easily. Though she was a native of South Africa, Bessie Head was denied a South African passport. Hence, as Denis Brutus had done earlier, in 1964 Bessie Head left South Africa permanently on a 'never-to-return' visa with her son Howard. The psychological effect of being an exile even while at home was clearly damaging and long lasting. It undoubtedly eventually contributed to Head's mental illness, an experience she effectively recreates in *A Question of Power*.

Autobiography

In an interview with Michelle Adler, Susan Gardner, Tobeka Mda and Patricia Sandler in Serowe in 1983, Bessie Head acknowledges use of personal experience in her three novels. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Makhaya's exile from South Africa to Botswana and alienation amongst the Batswana is a re-writing of Head's own experiences as an exile. In *Maru,* Margaret's profession, alienation and isolation as a Mosarwa amongst the Batswana reflects Head's own alienation and isolation as multi-racial in both South Africa and Botswana. However, in her words, her last novel, *A Question of Power* is 'totally autobiographical', 'Elizabeth and I are one' (MacKenzie 1991: 563). The idea of using personally lived material for her stories calls to mind J.M. Coetzee who argues that 'all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography' (Coetzee 1992: 3). Head recreates her life through her fictive characters in a process of invention which defines and also interprets those experiences.

In his book *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980) James Olney, a renowned scholar of autobiography, suggests that the motive of autobiographical creation is 'separate selfhood' (33). What this proposes is that autobiography is a claim for one's identity as an individual. Quoting Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Anne McClintock points out that 'autobiography is the genre most closely associated with the idea of the potency of self-identity, metonymically expressed in the signature: the emblem of a unique, unrepeatable and autonomous identity, created at a stroke of the metaphorical pen' (McClintock 1995: 313). According to Sidonie Smith (1987), the importance of autobiography is embedded in its relationship to questions of identity. What McClintock and Smith are arguing is the idea that autobiography writes one into being. J. Sturrock calls this a turning of 'life into Life' (Sturrock 1993: 2). Commenting on the issue of individuality versus community, Roy Porter (1997) points out that within Western thought, the individual, the 'self', is a materialisation from the 'tribal pool of the collective' (39). What Porter and the other critics seem to suggest is that autobiography is a move away from the collective of society towards 'individual' expression. Elements of the individual are clear in Head's narratives. The stories challenge a personal erasure by apartheid and patriarchy and assert Head's individuality and identity as a person.

However, writing the 'self' in the manner of Head also amounts to a representation of the collective which is a common practice in Africa. The result for Head is a strong on-going tension between ideas of individuality and communality throughout her writing. The stories of Head's protagonists, though autobiographical, also represent the lives of numerous other women and communities who have had to face the debasing evil of

apartheid as well as the oppressive effects of patriarchy. Black women's texts tend to narrate a 'collective' autobiography in that while they narrate the 'self', their stories also tell the story of many other women. Irene Mahamba's book, *Women in Struggle* (1984) which demonstrates Zimbabwean women's role in the country's struggle for freedom, illustrates this argument through its explanatory note which says that the book 'is fiction in that it is not a true story about any particular individual but draws from the experiences of many Zimbabwean people as they struggle against oppressive socio-economic and political structures. In this sense it is a true story' (4). In 'Preface to Witchcraft' Head concurs with this argument when she says: 'Any biographical detail takes in innumerable people of my generation who are scattered throughout the world as refugees. We were forced out of South Africa because, unlike our parents and our ancestors, we refused to call the white man *baas* (master)' (*A Woman Alone* 1990: 27). Keshia Nicole Abraham points out the autobiographical practice of most black women when she says: 'Black women autobiographers shift the paradigms of what is considered historiographical, and often blur the lines between what is considered private and that which is considered public, that which is marked factual from that which is considered fictive' (Abraham 1999: 2).

In view of the fact that the characters of young Margaret Cadmore in *Maru* and Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* project Bessie Head's life and bring her life experiences into perspective, I suggest that the stories conform to the personal centeredness or writing of the 'self' in autobiography. In Stuart Hall's language, they expose an essence of self which 'gradually unfolds to reveal a unified, unique central core' (Hall, 1992: 308). When asked where she got the material for the story of Maru, Head says 'A whole portion of it was

myself, my African background. It's easy for me to put myself into the shoes of Basarwa (Bushmen), you see' (Nichols 1981: 52). Like Head, the younger Margaret in *Maru* has an obscure background. Her Mosarwa mother dies in childbirth and like Bessie Head, a white missionary raises her. The white missionary, Margaret Cadmore, names the child after herself and basically uses her as an experiment for her scientific theories, one of which is that regardless of race, any child can excel so long as they are brought up in the right environment. While resisting any show of love to the child, the missionary goes on to provide an intellectually stimulating environment and young Margaret ends up achieving top academic grades. Her achievements however do nothing to change her racial circumstances. As a Mosarwa and therefore a member of the abhorred Basarwa tribe in Botswana, she is 'unwanted by society'. She is treated as 'the mad dog with tin cans tied to its tail' (9). She is spat on, pinched and jeered at. As young Margaret's character unfolds however, there emerges a unique self who stands out in a society that believes itself to be better than her. Margaret's calm, focussed and determined handling of her oppressed situation shows her to be in fact far superior to some of the Batswana whose perception of the Basarwa is frozen in prejudiced beliefs.

The significance of Margaret being Mosarwa and her adoptive mother being white is that Head draws from the two extreme racial positions in relation to power. As a Mosarwa, Margaret represents the lowest position in society. Her outcast position, poverty and the death of her biological mother illustrate that disadvantaged social condition. Yet the white Margaret, despite her own shortfalls, is not racist and can write of the dead Mosarwa woman: 'She looks like a Goddess' (*Maru*: 15). This is a recognition of the greatness of

ordinary people. It is a recognition of the fallacy of the belief in racial superiority and an acknowledgement of the importance of the inner being of any person. Margaret's white mother is important because it is from her that Margaret learns of her worth as a human. Head uses Margaret's quick grasp of her academic and artistic lessons to illustrate the fallacy of the notion that the Basarwa people are 'beasts' and to challenge the claims of racist societies such as apartheid South Africa and patriarchal Botswana.

Margaret's uniqueness is also evident from her art. Clearly a metaphor for writing, Margaret's drawings and paintings, like Head's writing, illustrate the power of art. Although Margaret's style is similar to her teacher's, she surpasses her in temperament. The older Margaret's style, which according to Dikeledi was 'cold and unemotional', contrasts with young Margaret, who is able to communicate the 'depths and heights of life' through her art (*Maru* 87). Margaret's paintings and drawings communicate her view of the world, reflecting a belief in the sanctity of life. This is a philosophy she shares with Bessie Head. Margaret's themes, which she takes from ordinary, everyday happenings in the village, challenge patriarchal views and express her belief in the importance of everything with life, including women. Hence, like Head's stories, Margaret paints ordinary women going about their daily chores. She captures details such as the mingling of tears and laughter on a woman's face, the powerful curve of a woman's leg muscle, or the resilience in a woman's neck or back as she carries a heavy load. Margaret also captures the animated gesticulations and expressions of the women as they converse. Such a focus puts women at the centre of society. It challenges stereotyped images of women as unimportant and points to their resilience, determination and capacity. When at one point Margaret paints thirty

pictures in one sitting, the achievement demonstrates her vitality. Evidently, the portrayal of the moment also suggests possession by an artistic muse, something Head talks of in relation to her writing activities at times (*A Woman Alone*: 77; Fradkin 1978: 430). Three of the pictures Margaret paints are projections from Maru's mind and this reinforces the idea of possession because it suggests that she paints them involuntarily. I will examine the concept of possession further later in this chapter.

Margaret's story is, however, also her community's. She represents the marginalized Basarwa who have lived a life of servitude for centuries. In the Batswana worldview, the Basarwa, a minority group called 'Bushmen' by colonialists, are not fully human. Their exclusion has been a result of their different looks and culture. Generally short, light-skinned and living a nomadic hunter-gatherer life, the Basarwa have been regarded as half-animal and been treated as such for a long time. The Batswana used many as slaves. Head compares the Basarwa's subjugated social condition with that of blacks and coloureds in apartheid South Africa. She clearly also contrasts the Basarwa's social condition with that of coloureds who, in Botswana, are similarly socially located on the periphery of the all-black society. While she is still a child, the older Margaret Cadmore tells young Margaret that: 'One day, you will help your people' (*Maru* 17). Though this is never said as though it were a big issue, it creates a burden in Margaret's mind. The help which the older Margaret foretells is eventually realised first through Margaret's academic and artistic achievements which challenge the stereotype of the Basarwa as half animals and therefore intellectually deficient, but also through her marriage to Maru which enables the rest of the Basarwa to re-examine their social conditions, awaken to their degraded

existence and resist further ethnic exploitation and abuse. The narrator tells us that:

> When the 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 along 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. They examined their condition. There was the fetid air, the excreta and the horror of being an oddity of the human race, with the head of a man and the body of a donkey. They laughed in an embarrassed way, scratching their heads. How had they fallen into this condition when, indeed, they were as human as everyone else? They started to run out into the sunlight, then they turned and looked at the dark small room. They said: "We are not going back there". (127)

This collective awareness underpins the argument that though Margaret's story is individual, it is also the story of the Basarwa people. Similarly, *A Question of Power,* which demonstrates the effects of apartheid and patriarchy on Elizabeth, also articulates the communal experience of the oppressed non-whites in South Africa.

While *Maru* isolates specific moments in Bessie Head's life, Elizabeth's story in *A Question of Power* is more overtly autobiographical. Elizabeth's birth and social circumstances approximate Head's in detail. Like Head, Elizabeth was born in apartheid South Africa of a white mother and an unknown black father. Perceived deranged, her mother was placed in a mental hospital and there gave birth to her daughter. Though the woman came from a wealthy family, when she died six years later, her child was bequeathed almost nothing. The only significant inheritance the child got from her white mother was the name Elizabeth. The woman had insisted that her child be named after her. Like Bessie Head, Elizabeth was brought up first by coloured foster parents before she was handed over to white missionaries at the age of thirteen. After her basic education, Elizabeth trained as a teacher and taught for a little while before changing her career to

journalism. As a result of the racial discrimination faced by black people, she got involved in politics. Unfortunately, not long after her involvement, Elizabeth was implicated in a court case, which resulted in the imprisonment of leaders of her political party.

As Bessie Head claimed for herself, Elizabeth also hurriedly married a man recently released from jail whom she soon discovered to be not only an uncontrollable womaniser, but who also harboured homosexual tendencies. Her discovery led to a decision to leave him and seek a teaching post in Botswana. Like her creator, Elizabeth was denied a South African passport, clearly as a consequence of her involvement in politics. The only option was to leave on an 'exit permit' which did not allow her to return. Taking the only son from her marriage with her, Elizabeth permanently left South Africa hopeful of a better existence amongst other black people.

Though Elizabeth's is an individual's story, there is the sense of the collective also portrayed in *Maru* in that Elizabeth's painful experience belongs to numerous others, both black and multi-racial, who faced racial oppression in South Africa. Writers such as Denis Brutus, Laureta Ngcobo, Arthur Maimane, Bloke Modisane and Todd Matshikiza left South Africa to escape apartheid's persecutions. According to Arthur Zich (1990), many South Africans left the country to seek refuge in Botswana. In the apartheid climate of the day, such forced dislocations could easily have resulted in psychological fragmentations such as the one Elizabeth exhibits in *A Question of Power*. Furthermore, Head's use of the third person narrator is a carefully chosen technique that reinforces the argument that her stories represent a collective experience. By placing herself 'outside' the narrative yet using

autobiographical material, Head clearly points to the commonality of Elizabeth's experience. She demonstrates that Elizabeth's story is also the story of numerous other South Africans, black, multi-racial, men and women who are similarly affected by the exclusions of apartheid and patriarchy. What is important, however, is that through the dramatization of Elizabeth's experiences which looks back to Bessie Head's own mental fragmentation, Head demands a closer look at and examination of the sanity of Apartheid South Africa.

Race and displacement

In *A Question of Power*, Head uses Elizabeth to illustrate the complexity and diversity of the concept of blackness in Southern Africa. This endeavour brings to mind Stuart Hall's concern with the issue of 'blackness' in Britain. In his essay 'New Ethnicities' Hall traces the path of cultural politics in Britain and the emergence of the term 'black' as a collective reference for marginalized people. Hall demonstrates how a diverse group of people from different cultural and ethnic groups in Britain, and with different traditions and practices, joined together on the basis of their common experience of racial oppression to forge a collective identity which came to be called 'black experience' (Donald and Rattansi eds. 1992: 252). Their shared experience of exclusion became an organizing tool, a unifying structure that cut across racial and cultural differences. The absence of, or the fetishized and stereotyped images of black people found in mainstream literature motivated 'black' activists to resist, challenge and transform such negative projections through counter images that conveyed a positive reality for oppressed people.

By writing from the specific position of the oppressed, Head similarly challenges the stereotyped figures of non-whites in South Africa. Her narratives reflect a collective experience and in this way she participates in the struggle Hall highlights. The cataloguing of experience and recording of memory as it cascades through her mind is a claiming of the self for the oppressed. This claim of identity, according to Hall, characterised the first movement of resistance against racial exclusion. Hall then traces a shift from the first collective movement against racism or 'relations of representation' to what he calls 'politics of representation', where the struggle of the oppressed now reflected the 'extraordinary diversity of subject positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category black' (Hall 1992: 254). I believe that Head participates in this dialogue through the characters of her narratives who represent the diverse groups that have been marginalized in Southern Africa. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, however, problematises Hall's idea when she argues that given the historical links of Africa with the rest of the world, the reality of Africa today is that there are no 'colour purities in Africa...Everything, biology, and culture, has been mixed up..."dynamized", by Africa's historical movement of people' (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 216).

Writing from a Caribbean perspective, the Jamaican women writers Erna Brodber and Olive Senior also demonstrate that the category 'black' is not limited to those who look black. These writers demonstrate through their texts that in Jamaica blackness encompasses multi-racial people who although they may look 'almost white', are nonetheless classified as 'not white'. I pointed out earlier that the desire for political control compelled the apartheid state of South Africa to adopt a policy that maintained divisions

among South Africans. Racial and ethnic difference amongst the people became a strong tool for maintaining that control. White people regarded themselves as superior to multi-racial people and blacks and in their turn, multi-racial people defined themselves by what they were not. Because they were not dark, they claimed superiority to blacks. I believe that Head's awareness of the agenda behind apartheid's racial divisions compels her to address it in her work. The position of multi-racial people in South Africa was complex. Though a few might have enjoyed some forms of privilege, most were nonetheless positioned on the periphery of the society. The 'Slegs Blankes' posters, which were posted outside doors, applied to them as much as they applied to black people. I suggest that without necessarily underrating the specificity of coloured peoples' experience and position in South Africa, Head reveals their link with black people in other experiences of disadvantage. Through this link she calls into question and challenges the racial policies of apartheid.

Though Head's novels are set in Botswana, as Arthur Ravenscroft points out, Head's South African experience always looms in the background (Ravenscroft 1976). On the surface, *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru* explore womanhood in Botswana. The female characters Paulina, Margaret, Dikeledi all come from Botswana and their experiences foreground a Botswana situation. Margaret's situation in *Maru* illustrates the double disadvantage of black womanhood. Margaret is victimized on the basis of gender as well as race/ethnicity. Her case demonstrates that ethnicity and race are causes for division in Botswana just as they are in South Africa. The undertones of racial exclusion suffered by Margaret resonate with the exclusions perpetuated under apartheid. *A Question of Power*

straddles South Africa and Botswana. Elizabeth is a South African native exiled into Botswana and her outlook on life is clearly dominated by the experiences of apartheid. Head shows that Elizabeth's experiences, from the time of childhood in South Africa to adulthood as exile in Botswana, are not very different from Margaret's who similarly faces racial alienation at home.

I am not suggesting that Head underplays racial difference, nor am I implying that she undermines the experiences of particular groups of women. Rather, I am of the opinion that Head's work demonstrates that whether one is coloured or black, women share similar social experiences of oppression in Southern Africa and that this can be under a black government as well as under white minority rule. This is, for instance, illustrated in her first and third novels. There is poverty in Elizabeth's adopted home in *A Question of Power* just as there is poverty in Paulina Sebeso's home in Botswana in *When Rain Clouds Gather.* Though coloured, and by South African apartheid ideology, therefore, better than black people, Elizabeth's adopted mother has to work very hard in order to sustain the family and survive. When her husband dies, Elizabeth's foster mother, Nellie, resorts to selling traditional beer to make ends meet (*A Question of Power*: 15). Similarly, Paulina Sebeso is a single mother who has to fend for her children alone. Unlike other cattle owners in the village, Paulina cannot afford to employ someone to look after her cattle in the bush. She sends her son instead. The boy dies as a result of malnutrition and tuberculosis which are a manifestation of poverty in poor communities. The link between black and coloured is also illustrated through Margaret in *Maru* who, though Mosarwa, reflects Head's experience of oppression. Margaret's portrait not only points to the autobiographical nature of Head's

work, it also illustrates Head's challenge to racist philosophy by highlighting the similarity in experience of black and coloured women.

In her article 'Social and Political Pressures that Shape Literature in South Africa', Head explains her personal circumstances as a multi-racial South African. She writes: 'I was born in South Africa and that is synonymous with saying that one is born into a very brutal world - *if one is black*. Everything had been worked out by my time and the social and political life of the country was becoming harsher and harsher... *We, as black people*, could make no appraisal of *our* own worth; *we* did not know who or what *we* were, apart from objects of abuse and exploitation' (Abrahams 1990: 12, my emphasis). And in *A Woman Alone* Head says: 'I think that *our* only education in South Africa, *as black* people, is a political one. *We* learn bitterly, every day, the details of oppression and exploitation' (63, my emphasis). I suggest that these personal views of the social position of the multi-racial South African who identifies with the black majority, reinforce the argument about Head's perception of these two groups of people as similar. Hence, in *A Question of Power* Head explores the dehumanising experiences of the coloured woman Elizabeth because the socio-cultural ideology of white South Africa, like the Western world, locates multi-racial people in their blackness. In my opinion therefore, Head uses Elizabeth's story to probe even deeper into what she had started in *Maru* and *When Rain Clouds Gather*. She uses Elizabeth's story to explore the psychological effect of apartheid's dehumanising practices on African womanhood.

In addition to challenging apartheid, Head addresses an African issue through the

geographic and ethnic diversity of her protagonists and their relationship to their places of exile. The three novels demonstrate that alienation and displacement is not limited to the oppressive white state of South Africa, but is also expressed in black societies. The three protagonists of Head's texts, Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Margaret in *Maru* and Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* do not face alienation in their original societies only, they re-live their homeland experiences in their locations of exile. As soon as it is known that Margaret in *Maru* is Mosarwa, she ceases to exist as a human being in the eyes of the school principal and his colleagues. She becomes an 'it' and the principal feels duty bound to warn everyone about her as an 'it' (31). This evokes her experience of alienation as a child where the other children's behaviour and reaction towards her expressed the feelings of the adults. The pinching, spitting and chanting at her, demonstrated society's refusal to treat the Basarwa as human beings and therefore as part of society. The principal's behaviour expresses similar sentiments. He becomes obsessed with the need to 'shove' Margaret out of Dilepe community (*Maru*: 41).

In the case of *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power*, South Africa, the original homeland society of the protagonists, alienates them on account of their race. As a result their racial marginalization, Makhaya and Elizabeth leave to settle amongst other black people. Yet both Makhaya and Elizabeth soon discover that not being Batswana militates against their social inclusion. Both characters discover that the evil of racial exclusion in apartheid South Africa resurfaces in their place of exile, the only difference being the colour of the perpetrators. This is the case, for instance, when Makhaya goes to report his presence to chief Matenge. Matenge's attitude and character demonstrate a

cruelty reminiscent of apartheid brutality. Matenge tells Makhaya that:

> Having a refugee at the farm is going to give it a bad name, including the whole area in which it is placed...We hear things about [refugees]...Most of the trouble here is caused by people from outside and we don't want you. We want you to get out...You know what a South African swine is?...He is a man like you. He always needs to run after his master, the white man. (62)

This refusal to accept Makhaya in society is repeated in Elizabeth's life in Motabeng. When she comes into the village, her inability to speak Setswana positions her outside the community, and in relation to social integration, clearly compounds her problem. Elizabeth feels an 'out-and-out outsider' also because of what she believes to be feelings of suspicion from the people. Yet some of these feelings are a result of her own racist paranoia, stemming from her South African experience. Nonetheless the women are reluctant to include her in their daily activities because they have concluded that being multi-racial she cannot cope with the rough existence of their lives. As a result, they leave her in the village when they move to their fields during the cropping season. Like Makhaya, her presence in the village is challenged when a man asks her: 'Can you tell me something about Sello?... He doesn't like his own nation at all. He likes *your* kind of nation' (*A Question of Power*: 27, italics in original). 'Your kind of nation', an exclusionary reference, is said with 'supreme contempt' which illustrates the people's unwillingness to accept Elizabeth as one of them. These instances, which illustrate the multiple exclusions Elizabeth faces as multi-racial and as a woman, demonstrate how class and/or race intersect with gender in women's oppression.

Head further addresses the race issue through the complicated relationships at the volunteer centre in Motabeng in *A Question of Power*. Representing the ideal universe of

Head's vision through the diverse racial, class, age and gender groups working together for a common goal at the farm, the structure nonetheless also illustrates the power relations of race. The volunteering system is premised on the concept of helping 'developing' nations achieve economic independence, which will then improve the social life of the people. Expatriate professionals from the West come to help set up means for economic self-sustainability amongst locals. Such professionals include teachers, agriculturalists, doctors and engineers. In Motabeng, this group of white professionals comprising teachers and agriculturalists have come from Denmark, England, America and South Africa. While some like Eugene, Gunner, Tom and the Danish girl Birgette, have overcome the racism prevalent in their native homelands, and learnt to regard black people with humanity and love, some have not. A majority of the Danish volunteers continuously denigrate and moan about their black, 'illiterate' students. They persistently hold on to a belief in the superiority of whites and of western culture. The fact that they have the means of education, with which to improve the black people's socio-economic status reinforces their belief.

Camilla, the Danish woman who assists Gunner in teaching the African students, epitomizes this othering of all black people. On numerous occasions Camilla complains about the Batswana's illiteracy and laziness. And although she sometimes complains to Elizabeth, Camilla actually also includes Elizabeth in the category of 'these people'. The manner in which she addresses Elizabeth is similar to the way she talks to Small-Boy, Kepotho and Dintle, the Batswana apprentices at the farm. Camilla flings incomprehensible and meaningless information at Elizabeth in order to demonstrate her racial and cultural superiority. Later, Camilla throws herself into an association with

Elizabeth because she believes that an association with a 'native' is one way of 'helping' the native. Thereafter, Elizabeth's 'nativeness' forms the background to all Camilla's comments. Camilla's attitude, which represents the attitude of the other racist volunteers, contrasts with that of Eugene, Gunner, Tom or Birgette who have learnt to respect humanity regardless of colour. Eugene's humanity, which is evident in his daily behaviour, is identical to that of the Batswana labourers at the farm (78). The focus on Eugene's daily conduct and mannerisms, challenges the fallacy of white racial superiority. The narrative illustrates and challenges the power relations of race, which clearly stand in the way of achieving the ideal universe Head envisions. By focusing on Elizabeth and her relationship with members of the volunteer centre, Head illustrates the complexity of the issue of race but also addresses the question of womanhood in Southern Africa.

Womanhood

As is the case in most literature by black women from Africa and the Caribbean, women and women's issues are fundamental to Head's narratives. Like Brodber, Senior and Ama Ata Aidoo, Head portrays several strong, resilient and resourceful, but also mentally fragile women in her fiction. Through her female characters, Head explores women's socio-cultural conditions, roles and disadvantages and more significantly, she celebrates their achievements. The focus on women challenges their oppression but also reinforces Head's vision of an ideal environment in which all humans, regardless of gender, race and class, will live in harmony. In the world she envisions, love and reverence for other humans is fundamental. Despite this political concern, it is documented that Head was always

reluctant to accept the title of feminist: 'I am not a feminist...in the sense that I do not view women in isolation from men' (Eilersen 1995: 238, quoted from Khama Memorial Museum (KMM) 44, Bessie Head Papers (BHP) 26.01.1981 and KMM 72, BHP 19.09.1982, Serowe, Botswana). Commenting on the relationship between feminism and writing in Southern Africa, Head says: 'Writing is not a male/female occupation. My femaleness was never a problem to me, not now, not in our age... I do not have to be a feminist. The world of the intellect is impersonal, sexless' (*A Woman Alone*, 95). I suggest that Head's reluctance to identify herself as a feminist is linked to two factors. Firstly, it is a result of the connotations attached to the term 'feminism' within most of Africa in her time, a situation that still exists in some parts of Southern Africa up to now. A significant number of African men and women associate feminism with deviation, an aping of western women's ideology that is 'destroying' traditional African culture. In an excerpt from his poem, 'Letter to a Feminist Friend', the Malawian poet Felix Mthali articulates this position succinctly when he writes:

> ...
> And Now
> the women of Europe and America
> after drinking and carousing
> on my sweat
> rise up to castigate and
> castrate their menfolk
> from the cushions of a world
> I have built!
>
> Why should they be allowed
> to come between us?
> You and I were slaves together
> uprooted and humiliated together
> Rapes and lynchings -
> the lash of the overseer
> and the lust of the slave-owner
> do your friends "in the movement"
> understand these things?
> ....
> No, no, my sister, my love,
> first things first!

...
When Africa
at home and across the seas
is truly free
there will be a time for me
and time for you
to share the cooking
and change the nappies -
till then,
first things first!
(Felix Mthali, first presented at Women in Nigeria Conference, Zaria, Nigeria, 1982)

From such a perspective, feminism is regarded as an undermining of the liberation efforts of the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements. Secondly, I would like to propose that in an environment of racial exclusion such as the one Bessie Head belonged to in South Africa Head's reluctance to label herself feminist is understandable, especially considering the effect of apartheid on black people. To adopt the term feminist would have suggested identification with white women who were seen as the 'originators' of feminism and by implication, it would suggest participation in the racial atrocities of the apartheid regime. In addition, it is clear that Head's refusal is linked to her philosophy of life, which is concerned with all humans regardless of race, gender and class. This is an ideal she holds on to throughout her fiction. Nonetheless, women and womanhood play a crucial role and remain pivotal to Head's telling of her stories.

Ravenscroft (1976) points out that Head's novels inter-connect and form a trilogy. Although Ravenscroft's analysis is based on thematic content, it is also true in relation to Head's exploration of womanhood. In *When Rain Clouds Gather,* Head looks at rural semi-literate women through Paulina Sebeso, Maria and Mma Millipede. Dikeledi and Margaret in *Maru* represent educated modern black women. In *A Question of Power,* Head deals with these groups through Kenosi and Elizabeth respectively. The novels explore

women's challenges, illustrating their strengths as well as the dilemmas that characterise their daily existence. Through Margaret Cadmore and Elizabeth, Head also explores the link between ethnicity/race and womanhood.

Through her female characters, Head challenges the male-oriented social outlook that allocates peripheral status to black women. Despite the universality of the concerns her texts explore, an outstanding aspect of Head's women is that each character is an individual in her own right. Head shows the women engaged in industry side-by-side with men to engender a new community of humanity. Regardless of the confines of their rural setting, the women demonstrate politicisation, dynamism and determination, thereby revolting against subjugating traditions in their communities.

As well as showing women's dynamism and industry, Head also highlights issues of ambivalence. Such representation calls to mind Gloria Chukukere's comments in which she perceptively points out that 'In their attempts to present a balanced viewpoint, female writers are equally objective in their analysis of female roles especially in exposing the inherent weakness of their victims which assist to perpetuate their subjugation within the patriarchal society' (Chukukere 1995: 10). This exposition of the women's weaknesses includes what Obioma Nnaemeka calls 'woman on woman violence', such as female circumcision, the ridicule of barren women, which many African feminists see as important to black women's lives (Nnaemeka 1995: 83).

Like the other members of Golema Mmidi, Paulina Sebeso in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a refugee. She comes to Golema Mmidi to find a new life after she is widowed. As is the

belief in many Southern African societies, Paulina's native community believes that marriage takes precedence over a woman's academic and personal achievement. Consequently, in spite of an excellent performance at school, Paulina gives up education for the prospect of security in marriage (90). Unfortunately however, her teenage marriage to a traditional man from Rhodesia ends in early widowhood when, in the way of his tradition, the man commits suicide because his honour was at stake (72). Thereafter, with her two children, Paulina moves to Golema Mmidi to start a new life. In her new environment Paulina distinguishes herself once again. What sets her apart now is her inexhaustible energy, organising ability and individuality. Her awareness of the multiple and complex issues that make up womanhood in her society set her apart from the majority of traditional women who regard sex and sexuality as the sum total of womanhood. Thus, despite her physical frustrations, Paulina ignores the sexual taunts of the men and women. She adheres to her moral principles that value women for their humanity and not as mere sex objects. When one day the women challenge her principles, she recognises the aim and patriarchal basis of the attack:

> It was bait-talk. It had been planned. They all had permanent lovers or husbands while Paulina Sebeso had none, and even a tradition was forming about her. A few men had said she was bossy. Then they all said it...They were determined to keep her trapped in a frustration far greater than their own. (89)

Paulina's attitude challenges the traditional subordination of women on the basis of gender. She is critical of the women who fight over men regardless of the men's morals (107-108), thereby participating in their own subjugation, just as much as she is scornful of men who see women as purchasable merchandise 'the way you bought a table you were going to keep in some back room and not care very much about' (120). The old woman Mma Millipede similarly comes to settle in Golema Mmidi as a refugee. Like Paulina, she is a

victim of the brutal power of traditional custom and practice. Initially forced into marriage with a chief's son named Ramogodi, she is later divorced because her husband falls in love with his younger brother's wife. When she moves to Golema Mmidi, Mma Millipede meets and becomes neighbours with Dinerogo, a man she was prevented from marrying when they forced her to marry the chief's son. After she settles into her new environment, Mma Millipede soon establishes herself through her hard work and unique individuality which she expresses through a generosity and kindness that surprises and challenges all, including the emotionally scarred Makhaya.

By portraying Paulina's militancy and Mma Millipede's kind generosity, Head illustrates the possibility of challenging tradition from within. Paulina not only rejects the traditional perception of women as mere sexual objects, she also demands recognition and acknowledgment of women's physical and emotional contribution to society. Paulina's eventual union with Makhaya, a refugee fleeing political persecution in South Africa, who is alienated from traditional beliefs that see men as superior and privileges them as a result, represents what Chukukere (1995) calls a 'reordering of societal values' (278).

In addition to illustrating women's militancy, Paulina's character, which foreshadows Dikeledi in *Maru,* also exemplifies some of the dilemmas of black women seeking to assert their identity within traditional society. This dilemma is demonstrated through Paulina's retaining of internalised notions of what constitute female and male roles and traditional custom. She is for instance, alarmed when Makhaya lights a fire, a chore socially designated as female in her community. Though she challenges the idea of male superiority

through her independence, her attitude illustrates submission born of traditional practice. For example, after they get to the cattle post Makhaya refuses to allow her to see her son's body. Paulina's argument, which is based on 'our traditional custom', illustrates the dilemma of her character:

> She scrambled out of the car and raced towards the hut. But Makhaya reached the door before her and pulled her back and looked at her briefly with an angry expression...
> "The boy is dead," he said sharply, "Why do you want to go in?"
> "I must see the body", she said, but with dry, taut lips. "I must see the body because it is our custom."
> "You see," he said, in a deliberately harsh voice. "All these rotten customs are killing us. Can't you see I'm here to bear all your burdens? Come on." (*When Rain Clouds Gather*: 158)

Paulina's attitude and mentality also characterise Maria, another young woman in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Similarly portrayed as innovative and ingenious in a community steeped and entrenched in 'traditional custom', Maria fails to carry through her initial refusal to accompany her husband Gilbert to England. When, based on the tradition that allocates superiority and leadership to husbands, he demands obedience from her: 'You're my wife now and you have to do as I say. If I go back to England, you go there too' (99), Maria abandons her earlier resolve and acquiesces. Paulina's reaction is similar when Makhaya decides to take over the role of head of her household. Maria's story, like Paulina's, illustrates some of the dilemmas of black women trying to assert their womanhood within traditional culture.

At the same time, through Makhaya and Gilbert *In When Rain Clouds Gather*, Maru and Moleka in *Maru* as well as Eugene and Tom in *A Question of Power*, Head exhibits romanticism. In her autobiographical writings Head hints at her contradictory tendencies

as an author when she indicates that rather than feel anger at the immense suffering of black people, as most of the black South African male writers express, the experience created a reverence for ordinary people in her. This difference in her writing is also alluded to when she says: 'My writing is not on anybody's bandwagon. It is on the sidelines where I can more or less think things out with a clear head' (*A Woman Alone*: 61). Although one of the main issues Head addresses is men's oppression of women, her portraits also depict strong, considerate and helpful men. Though not always realistic, the portraits reflect African and classic Western ideologies of ideal manhood. The characters exemplify a concept of manhood which foregrounds traditional perceptions of men as leaders and protectors. The romantic nature of her narratives where gallant gentlemen courageously face the challenges of nature and/or man to rescue the vulnerable, especially women, are an idealised perception of manhood.

In addition, in spite of the complexity and significance of the issues raised, romantic love always plays a big role in Head's fiction. There is always a romance in her stories and it is possible to ascribe this to Head's own deprived childhood and failed marriage. In *Thunder Behind Her Ears*, Eilersen suggests that Head always harboured a dream of finding the perfect partner and living happily ever after. Such a dream is clearly expressed through the happy marriages at the end of *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*. Although Head is a romanticist, she is however, also very perceptive of the realities in her society. Through characters such as Matenge, Dan and Sello of the brown suit, she foregrounds and addresses the oppressive, insensitive and destructive nature of many African men. Head's paradoxical portraits of manhood complicate, in my opinion, any efforts at seeking to fit

Head into neat theoretical categories, especially in relation to feminism.

In the case of Margaret in *Maru*, Head illustrates that as an adult, she is confronted with gender discrimination in addition to the racial and ethnic marginality she has suffered since childhood. When the discovery of Margaret's Basarwa origins culminate in the decision to get rid of her, Head points to the multiplicity of her problems. Head demonstrates that Margaret's womanhood comes into play in the principal's decision to get rid of her: 'She can be shoved out...It's easy. She's a woman.' (41). Based on Batswana cultural perceptions of the female sex, Margaret's femaleness becomes a tool which the principal intends to use to his advantage.

After foregrounding the socio-cultural conditions Margaret faces in Dilepe, Head is particular about illustrating Margaret's strength and personality as a way of challenging Batswana gender and racial perceptions. For instance, Maru's royalty makes him a revered figure and beyond reproach in the community. Hence, when he demands that a bed lent to Margaret when she arrived at Leseding be returned, despite awareness of the harshness of his decision, Moleka, as well as the two men sent to collect the bed, silently carry out his command. The traditional expectation of silent submission from women (and the Basarwa) is however challenged when Margaret, who embodies both, goes to the offices where Moleka and Maru are and asks to keep the bed until she is able to buy her own. Margaret's action here reveals exceptional agency, especially in the context of her inferior status as a woman and a Mosarwa.

In spite of the agency she displays, there is an ambiguity in Margaret's character which serves to illustrate the complexity and dilemmas of black women's lives. Margaret's character illustrates black women's internalisation of social beliefs rooted in traditional custom and the difficulty of breaking away from such practice. When Maru decides to marry Margaret, he does not ask whether she wants to marry him. He simply takes her away to be his wife in the distant place he decides to settle in. While marrying Margaret is meant to demonstrate the equality of all humans that Bessie Head advocates, the idea that Margaret silently follows also reinforces the exclusion of the Masarwa and women's docility. Maru can only have a life together with his chosen wife outside the community. Additionally, it also shows how a traditional imposition on women has been internalised and become cultural practice. Because she is woman, Margaret has no say in the marriage decision. She simply follows where she is led. This ties in with Schapera's study of Batswana life which shows that traditional practice allocates women inferior status (Schapera 1955). As well as illustrating the complexity of women's lives, the narrative of the marriage also demonstrates the romanticism I suggest above. Even though Margaret is an unaccepted member of society, her lifetime of racial persecution and deprivation comes to an end when the most highly placed male in the society chooses her for his wife and she gets to marry the most eligible bachelor in the community.

Dikeledi, the other woman in *Maru,* is the quintessence of modern black womanhood in Botswana. Highly liberated, Dikeledi is presented as a revolutionary in many ways. As daughter of the reigning chief, social expectations would allocate her the position of role model in the community; a repository of Batswana tradition and customs. Dikeledi,

however, does not conform to such a position. She wears short tight skirts and smokes cigarettes. She is the first female member of the royal household to put a 'good education to useful purpose' through employment (25). Unlike other female members of the royal family, Dikeledi uses her education to gain freedom. She turns a personal interest in people into a career in teaching. And as part of the teaching team at Leseding, she displays independence and individuality of character. Against local belief and practice, she does not subscribe to the idea that Basarwa are less than human. A part of her inheritance as daughter of the reigning chief is two slaves. Yet, contrary to tradition, 'without fuss or bother, [Dikeledi] paid them a regular monthly wage' (25). Dikeledi's love and concern for other humans is also responsible for her affection for Margaret. When Margaret comes to Leseding, she quickly gains the friendship and respect of Dikeledi. Dikeledi's belief in Margaret's humanity is the reason for her angry outburst when the pupils in Margaret's class undermine her humanity through their chants. In a voice 'like murder, shrill and high like the shattering of thin glass against a wall' Dikeledi shouts: 'Stop it! I'll smash you all to pieces! She's your teacher. She is your teacher!' (146).

Dikeledi's treatment and defence of the racially marginalized, an expression of her wrangle with oppressive traditionalism, is however problematized by what amounts to a traditional outlook towards men. Dikeledi has clearly internalised traditional notions of what it is to be a woman in her society. Like many other women, Dikeledi feels a sense of inadequacy because she is not attached to a man. One is here reminded of Esi in Aidoo's *Changes,* for whom attachment to a man also seems the only way to express her femininity. Thus in spite of her independent personality, Moleka's love is important to Dikeledi's sense of self

worth. Unfortunately however, her obsessive affection for Moleka blinds her to his moral faults, she does not see through his deception. When he makes her pregnant, it is not out of affection but because he sees her as a sexual object, a tool for exacting revenge against her brother, Maru. Dikeledi's feelings for Moleka are regardless of his corrupt and irresponsible morality. Her individualism and independent personality is compromised through dependence on Moleka's affection for a sense of self worth.

Patriarchy

Importantly, Head does not try to solve women's gender problems through male exclusion. Her texts depict men playing crucial roles in the women's lives. Such a portrayal demonstrates Head's belief in the place of men in women's lives which links her with African feminists such as Obioma Nnaemeka (1997, 1998), Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves (1986) and Filomina Steady (1994) who point out that the struggle for African feminists includes women, men and children. Joyce Ladner, an American feminist, articulates similar sentiments when she writes: 'Black women do not perceive their enemy to be black men, rather the enemy is considered to be oppressive forces in the larger society which subjugate black men, women, and children' (Ladner 1972: 277-8). Although Head's portrait of the relationship between mothers and their children, such as the one between Elizabeth and her son Shorty in *A Question of Power*, complicates traditional ideas about motherhood, she creates male characters who play important roles in the female characters lives.

Susan Gardner rightly identifies a consistent pattern in Head's fiction in which female characters confront their difficulties mostly with the help of 'god-like' men (Gardner and Hill-Scott 1986). Eilersen (1995) makes a similar observation and suggests that Head's 'god-like' male figures are a result of the lack of a male parental figure as Head grew up. I suggest that Head uses these god-like male characters to challenge male insensitivity and cruelty to women. By creating male characters such as Eugene, Sello the monk or Tom, Head suggests and demonstrates that men can be compassionate and sensitive to women's pain and situations and that they have a role to play in changing the social situation of women. Such an outlook contrasts with the image of 'the real man' as portrayed, for instance, in the character of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo's strong, determined, proud, and impulsive nature portrays a more conventional picture of African ideas of manhood. Okonkwo's brashness and insensitivity, especially to women, is regarded by society as expressive of real manliness. Head's male characters on the other hand, question and challenge such perceptions.

At the same time, however, as well as god-like characters such as Eugene, Sello 'the Monk' and Tom in *A Question of Power* or Maru in *Maru*, Head portrays others such as Dan and Sello of the brown suit or Matenge in *When Rain Clouds Gather* who illustrate men's abuse of patriarchal power. In other words, Head does not evade the negative impact of patriarchy. Her texts also illustrate patriarchal abuse and subjugation of women. She shows the negative psychological effect of male power on women. What I am suggesting is that Head's men are polarized between good or evil. Her women however, are a reversal of the usual male representations; they are rounded and complex characters.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather* Makhaya is the medium of Head's feminist consciousness. His monologues illustrate his rejection of men's domination and exploitation of women. This rejection is most clear at the border where, in an instance that shows women at the service of patriarchy, an old woman orders her granddaughter to sell him sex. Makhaya's thoughts, we are told, go back to his sisters:

> He had sisters at home, one almost the same age as the child and some a few years older. But he was the eldest in the family and according to custom he had to be addressed as "Buti" which means "Elder brother", and treated with exaggerated respect. As soon as his father died he made many changes in the home, foremost of which was that his sisters should address him by his first name and associate with him as equals and friends. When his mother had protested he had merely said, "Why should men be brought up with a false sense of superiority over women? People can respect me if they wish, but only if I earn it". (15-16)

Though Makhaya rejects male supremacy this time, his later behaviour, for instance at the cattle-post when they go to find Paulina's son, as well as Paulina's attitude towards him, tend to affirm the same superiority he rejects at the border. Presented as someone who is aware of the sexual exploitation of women by men, Paulina is unwilling to get involved in a relationship where a man will once again exploit her. After all she already has two fatherless children. She sees the numerous uncommitted male-female relationships around her as 'purposeless' and 'aimless'. What Paulina desires is a stable male-female relationship expressed through marriage. Paulina's perception of marriage, which she clearly shares with Head, is in the patriarchal terms of her society, with men as protectors. Hence Paulina's attraction to Makhaya, amongst other things, is premised on the protection and care he will provide her and her two children. When at one point he enquires after her daughter, she is surprised and ponders deeply about his gesture.

> It had surprised her when Makhaya had inquired about the child. Batswana men no longer cared. In fact, a love affair resulting in pregnancy was one sure way of

> driving a man away, and it was a country of fatherless children now. Perhaps, she thought, this man still had tribal customs, which forced him to care about children. Every protection for women was breaking down and being replaced by nothing. (115)

Paulina's sentiments and expectations express nostalgia for a lost Batswana past when men supposedly took their family responsibilities seriously. When Makhaya finally marries her, Paulina feels a sense of security and from then on looks to him for support and direction. The constant evocation of traditional practices when men 'protected' their women implicitly asserts male supremacy and endorses Batswana patriarchal structures that are simultaneously responsible for women's oppression.

A Questions of Power similarly portrays Sello in several roles as God/protector. Like Maru in *Maru* whose royal position as chief sets him apart in the society and ascribes to him the role of protector of his subjects, Sello is a paternal figure hierarchically removed from the community of characters in the text. Like Maru, Sello possesses the power and capacity to conduct telepathic relations with his subjects and is also able to see into the souls of people. The most crucial statement of *A Question of Power* is actually attributed to Sello. Warning Elizabeth about Dan's false and unhealthy concept of love, Sello tells her that: 'Elizabeth love isn't like that. Love is two people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the soul of the other like a ghoul' (*A Question of Power*: 197). Like Paulina, Elizabeth's relationship with Sello is on patriarchal terms. She depends on him. We are told that: 'She seemed to have no face of her own. Her face was always turned towards Sello whom she adored' (*A Question of Power*: 25); Elizabeth's existence seemed to be only as a 'side attachment to Sello' (25); '[S]he...rapidly accepted Sello as a comfortable prop against

which to lean' (25). Later, when she fails to heed his warning, '[S]he floundered badly in stormy and dangerous seas' (29). Eugene, the South African in charge of the development project and Tom are similarly portrayed. The American Peace-Corp volunteer Tom becomes a 'permanent fixture' in Elizabeth's life from their first meeting. The narrator makes clear that: 'She [Elizabeth] was to depend on Tom heavily for the return of her sanity' (*A Question of Power*: 24). Tom's constant presence and concern provide Elizabeth with the physical and emotional balance she needs to help her regain her sanity.

It is however not just to the men that Head attributes patriarchy. Her work illustrates the role women play in executing and enforcing patriarchal ideals. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) points out that, 'African complex kinship structures and the day-to-day negotiations of our lives through gender, sex and male female relational experiences make us realise that patriarchy not only includes women but gains some of its force and effectiveness from the active participation of women too' (16). In *A Question of Power* Head effectively dramatises women's participation in patriarchy through Medusa. Though Medusa, Sello, Sello of the brown suit and Dan, are creations of Elizabeth's mind, Medusa's character illustrates, nonetheless, how women can enforce male ideals and thereby help in their and other women's subjugation. I suggest this because the phantoms of Dan, Sello, and Sello of brown suit and Medusa are real to Elizabeth. She talks with them and feels the reality of their threats physically. Medusa and Dan are the ones who torture Elizabeth to madness. Presented as 'the direct and tangible form of his [Sello's] own evils, his power lusts, his greeds, his self-importance' (*A Question of Power*: 40), Medusa illustrates how women internalise patriarchal ideals and implement them. Dan and Sello try to kill Elizabeth's

spirit through Medusa and the 'seventy-one nice-time girls' (173). They try to organise Elizabeth's death through the women's undermining of Elizabeth's womanhood.

Regardless of being psychological, Elizabeth's story is an illustration of how sexuality is used as a tool for patriarchal oppression. Dan continuously flaunts his sexual escapades with his numerous women before Elizabeth. He sometimes performs sex with the women on Elizabeth's bed. He boasts of his and his women's sexual energy. I suggest that though Dan and Medusa deem Elizabeth's position inferior, in reality, she is comparable with the seventy-two women Dan flaunts before her. Like Elizabeth, these women are similarly sexually marginalized. Their value is as objects for Dan's sexual satisfaction. Names such as Squelch-Squelch, The Womb, Miss Sewing Machine, Miss Wriggly-Bottom, Pelican Beak, and Body Beautiful demonstrate the women's sexual objectification and point to their sexual function as 'nice-time girls' (128).

Head's focus on sexuality and the exploration of how sex is used to oppress women is important especially in relation to the traditional African view of sex and/or sexuality as valuable mainly for the continuation of lineage (Steady 1994: 32). Such a view compares with the Caribbean and British situation where many black men also use sex to assert and prove their manhood (BBC 2: 'Baby Father', 2002-3). Some men do not take responsibility for the resulting offspring. A lot of Caribbean women, however, view sex and sexuality as important because of the resulting children who become a source of identity as well as security in old age (Senior 1991). In a lot of African communities, women's role as mothers, the channel of the continuation of the people's lineage, is widely acknowledged

and gives women identity and a special place in society (Nnaemeka 1995; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Phiri 1997; Kuthemba-Mwale 1977).

In many Southern African societies, sexual lessons are consequently given to women at the three most vital stages of initiation; puberty, marriage and the birth of first child (Kuthemba-Mwale 1977). Women play crucial roles in these sexual lessons as instructresses. For instance, in societies such as the Lomwe and Yao of Southern Malawi, the lessons might include demonstrations. The young women are shown how to prepare for and please the man during intercourse. That the basic aim of these lessons is male satisfaction demonstrates women's participation in patriarchal agenda. Similarly, in addition to throwing her blinding thunderbolts, Medusa offers Elizabeth 'top secret' information through demonstration. Sprawling her long black legs in the air, she shows Elizabeth her genitalia and with a mocking smile challenges her: 'You haven't got anything *near* that, have you?' (*A Question of Power*: 44, emphasis in original). Medusa's cruel taunt demonstrates how sexuality can be used by women to oppress other women.

Madness and spirituality

In *A Question of Power*, the journey into Elizabeth's 'innermost recesses' allows Head to contrast Elizabeth's frightening soul experience with the 'public convulsions that range across the world and from one civilization to another' (Ravenscroft 1976: 183). Head's vivid rendering of Elizabeth's psychological chaos has compelled Ravenscroft to wonder, and rightly so, whether someone who had not undergone Head's psychic experience would

have been able to successfully invent the phantom world that comes to life every night when Elizabeth is alone (Ravenscroft 1976: 184). The idea that the stories are derived from personal experience and that Head weaves Elizabeth's bouts of derangement into her everyday life-events and activities such as gardening, motherhood and friendships, gives the stories their uniqueness. Through a juxtaposition of Elizabeth's chaotic inner world with the realities of the everyday, Head traces Elizabeth's development from alienation to acceptance.

In her book, *Madness in Literature* (1980), Lillian Feder demonstrates that humanity has long been intrigued with the mind, especially with extreme forms of psychic experience (3). Feder's study is concerned with Western literature where interest in insanity is linked to interest in the workings of the mind. However, black women writers in texts as diverse as Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb* (1980) to Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) use the theme of madness, firstly, as a way of highlighting the 'contradictions and tensions' characteristic of female being in their societies (O'Callaghan 1993: 37), and secondly, as a way of illustrating a powerful sense of resistance to their marginal situation. This is what Odile Cazenave means when she says: 'madness becomes a sign of collective active resistance; it is no longer synonymous with abandonment and self-confinement' (Cazenave 2000: 199). Racism, classism and patriarchy, prejudices which constitute the divisive elements in society as well as women's sense of themselves, are portrayed as causes of women's mental fragmentation and their madness, illustrating the depth of their suffering and pain. In addition, however, insanity also demonstrates their rebellion. A character's madness often illustrates a strong sense of resistance to the conditions imposed on them by

a patriarchal and/or colonial order. This, for instance, is what Nyasha in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) demonstrates. Nyasha's psychological breakdown is her way of resisting patriarchal oppression in her society, which, in the story, is enforced through her father's attitude and behaviour. Writers such as Brodber, Head, Senior and Aidoo all feature alienated and psychologically fragmented figures who experience excessive withdrawal as well as physical and emotional collapse as a result of the political and socio-cultural conditions operating in their societies.

In much contemporary western literature, 'psychic dissolution' is used to express a search for personal and artistic fulfillment as well as social and political freedom (Feder, 1980: 9). In Michel Foucault's opinion madness is therefore an expression of the constraint of an individual's freedoms. For him, mad people communicate 'truths' to a hostile society through the 'dialogue of delirium' (Foucault 1967: 209-210). In his turn R.D. Laing in his book *The Divided Self* (1960), suggests that psychosis is a response to life in a destructive society and that schizophrenia is a special strategy that a person 'invents' in order to survive in an unlivable situation (79). Feder warns against adulation of madness by describing Foucault's theory as 'an idealization of madness that actually confuses compulsion with freedom, anarchy with truth, suffering with ecstasy' (Feder 1980: 33). Feder's point that the use of such words as 'truth', 'freedom' and 'glory' confuses the actual message of the mad with the philosophical significance society imposes on it is pertinent because in addition, it can lead to the assumption that all mad people are alike. Feder defines madness as: 'a state in which unconscious processes predominate over conscious ones to the extent that they control them and determine perceptions of and responses to experience that, judged by

prevailing standards of logical thought and relevant emotion, are confused and inappropriate' (Feder 1980: 4).

A close analysis of the patterns of madness in literary works by black women reveals suffering, and not necessarily achievement of glory as suggested by Foucault. The texts demonstrate how the oppressive nature of the patriarchal and/or colonial structures of society affects women psychologically. What is significant in the portrayals however is that as well as illustrating their pain, more importantly, the texts also reveal women's resistance to oppression. The texts suggest resistance through the mad women's anger at the source of their oppression. In addition, resistance is expressed through the eventual ability of the women to recover physically and psychologically. In most cases therefore, the writers depict female protagonists who suffer physical and mental collapse, a fragmentation of the self out of which, however, they are beginning to recover or have recovered as the story comes to an end. This suggests that the aim of these women writers is not to illustrate insanity *per se,* but rather, to reclaim woman's place in society and celebrate what Laing refers to as 'the return' of the female subject (quoted from Rigney 1978: 8). Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* offers an example of this kind of a 'return'.

As a woman, my position in relation to black women's insanity links with that of many feminists who attribute it to female oppression in the male supremacist codes that make up many black societies. It is important to note, however, that there are different cultural understandings of psychic experience and that societies react differently to the variety of conditions called 'madness'. In *Women and Madness* (1989), Phyllis Chesler observes that

generally, in the West, madness is regarded as a 'shameful and menacing disease, from whose spiteful and exhausting eloquence society must be protected' (34). In ancient Greece madness was seen as both a blessing and a curse. As a curse, it was expressed in epilepsy, mania, melancholia or paranoia, while as a blessing it was believed to bring gifts such as prophecy and poetry. In the Bible it was regarded as a 'possession', which sometimes necessitated removal from society (see for example the story of Legion in the New Testament). Removal of a mad person from society in effect becomes a blessing. It allows not only for escape from the confined position imposed by the controlling patriarchal structures, but also from the penal code of the community.

Many African societies perceive madness as both 'disease' and 'possession'. People believe that greed, jealousy or malice can induce some evil people to afflict whoever they wish with the disease of madness. As 'possession' madness is believed to come from the realm of the spiritual. Possessing spirits can either be good or bad depending on purpose and nature of possession (Soko: 1992). The people believe that bad spirits cause affliction and disease while good spirits induce divine prophecy, which, when heeded by whoever it is directed at, society or the individual, ensures protection, prosperity, good health and peace. However even in the case of possession by good spirits, when a possessed individual ignores the instructions of the possessing spirit their condition can degenerate into a 'disease' (Soko 1992). Even when deemed a disease, madness is still not regarded as an ordinary disease *per se*. The people believe that ancestors or the gods can communicate through such people.

Amongst the Anyanja of South Central Africa (Malawi and Zambia) for instance, in addition to perceiving madness as a condition from which some members of society especially children and pregnant women need to be protected, the people also believe that a mad person can possess prophetic attributes. Consequently, what a mad person says is never taken lightly. The belief that a mad person might be a messenger of the gods is, for example, expressed through the social practice of offering them food when they come to one's compound. The idea that mad people can possess prophetic attributes is also reinforced through the Chinyanja saying *'wamisala anaona nkhondo'* which literally translates into 'it was the mad man who foresaw the war'. Implicit in this saying is acceptance and tolerance of mad people and madness. In this sense madness becomes an enabling illness. It allows the possessed person space in society.

Similarly, possession allows the women of the Zar cult of Northern Sudan space in their society. Although the society perceives a woman's possession by a Zar jinn as an illness, through it the women are able to ameliorate their status of subordination. For instance, whatever a woman demands whilst in a state of possession – gold jewellery, expensive perfume or fine clothing – is readily supplied by her husband or brothers because it is believed that that is the only way she can regain her well-being (Boddy 1989: 189). In addition, as well as, and because of its link with fertility, Zar possession is enabling because as Boddy (1989) points out, 'it enables a couple to modify an overly polarized, increasingly schismogenetic marriage...and forestall its disintegration in the face of negative gossip' (190). Possession by a Zar jinn 'provides an idiom through which spouses can communicate about and even resolve issues it might otherwise be inappropriate for

them to discuss' (190).

It is in the sense of madness as agency that *A Question of Power* has been read by feminist scholars and critics such as Carole Davison (1990), Sara Chetin (1991) and Anisa Talahite (1990). By becoming 'mad' Elizabeth is able to find a voice for resisting the oppressive conditions of the society. She becomes a disruptive woman who refuses to be situated within the mythologies of race and of gender. Madness enables Elizabeth to subvert her social condition of silence, which her identity as a woman and as non-white in South Africa and non-black in Botswana, imposes on her. Yet Head also demonstrates that madness is not necessarily an individual or personal condition only. Her work illustrates that madness can also be a socio-political condition. This, for instance, is how she explains the ferocious and brutal, yet senseless nature of apartheid's laws against non-whites. Her conviction is demonstrated in her frequent references to the apartheid regime of South Africa as 'mad'.

As well as using insanity to demonstrate women's resistance, Head also uses madness to illustrate women's ostracization, oppression and the extent of their suffering. Since mental illness amounts to a loss of one's place in society, by having mad female protagonists, Head illustrates the extent of women's pain in addition to illustrating the force of the women's resistance. In her analysis of psychosis in African women's literature, Odile Cazenave (2000) identifies two broad categories, those who exist on the margins of society from birth and those whose marginalization is a result of evolution, that is, those who move from a position of favour or power economically or due to physical beauty to a marginalized position which causes insanity (66). Elizabeth's position in *A Question of Power* is outside

society from birth. In the racialized society of South Africa and Botswana, Elizabeth's multi-racialism denies her a central place in either nation.

A Question of Power captures the quintessence of Elizabeth's suffering by tracing her life from childhood in South Africa through exile in Botswana. Through this technique Head demonstrates the entirety of her heroine's suffering. The story illustrates the role of society and childhood experience in the protagonist's adult life of mental aberration. Adetokunbo Pearse (1983) hypothesizes that *A Question of Power* is not particularly concerned with Motabeng, the site of most of the action in the novel; it is, rather, more concerned with Elizabeth's psychological retention of her South African experience which is key to her breakdown (82). The Elizabeth who goes to Motabeng is one already predisposed to mental breakdown. *A Question of Power* indicates that Elizabeth first suffered rejection as a child. As a consequence of her birth, no one wanted her. Her maternal family immediately put her up for adoption because she was multi-racial and illegitimate. Her father is non-existent in the story. As a result, Elizabeth was shuttled between prospective adoptive families before being given to foster parents from whom she was also finally taken away and sent to an orphanage. In the orphanage Elizabeth learnt the circumstances of her birth and the fate of her mother. Interestingly, Brodber similarly portrays childhood rejection as a crucial factor in Ella's mental derangement in her novel *Myal.*

The knowledge that she had been born in contravention of the South African Immorality Amendment Act of 1957, that her mother had been deemed insane and committed to a mental asylum where she gave birth to Elizabeth before committing suicide, plays a crucial

role in the creation of the person Elizabeth becomes as an adult. Society, through the principal's actions, believes that because she had been born of an insane woman who also committed the insane crime of killing herself, Elizabeth would naturally, also end up insane. The principal of her school cruelly tells Elizabeth when she is barely thirteen that:

> We have a full docket on you. You must be careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native. (16)

Though the information distresses the child, the principal goes on to 'live on the alert for Elizabeth's insanity' (16). While other children get away with more serious breaches of school regulations, Elizabeth is punished for trivial offences. Recognising Elizabeth's 'difference', the other pupils take advantage. They constantly deliberately provoke her because they are aware that if she reacts she will get in trouble.

The psychological effect of this social persecution proves enormous for Elizabeth. Eventually, she starts to imagine her mother appealing: 'Do you think I can bear the stigma of insanity alone? Share it with me' (17). This identification with a mother socially judged 'mad, sexually depraved and evil' is partly responsible for Elizabeth's negative attitude towards society (Myers and Roberts 1964: 231). The knowledge of her mother's 'abnormal' sexuality, carried in her subconscious all along, finally expresses itself through the phantoms in her horrific mental ordeal. I suggest this because the phantoms of Medusa, Dan and Sello of the brown suit all torture Elizabeth with sex and accusations of her sexual ineptitude.

Besides using madness in order to capture the essence of women's suffering and to

demonstrate the extent of their pain, like other African women writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo in *Anowa* (1965), Mariama Ba in *Scarlet Song* (1981) and Vieyra-Warner in *Juletane* (1987), Head uses madness to demonstrate women's ability and determination for survival. A significant difference between Head and the other African women writers is that Head deals with the crossover between two worlds. In addition, rather than portray madness *per se*, Head focuses on the process of mental breakdown. By portraying the process, Head communicates the women's strength and resolve through their ability to finally overcome threats to their sanity.

Elizabeth's nightmarish 'journey of the soul' starts with the mystical appearance in Part I of the monk-like figure of Sello. Sello appears constantly for some time until Elizabeth gets used to his presence and starts to communicate with him as she would a living person. Eventually however Sello creates the company that makes Elizabeth question his divinity and goodness. He creates Medusa (37), and from his figure also emerges the figure of Sello of the brown suit, who, together with Medusa and the figure of Dan who appears in Part II, terrorizes Elizabeth with accusations of sexual inferiority and perversity. Every night the phantoms rise in Elizabeth's bedroom denying her rest and sleep. At one point she is brought to a cesspit:

> It was filled almost to the brim with excreta. It was alive, and its contents rumbled. Huge angry flies buzzed over its surface with a loud humming. He caught hold of her roughly behind the neck and pushed her face near the stench. It was so high, so powerful, that her neck nearly snapped off her head at the encounter. She whimpered in fright. She heard him say, fiercely: "She made it. I'm cleaning it up. Come, I'll show you what you made". (53)

The cruelty of this revolting experience does not kill Elizabeth; however, the fall into the

deep darkness that follows this harrowing experience provides an opportunity for Elizabeth to look inside herself. Therein she discovers a still and sane self and that the evil that was threatening to take over her life had a parallel of goodness. Thus holding on to this reassurance of goodness, Elizabeth reclaims physical reality and therefore life. To the amazement of the nurse attending her, Elizabeth abruptly jumps out of her sick bed, declares herself better and discharges herself from the hospital.

Elizabeth's determination to survive is displayed again a year later when after descending one more time into derangement, she is subjected to the most evil and hair-raising experience:

> She had seen two large, familiar black hands move towards her head. They had opened her skull. He'd bent his mouth towards the cavity and talked right into the exposed area. His harsh, grating voice was unintelligible. It just said: "Rrrrrrrrrrraaaaaaaaaa." It had shot through her body with the pain of knife wounds. She'd pulled and pulled, struggling to free herself of the hands holding her head. She'd awoken gasping for breath. (177)

The violence of this experience is met with a physical struggle for freedom. And although Elizabeth's horrendous experience is at the level of the unconscious, Head conveys its significance by linking it with consciousness. The reality of Elizabeth's struggle is conveyed through the fact that she wakes up from her haunted sleep gasping for breath. Although so many times Elizabeth is near death in her pain and suffering, she is shown to possess an inner capacity to survive her horrific experiences. In addition, the participation in the gardening project and her friendship with Kenosi and Tom help her pull out of her excruciating ordeals and regain sanity. Added to this is her role as Shorty's mother. The responsibility of motherhood which is commonly portrayed as vital to black womanhood

by many black women writers also helps Elizabeth recover her psychological and physical balance. Head reinforces the idea of women's strength and determination through the portrayal of Elizabeth who, after her horrific experiences, returns to reclaim herself both as a woman and as an African. The symbolic placement of her hand on the Batswana soil at the end of the story is acceptance of who she is. It is a rejection of the marginalizing and oppressive impositions of the power games of apartheid and patriarchy, and acknowledgment of her identity as an African woman.

I further suggest that Head uses madness to illustrate the presence of different levels of reality. Analysed in the context of African perceptions of madness, Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* clearly experiences madness on different levels. The idea of being haunted by apparitions resembling real living men suggests the malice or jealousy of witchcraft. And Dan's malicious role in her nightmares links with the bad and therefore disease-causing spirits as documented by Soko (1992). The idea that Elizabeth becomes physically unwell and is sometimes violent as a result reinforces this link with witchcraft. Yet at the same time the presence of the figure of Sello the monk, who comes to sit in her chair every night and with whom she has conversations, expresses the communication with the spiritual, which, according to African philosophy, can be a source of prophetic wisdom.

I view the whole ordeal of her experience with the spirits as exemplifying the idea of attainment of knowledge and wisdom as a result of contact with the spiritual. I suggest this because it is during those moments when struck with neurosis that Elizabeth makes the most pertinent observations and criticisms of society. And despite the horror and brutality

of her experience, Elizabeth emerges out of her ordeal more knowledgeable. She emerges with a strong consciousness of her identity, so that rather than deny or try to erase her black background, she finally comes to accept and identify with it. In addition, Elizabeth learns more about humanity, about issues of power and about real love through her suffering. She comes to a consciousness of the power games played out in society and the truth about the position of ordinary people in the political games of the powerful. Elizabeth sees parallels between power-hungry men or societies and the high God in the heavens who jealously guards his power. Elizabeth realises the role such a god plays in human suffering because 'personalities in possession of powers or energies of the soul' imitate him (*A Question of Power*: 190). By portraying Elizabeth as making such crucial observations in a state of neurosis, Head also challenges the social construction of madness and extends an invitation for a re-examination of the condition society labels 'mad'. She acknowledges and participates in the theory of possession and dreams as expressions of different levels of reality and as alternative sources of knowledge.

In her article titled 'Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality' Janice Boddy's (1994) definition of 'possession' is 'the hold exerted over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than she' (407). Boddy's idea of possession as a powerful hold by external forces, that echoes Soko's (1992) analysis of spirit possession in a Vimbuza performance in Northern Malawi is also reflected in Head's novels. In *A Question of Power*, the two Sellos, Dan and Medusa, are separate and real to Elizabeth and her experience of them is as independent beings. They are distinct bodies, different from each other and from her, and they exert a very powerful hold on Elizabeth's psyche. In *Maru* an

external force takes over Margaret's body immediately after Dikeledi delivers the assortment of artist's materials such that she does not notice when Dikeledi leaves. Thereafter, a new rhythm which merges her days with nights takes over. The energy from this 'artistic muse' allows for no relaxation so that 'the images and forms, the flow and movement of their life imposed themselves with such demanding ruthlessness that there was no escape from the tremendous pressure' (*Maru*: 100-1).

However, unlike Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* or Erna Brodber's Nellie in *Jane and Louisa* and Ella in *Louisiana* who are also possessed and communicate with spiritual figures, Margaret does not seem to be personally aware of the force that possesses her. After her experience she tells Dikeledi 'I had a strange experience...Each time I closed my eyes those pictures used to fill all the space inside my head...The funny thing was, this happened again and again until I put those pictures down on paper' (*Maru*: 103). Another contrast between Margaret's possession with Elizabeth's in *A Question of Power* or Miss Gatha in Brodber's *Myal*, is that rather than verbal, Margaret's possession is expressed in the proliferation of her art. Margaret produces thirty paintings within two days. The idea that this unquenchable force is the result of an independent spiritual energy that descends onto Margaret's spirit is reinforced through its disappearance once Margaret puts all the images onto paper.

The significance of Margaret's extraordinary output is that although Maru recognises some of the pictures, reinforcing the suggestion that he has a role in their projection, the paintings clearly also speak to him. Through the paintings Margaret draws attention to the

plight of her people: 'You see, it is I and my tribe who possess the true vitality of this country. You lost it when you sat down and let us clean your floors and rear your children and cattle. Now we want to be free of you and be busy with our own affairs' (*Maru*: 109). Collectively, the paintings represent an act of self-liberation for Margaret and her people. Margaret recreates the Basarwa as a community not of the passive half-donkey half-human theory of colonialism and the Batswana, but as a people capable of resistance through her work (Fanon: 1961). Modupe Olaogun's (1994) point that the paintings open Maru's mind and stir in him visions of social transformation (80) is therefore apt. As Maru takes in the images, 'It was as though he had fallen upon a kind of music that would never grow stale on the ear but would add continually to the awakening perfection in his own heart' (*Maru*: 107). Maru's contribution to the social transformation he envisions, although problematic, is through his marriage and abdication.

In addition to awakening Maru's consciousness, because the pictures draw on ordinary everyday themes which society regards as insignificant, they demonstrate a hidden level of knowledge which Margaret is able to unlock and translate through her state of possession. The pictures challenge social belief and bring to the fore the importance of, and in Head's view, the sacredness of ordinary people and all living things. And because the paintings are from Margaret's perspective of the world, as an ostracized member of society, they give a view of the world which represents a different level of reality and knowledge. I suggest that Head views this different level of reality as analogous with the knowledge of possession or madness because both occupy border terrain.

A Question of Power however also links the spiritual bodies with dream activity. The spiritual figures in *A Question of Power* predominantly manifest themselves in the darkness of night or sleep. While the idea of the phantom's manifestation as being specifically in dreams connects Head with the western theory of Sigmund Freud who proposes that the experiences and fears of our waking life are replayed in dreams, I am in agreement with Maggie Phillips (1994) who argues that Head goes beyond Freud by exposing another dimension to dreams (90). Through her linking of dreams with the spiritual, Head demonstrates a belief prevalent amongst many Africans in Africa and in the diaspora, which holds dreams, as it does spiritual possession, as the site of a different level of reality. Phillips' (1994) exposition of the significance of dreams for Africans is most illuminating and in my opinion, clearly locates Head within this African philosophy:

> Throughout the ethnic diversity of Africa, dreaming is a gift passed down through a multitude of forbears and the dreaming received is full-bloodied experience. Dreams predict and torture or protect; dreaming enters other realities and is the site of ritual psychic healing; dreamselves travel out of bodies, and sorcerers, gods, goddesses, spirits, and the dead physically enter the dreamer's presence...dreaming transgresses chaos and contacts the highest sacred authority. (90)

In his study of phenomenology, the psychologist Carl Jung suggests the existence, in the psyche, of 'subtle bodies' which are neither facts nor ideas but which belong to the 'soil of the soul' or the 'third place between things and mind' (Romanyshyn 2000: 27). Jung's hypothesis is that these bodies exist in the psyche not as productions by the person but that they produce themselves and have their own being. Jung illustrates his views through the description of Philemon, an 'imaginal being' who resides in Jung's psyche and with whom Jung says he interacts as if he were another person. Jung points out that although there is a 'differentiation' between himself and Philemon, there is no 'separation' (Romanyshyn 2000:

28).

There are interesting parallels between Jung's theory and the figures Head draws which make Jung useful for understanding the complex spiritual bodies in Head's narratives. Like Jung's Philemon, Head's Sello, Dan and Medusa are different from Elizabeth. They have their own reality and being at the same time as their origins, Elizabeth's dreams, locate them in Elizabeth's psyche. Although the presence of the figures affects Elizabeth physically, they nonetheless exist 'on the border of the real and the ideal' (Romanyshyn 2000: 32). One aspect of Head's uniqueness is, I believe, her ability to offer optical representation of theories such as Jung's that the imaginal bodies reproduce themselves through having the figures come into being by walking into and out of other figures. Sello walks into the figure of the 'Father' (*A Question of Power*: 30); a beautiful woman walks out of a monstrous woman and walks into Elizabeth (*A Question of Power*: 33); Sello of the brown suit is projected from Sello the Monk (*A Question of Power*: 37). Their connection with reality, which represents the intermingling of reality with the spiritual, is suggested through the figures walking into real people such as the fictional Elizabeth represents in *A Question of Power*.

The idea of 'difference' without 'separation' between Jung and Philemon or between Elizabeth and the phantoms of Dan, Medusa and the two Sellos brings to the fore the issue of 'projection' in relation to possession. Head's narrative, like Jung's, complicates the concept of projection as an external force which transfers itself onto the mind of the possessed, a way of thinking that has been used to explain much of the splitting of psychic fragmentation. By complicating projection and yet suggesting existence of what

Romanyshyn (2000) calls a 'metaphorical reality' or the 'third place between the two of things and thoughts' which is occupied by imaginal beings (32), the constraining limitation of the perception that knowledge results from reality or thoughts only is demonstrated. This complication of projection does not suggest erasure of the concept because as Romanyshyn notes, projection as a psychological experience does occur (31). Elizabeth's story, like Jung's, illustrates the existence of a different level of reality and of being, and by implication, a source of knowledge which exists in an in-between space of 'matter and thoughts'. I suggest that in the African worldview, this is the location of the activity of spiritual possession, of witchcraft, and of dreams. Head's narratives illustrate that although commonly disregarded or undermined, the activity of this in-between place affects and is a part of the people's lives.

The idea of 'in-between' space being a source of a different level of knowledge and therefore positive, compares with Bhabha's hypothesis of the possibilities of in-betweenness. Using an architectural analogy he identifies the stairwell as being in between the attic and the boiler room and illustrates how as in between designations of space, the stairwell 'becomes a connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower'(Bhabha 1994: 5). According to Bhabha this in-between location is the space in which 'something begins its presencing' (5). In the postcolonial context of race and culture, this in-between space is the space of hybridity and mimicry which Bhabha identifies as strategies developed by the postcolonial subject in order to have her/his difference felt and known (Bhabha 1994: 5).

In both *A Question of Power* and *Maru*, Head illustrates the intermeshing of spiritual activity with reality through a number of complex narratives that illustrate the third level of reality. For example, when the pupils in Margaret's class chant the racist slogan, 'You are a Bushman', for a moment Margaret re-lives the torture of her childhood when other children hurled racial abuse at her. But unlike the passivity that characterised that childhood torture now, born in the energy of her adult emotions is a spiritual power, forceful and frightening, even to herself, and which clearly leaves a mark on reality. Margaret 'sees' herself beating the children with a stick and, in the process, breaking the neck of one of the girls in the front row. Although in reality, Margaret does not move from behind her desk at all, the figure of a little a girl in the front row of the class, white-mouthed and desperately clutching her neck in obvious pain, tells a different story. Though scientifically illogical, the girl's gesture and expression demonstrate a link between the spiritual and the real. What takes place is an illustration of the intermingling of spiritual activity with everyday reality. The fact that Dikeledi sees the little girl as well shows that spiritual reality is not confined to those who directly experience it or those who are possessed, but that it is communal. Dikeledi's sharing of the feeling and vision expresses the realness of spiritual activity as much as it also illustrates and reinforces the concept of a third level of reality.

Head deals with the crossover between reality and the imaginal in *A Question of Power* once again through the relationship between Elizabeth, Tom and Sello the monk. Not long after he makes himself a permanent presence in Elizabeth's hut, the monk Sello crosses the confines of his spiritual boundaries into the real so that not only Elizabeth, but also Tom hears him (*A Question of Power*: 24). The instance of Elizabeth's dream of Sello attacking

a little herd boy in the bush, which corresponds with a radio announcement the following day of the real death of a boy in the bush (141), also portrays the link as much as Elizabeth's dream-thoughts at one time, of brown-suited Sello as a monkey result in Sello transforming his facial features to an owl's. Significantly, when she wakes up the following morning Elizabeth discovers a dead owl on her door step (48). Complex as these instances are, they nonetheless demonstrate an intermingling of the real with the spiritual, which in traditional African worldview, is a part of the people's everyday reality (Mbiti 1999: 74).

While Head attacks religion, especially Christianity, for its role in the oppression and exploitation of black people, it is nonetheless, always in the background of her fiction. Head uses Biblical language, imagery and stories throughout her novels. For instance, like John the Baptist (Mathew 3:3), Elizabeth is told to 'prepare the way' (*A Question of Power*: 30), and in the same way the Pharisees 'whisper amongst themselves' in opposition to Jesus (Mathew 21:25), at the onset of Pete's derangement in *Maru*, the women 'began whispering among themselves' (*Maru*: 88). In addition, like the all-powerful and all-seeing Christian God of creation days (Genesis 1), '[Maru] dwelt everywhere' (*Maru*: 34) and he was the 'ultimate authority' in Dilepe. In *A Question of Power*, the phantom figure of David with a sling whom Elizabeth tells to kill a gigantic and monstrous woman, evokes the story of the fight between David and Goliath in the Old Testament (*A Question of Power*: 33). Like the prostitute who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair (Luke 7:36-38), Sello's concubines are 'beautiful women who cried and wiped his feet with their long black hair' (*A Question of Power*: 42).

The influences of the Eastern religions of Buddhism and Hinduism also inform both *Maru* and *A Question of Power* (Eilersen 1995: 35) and Head draws some of the images and themes of her narratives from these religions. Despite the complexity of his character, Sello's theory of love in *A Question of Power* embodies the concepts which articulate the anthropocentric doctrine of human sacredness on which Buddhism and Hinduism are premised. Head's interest in these Eastern religions, which focus on the sanctity of all humans and animals, contrasts with the relationship of distance between the Christian God and his creation. The attraction of such a belief makes sense for someone with Head's experiences. Nonetheless, just as she accuses the Christian God of being power-hungry, in *A Question of Power*, Buddha is similarly charged with arrogance (*A Question of Power*: 32-33).

Embedded in the narratives of the little herd boy or of the owl are aspects of African traditional practices and beliefs such as sorcery and witchcraft. As she does with religion, Head treats witchcraft with ambivalence. Her fiction indicates horror simultaneously as it expresses fascination for witchcraft's unexplainable mysteriousness. Head condemns the practice for its politics of power, which in her opinion is comparable to religion, apartheid and tribalism. Yet witchcraft is also clearly identified with the in-between space that is believed to be a source of knowledge and a different level of reality. In her story 'Witchcraft' Head links the supreme power of witchcraft and sorcery, which was 'vested in chiefs and rulers' with the concepts of power she abhors. She identifies witchcraft as a force that had its source in 'a power structure than needed an absolute control over the people' (*Collector of Treasures*: 47). I suggest that the parallels Head identifies between witchcraft

and the oppressive power structures of apartheid and colonialism are responsible for an attitude which sometimes 'dismisses' witchcraft as mere superstition (Phillips 1994: 99). In *A Question of Power,* Elizabeth succinctly verbalises Head's dismissive feelings of witchcraft when she suggests that witchcraft was an 'adult game that should really have been relegated to children' (*A Question of Power*: 21).

However, in spite of the attack on witchcraft, there is clearly also an attraction due to the ineffable quality of the practice. As Phillips also notes, witchcraft often provides Head with the imagery for her narratives (Phillips: 1994: 99). While Phillips isolates the images of distorted genitalia such as 'leering penises' and 'huge vaginas' which characterise *A Question of Power* as particularly expressive of witchcraft, I would add that linked to these images is the concept of time. Most of the horrific activities in *A Question of Power* occur at night and darkness is, I believe, vital to the practice of witchcraft or sorcery. By placing the horrific appearances of Elizabeth's nightmares at night time or when Elizabeth is sleeping, Head taps into one of the most significant aspects of witchcraft. In addition, images such as owls, which in the West are associated with wisdom, in Africa, are linked with darkness and death. Similarly, the imagery of ashes, unaccountable animal footprints, as well as opened skulls and hands detached from the body, are drawn from beliefs about the practices of witchcraft and sorcery (Chakanza 1990).

Head also links witchcraft with the 'third place' that is a source of knowledge. In *A Question of Power* Head demonstrates this through the harshness of witchcraft which becomes the grounds for discovery of human knowledge for Elizabeth. Elizabeth learns

from the horror of Dan's sorcery

> [Dan] was one of the greatest teachers she'd worked with, but he taught by default - he taught iron and steel self-control through sheer, wild, abandoned debauchery; he taught the extremes of love and tenderness through the extremes of hate; he taught an alertness for falsehoods within because he had used any means at his disposal to destroy Sello. And from the degradation and destruction of her life had arisen a still, lofty serenity of soul nothing could shake'. (202)

As a result of the ghastly torment of her nightmares, Elizabeth learns self-control. The discovery of the possibility of the existence of both good and evil, God and Satan in an individual helps in this lesson of self-control. Elizabeth also learns about love and humility and in addition, she comes to accept and claims her African heritage.

The story 'Witchcraft' also expresses Head's ambivalence in that although Mma-Mabele's mysterious affliction is blamed on witchcraft the story implies that it is also the source of her healing. By inflicting Mma-Mabele with 'the dark things that dwelt in the dark side of life' (*A Collector of Treasures*: 56) and implying that the hospital as well as the medicine man Lekena fail to help her, Head suggests that Mma-Mabele's healing is from within, it belongs with the 'dark things' within her. Hence when the villagers want to know whether she had found a powerful Tswana medicine man to heal her, Mma-Mabele's answer is an angry but ambiguous retort: 'There is no one to help the people, not even God. I could not sit down because I am too poor and there is no one else to feed my children' (*A Collector of Treasures*: 56).

Power

The title of Head's last novel sums up the main thesis in all her fiction. Whether she is writing on women's oppression and subjugation, on racism or on madness, Head's main concern remains the issue of power. Her interweaving of different painful and difficult experiences is a critique of power and a demonstration of power as the fundamental cause of all human suffering. She uses these narratives to highlight her theory that abuse of power is the source of all the problems in the world; that it is what throws the world into chaos. Her texts address power in its varied structures, political power, patriarchal and sexual power as well as spiritual power. Focusing on Botswana and South Africa, Head's texts point a finger at the source of evil in South Africa simultaneously as they expose the misery and suffering that abuse of power inflicts on ordinary people in Botswana. Although South Africa is never directly present in the fiction, the effects of its abuse of power, for example on the lives of the two exiles Makhaya and Elizabeth, are constantly in the background. Head illustrates how apartheid, ethnicity and patriarchy are responsible for the untold misery and suffering among many black Southern Africans. Her novels illustrate the physical and psychological damage inflicted by abuse of any form of power.

In the vein of many African women writers such as Aidoo, Dangarembga, Emecheta and Nwapa who whilst challenging women's subjugation are nonetheless also committed to the reality of the complexity of women's lives, Head too engages the complexity of her people's lives by suggesting that evil such as that apartheid inflicts on black people is not necessarily only practiced by colonialists. She demonstrates the participation of black people in racism through characters such Matenge in *When Rain Clouds Gather,*

Margaret's colleagues at Leseding School in *Maru* and also through the phantom figures in *A Question of Power* who, like the apartheid state of South Africa, use the power at their disposal to oppress those who are racially or ethnically different.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Makhaya flees South Africa because of the state's abuse of political power. Yet in Botswana he re-confronts the racial persecutions he escaped from in South Africa through Matenge, the chief of the community he settles in. Matenge is corrupt and a tribalist who uses his power to exclude the aliens who come to seek refuge in his village. Head suggests that his tribalist cruelty is similar to the evil racism of apartheid. Makhaya's situation is echoed by Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* who, in Botswana, similarly meets the racial exclusions of South Africa. Her refugee status in Botswana resonates with the statelessness of being black South African. Like Chief Matenge, the principal at Elizabeth's school misuses his power when he decides to sack her for refusing his sexual advances. What Head demonstrates through this narrative is the similarity between the principal's misuse of his power and authority and apartheid's abuse of its political power. And because South Africa's male-controlled culture echoes Botswana's patriarchal society, Elizabeth's final mental illness is therefore a dramatization of the damage inflicted by abuse of this male power.

Head demonstrates the entrenchment of patriarchal or sexual power through Elizabeth's madness and torture which she shows to be male-authored. The sources of Elizabeth's nightmares are the male phantom figures of Dan and Sello. Medusa, though a woman, is actually an extension of destructive male power. I am not suggesting that Head believes

that women are never bad in themselves. The women who taunt Paulina in *When Rain Clouds Gather,* the prejudiced Batswana nurses who refuse to touch the dead Mosarwa woman who gives birth to young Margaret Cadmore in *Maru,* as well as Camilla, the Canadian volunteer in *A Question of Power,* challenge such a claim. Rather, I believe that Medusa's participation in Elizabeth's torture symbolizes the ways through which structures of male dominance and female submission are 'internalised and reproduced by women' (Chukukere 1995: 298).

The idea that there are two living members in the Motabeng community with similar names to the one Elizabeth's sub-consciousness creates, allocates the figures a symbolic function. Sello and Dan are consequently symbols of male functions and men's abuse of their sexual powers. Their relationship with Elizabeth illustrates patriarchy's misuse of its power. The narrative suggests that when she comes to Botswana the rapport she establishes with Sello the monk is soon shattered when he reveals a different side to his character. Sello has a weakness for women. This weakness is responsible for the creation of the figure of Medusa who is both a representation of female sexual power and an agent of destructive male sexual power. Medusa's sexual composition links with the sickening equivalent of Sello of the brown suit to torture Elizabeth for her colour and, therefore, 'sexual repulsiveness'. Head's view of such abuse of power is demonstrated through the eventual destruction of both Medusa and Sello of brown suit. Additionally, the nature of Dan's character also demonstrates male abuse of sexual power. He is a child molester, a homosexual and incurable phallic worshipper. Dan repeatedly flays his penis at Elizabeth. He has intercourse with numerous women in Elizabeth's presence and unceasingly boasts about

his sexual energy. If he is not satisfied with any of his women or if they are too sexual for him, he destroys them. Such is the fate of, for example, Miss Pelican Beak.

Head complicates power through characters such as Sello the monk or Maru who are used to illustrate the link between good and evil. Through these characters Head demonstrates the fragility of the division between good and evil by suggesting that the two elements can exist in an individual simultaneously. Head suggests this fragility through the demonstration that the problem with power is that one might not be aware at what point it becomes used for evil. Although Maru's main reason for abdicating from power is to be with his Masarwa wife, it is clearly also a refusal to continue to be a part of an oppressive tradition. His action allows him to avoid the trap of power into which characters such as Matenge in *When Rain Clouds Gather* have clearly fallen. By abdicating and marrying a woman from the despised tribe, Maru illustrates a sensitivity which demonstrates his acceptance of the humanity of the Masarwa. Maru's sensitivity, gentleness and humility are however broken by 'vicious, malicious moods', so that every word he utters can be as 'sharp as a knife intended to grind and re-grind the same raw wound' (*Maru* 8). This picture of Maru links with the earlier Maru who used whatever means he could, spying, chicanery, threats and manipulation to have his way.

Additionally, Head tackles spiritual power and through a demonstration of its complexities, illustrates how it can be misused and become a source of pain and suffering. In Elizabeth's view, which clearly represents Head's outlook, the existence of an omniscient God in the heavens who not only sits in judgment of humanity, but also

jealously guards his power, is the cause of man's desire for and abuse of power because man imitates this god. Through Elizabeth, Head concludes that such a god is the cause of human suffering just as much as are 'personalities in possession of powers or energies of the soul' (*A Question of Power*, 190). Elizabeth's experiences at the orphanage show how religion and religious power are abused. The attitude of the missionary who tells Elizabeth about her mother's 'insanity' contradicts the Christian claim to be compassionate. The principal's callous inhumanity demonstrates how, like political power, religious power can be similarly misused. Head reinforces her mistrust of religion when, in spite of her admiration for Buddhist philosophy, Elizabeth accuses Buddha of spiritual arrogance in *A Question of Power*. In the final analysis Head's work argues that abuse of power crosses all race, class, gender and religious borders.

Head's novels are not limited to expositions of instances of abuse of power and the pain inflicted on the oppressed. Head challenges abuse of power through illustration of situations when power has been enabling. Head views positively the use of power to serve ordinary people. Through Moleka, Maru and Dikeledi in *Maru*, and Tom, Sello the monk and Eugene in *A Question of Power*, Head demonstrates enabling uses of power. In *Maru*, by offering Margaret an alliance, the three most distinguished people in Dilepe, demonstrate how power can be interpersonal and enabling. As a result of their intervention in Margaret's life, Maru, Moleka and Dikeledi contribute to her and her people's acts of self-liberation in Dilepe. The social position of these friends demonstrates, as Olaogun notes, the possibility of changing society from the inside (Olaogun 1994: 81). They use their royal power and influence to challenge traditional Batswana beliefs and practices

against the Basarwa. Significantly, this always involves the giving away and abdication of power. And what Head is suggesting is that power must only be used to destroy power.

Contrary to the socio-cultural belief that denies the Basarwa humanity, Dikeledi very quickly offers her friendship and support to Margaret. She realises and accepts that she can learn from her Mosarwa friend: "Why," Dikeledi thought. "She has changed my life. I am becoming a more sincere person" (*Maru*: 105). In addition, Dikeledi pays her Basarwa slaves regular wages. Moleka's contribution, which according to Maru is contemptible because it does not question the principle behind slavery, is to eat with his Basarwa slaves at his table (*Maru*: 48). Rather than accept the chieftaincy, a position which would entail safeguarding and defense of Batswana traditions and practices, Maru abdicates, marries a Mosarwa woman and goes away to live an ordinary man's life. By virtue of his royal position, his marriage to Margaret is a powerful social statement and a positive use of political position. Although, as Ravenscrosft rightly points outs, the choice to take his wife away from Dilepe undermines his contribution to social transformation (Ravenscroft 1976), his action nonetheless challenges society's perceptions of the Basarwa as well as the Basarwa's perception of themselves.

Eugene similarly illustrates positive use of power in *A Question of Power*. Eugene's privileged background means that he has acquired knowledge and skills not accessible to many of the Batswana. When he comes to Botswana he uses his knowledge to help change the socio-economic status of the Batswana. As well as teaching traditional subjects, the secondary school he opens trains young men in practical skills capable of sustaining them

economically. More importantly, Eugene introduces and takes responsibility for a local industries project aimed at developing rural Motabeng and improving the socio-economic lives of the ordinary people. This interest is not just communal. Eugene's concern for individuals is expressed after Elizabeth loses her job. By allowing Elizabeth to participate in the gardening scheme of the local industries project, Eugene unknowingly saves Elizabeth from mental fragmentation. Eugene's use of his power to help Elizabeth during a desperate moment, demonstrates his concern and interest in ordinary people. Head's approval of such use of power is reflected in the fact that by providing Elizabeth with a job and a home, Elizabeth's mental health, which was deteriorating as a result of the stressful conditions at school, stabilizes. The involvement in the garden and the responsibilities this entails contribute to save Elizabeth from total mental collapse. Her responsibilities and commitment at the vegetable garden and jam-making industry play a role in the maintenance of Elizabeth's mental well-being. At the garden, her friend Kenosi's understanding and support also help Elizabeth's mental balance.

In addition, Tom, the volunteer peace corp, uses his power for perceptive analysis to help Elizabeth conquer Dan. By sharing his discerning insight, Tom successfully points out that Dan is an untruth. Tom's focus and reflection on Elizabeth's different brand of power expressed through her love for everything, including the vegetables, helps her triumph over Dan and overcome her bondage so that Elizabeth's 'soul journey into hell' comes to an end. It is this capacity to overcome such abusive power that leads to a profound reflection on the nature of victimhood:

> The victim is really the most flexible, the most free person on earth. He doesn't have to think up endless laws and endless falsehoods. His jailer does that. His jailer

> creates the chains and the oppression. He is merely presented with it. He is presented with a thousand and one hells to live through, and he usually lives through them all. (84)

This view explains why, though she descends into madness several times, ultimately Elizabeth lives through the power-seeking tortures imposed on her and emerges triumphant at the end of the novel.

Conclusion

Though Head's work is contradictory at times, it nonetheless demonstrates activism against apartheid and patriarchy. Her novels demonstrate a concern with the negative impact of apartheid on black people. Additionally they address patriarchy's oppression of women. Through a dramatization of the pain inflicted by apartheid's oppressive policies, which is analogous to patriarchy's treatment of the female sex, Head demands a humane and just society. She demands a world in which the different people of Southern Africa can live in harmony. The racial variety of Head's characters, which supports the claim that she writes for all, also demonstrates the complex yet rich heritage of Southern Africa and illustrates the possibility of harmonious existence within difference. By creating mini-universes through the agricultural projects in *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power* where people of different genders, classes and races work together, Head challenges the horrendous cruelty and intolerance of apartheid and sexism.

Although she declares herself a non-feminist, Head's concern with the issue of women remains one of the central preoccupations in her texts. Women form the core of her

explorations of the issue of good versus evil. The texts expose the dilemmas of women's existence in both South Africa and Botswana. Through her portraits of strong, resilient women, Head challenges their subjugated position and claims their humanity as important members of society. Her stories demonstrate that in spite of their oppression and marginalization, black women have held on and survived the hideous persecutions of society.

The broader thesis of Head's narratives however remains her rejection of abuse of power in all its forms and she claims equality between all humans. Through her ideal of a universal humanity and vision of a harmonious universe which she recreates through the mini-universes of the agricultural projects, Head's narratives demand a valuing of people, including ordinary people 'with bare feet' (*A Question of Power*: 41) based on their capacity for compassion and love for others. Although her envisioned universe is utopian and therefore problematic, the message of her narratives is nonetheless urgent and pertinent. Her stories challenge and write against discrimination and devaluing of people on the basis of race, class, ethnicity and sex, structures created and supported by apartheid and patriarchy in Southern Africa.

CHAPTER TWO

AMA ATA AIDOO

Our lives too are simple songs that can be sung simply and ordinary tales that can be told ordinarily
('Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves': 33).

It is very possible for life on this earth to be good for us all (*Changes*: 111).

In this chapter I explore black womanhood from a West African perspective. Ama Ata Aidoo, a Ghanaian, focuses on the experiences of black women in Ghana but, in addition, she is concerned with the political, economic and social-cultural situation of modern Africa. Aidoo believes that the position of African women is interwoven with the liberation and development of the continent. One of only a few African women writers who have been interested in the link between Africans in Africa and black people in the diaspora, Aidoo's works explore Africa's history in an effort to understand the continent's present socio-political conditions.

Aidoo is one of Africa's most versatile writers. She is a dramatist, novelist, short storywriter, poet and essayist who also writes for children. Her writing career, which

started in mid-1960s, continues to date. Her work so far includes two plays; *The Dilemma of A Ghost* (1965) and *Anowa* (1970); two novels: *Our Sister Killjoy; or, Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint* (1966) and *Changes: A Love Story* (1991); two collections of short stories: *No Sweetness Here: A Collection of Short Stories* (1970) and *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* (1997); two collections of poetry: *Someone Talking to Sometime* (1985) and *An Angry Letter in January* (1992), and for children, *Birds and Other Poems* (1988) and *The Eagle and The Chickens and Other Stories* (1986). Aidoo has also published numerous essays, articles and reviews.

Given the range of Aidoo's creativity and output, it is impractical to examine all of her work in this chapter. My focus, which I base on her foregrounding of female experience from two extreme moments of pre-colonial and post-colonial Ghana will, therefore, concentrate on her most frequently produced play *Anowa* (1970), and her most recent novel, *Changes* (1991). Throughout the chapter nonetheless, I will make references to her other play, *The Dilemma of A Ghost,* her novel, *Our Sister Killjoy* and to some of the short stories in *No Sweetness Here.*

My argument in this chapter is that in the face of prevailing patriarchal beliefs and theories of black womanhood, Aidoo is committed to challenging and redressing misrepresentations of black women by foregrounding the erased realities of their lives. Through a focus on a range of female characters, she demonstrates the complex reality of the women's lives and experiences. Her texts illustrate how traditional culture, in collusion with colonialism, has relegated women to the borders of society. Texts such as *Anowa*,

Changes, *Our Sister Killjoy* and short stories such as 'Something to Talk About On The Way To The Funeral', 'In The Cutting Of A Drink' and 'The Message', demonstrate this peripheral status of women. Like Bessie Head in Southern Africa, however, Aidoo's focus is also on women's strength, determination and capacity to survive in spite of the oppressive socio-cultural conditions of their society.

Biography

Ama Ata Aidoo was born on 23rd May 1942 in the south central region of Ghana, then called the Gold Coast. Her father, an admirer of the educator Kwegyir Aggrey, believed that western education offered children, especially female children, an alternative way of life from the 'definite waste that was the sum of female lives' (*Sisterhood is Global*: 262). After junior school, Aidoo was sent to Wesley Girls High School in the Cape Coast. She was also influenced by an aunt who, having learnt to read and write a little in the local language, told her niece to 'get as far as you can into this education. Go until you yourself know you are tired. As for marriage, it is something a woman picks up along the way' (262).

Following high school, Aidoo studied the arts at the University of Ghana at Legon. There she distinguished herself as an undergraduate, first by winning a short story competition and also by staging her first play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* at the student theatre. Aidoo graduated from Legon in 1964 with a degree in English. Thereafter she became a research fellow at the university's institute of African studies. A creative writing fellowship at

Stanford University in California followed. She then taught literature at several universities and colleges in Europe, America and Africa. Aidoo has also travelled in Europe and Africa as writer. From 1982-83 she was minister of Education for Ghana. She resigned from her ministerial position as a result of her radical views in 1983 and was forced to live for some time in exile in the USA and Zimbabwe. On October 17, 2003, Ama Ata Aidoo was one of four Ghanaian writers honoured as Living Legends at the National Theatre of Ghana.

Africa: history and cultural beliefs

Africa and Africanness have always been fundamental to Aidoo's storytelling. In an interview with Adeola James, she says that she finds her 'commitment as an African, the need for [me] to be an African nationalist, to be a little more pressing. It seems there are things relating to our world, as African people, which are of a more throbbing nature in an immediate sense' (James 1990: 15). This concern is reiterated in an interview with Sarah Chetin: 'What I am basically interested in has not changed. I wish that Africa would be free, strong and organised and constructive, etc. That is basic to my concern as a writer'. (Interview by Chetin: 25.) Aidoo's concerns lead to explorations of the continent's historical past and post-independence present in her fiction. Unlike Africa's negritude writers such as Leopold Senghor, who put Africa on a pedestal, Aidoo does not romanticise Africa. Through frank and candid foregrounding of Africa's 'ghosts of the past', she links contemporary socio-economic and political problems in the continent with history when she says: 'I think that the whole question of how it was that so many of our people could be enslaved and sold is very important. I've always thought that it is an area that must be

probed. It probably holds one of the keys to our future' (James 1990: 20-21).

Although campaigning for a better Africa through analysis of history is not unique to Aidoo and in fact, links her with other African writers such as Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Aidoo's call for change is, in my opinion, more profound. I suggest this because she is one of the very few writers who recalls a horrific historical past which many Africans are unwilling to acknowledge and take responsibility for. The plays *The Dilemma of A Ghost* and *Anowa* evoke a history of slavery in which Africans are implicated. Other African writers who follow Aidoo's lead and deal with slavery as an African issue include Bessie Head in *Maru* (1971), Buchi Emecheta in *The Slave Girl* (1977) and Abdulrazak Gurnah in *Paradise* (1994).

In *The Dilemma of a Ghost* Aidoo explores the feelings of a significant number of African-Americans who decided to return to Africa at the beginning of the 20th century. The play illustrates these people's dilemma upon their arrival when many discovered that the reality of 'home' was different from the imagined homelands in their minds. *The Dilemma of A Ghost* tells the story of Eulalie, an African-American woman who falls in love with and marries a young African man called Ato Yawson who has been studying in America. When the time comes for Ato to return home, Eulalie comes with him. The decision to go with Ato is not only because she hopes to find marital happiness, but also because she wants 'to belong to somewhere again' (*The Dilemma of A Ghost*: 9). The idea of wanting to belong 'somewhere again' articulates feelings of alienation, of 'not belonging' experienced by the original slaves and their descendants in America.

When Eulalie gets to Africa things are not as she imagined them to be. Although this is partly because her image of Africa is based on 'tourist brochure' imagery (9), it is mostly because Ato, her link with the African culture into which they come, fails her as her guide and husband. He does not explain his people's ways of life to his wife nor does he try to make his family understand Eulalie's background to enable her integration into their community. Clearly viewing himself as progressive, he embraces a western world-view and dismisses the socio-cultural beliefs and practices of his people. For instance, when Eulalie expresses anxiety that 'the whole lot of them [Ato's family] will be coming to see us' (30), rather than use the opportunity to familiarise her with Ghanaian concepts of family, marriage and community, which would help in her process of integration, Ato suggests that they go to see a recently built Methodist School instead. The decision to go to see an institution of education demonstrates Ato's linking of himself with progress and development. Simultaneously, it amounts to distancing himself from his traditional culture which, due to his American education, he sees as backward and non-progressive. Such a view articulates, in my opinion, the weakness of the colonised that Fanon identifies in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In Fanon's view, the consequence of the colour prejudice against black people is their feelings of inferiority, fear, non-existence and of a desire to escape their blackness by adopting western culture and/or acquiring western material things (Fanon 1952: 139).

Ato's lack of strength in fact parallels Kofi's in *Anowa*. For both men, their weakness comes into high relief when juxtaposed against the strength of the women around them. In the case of *Anowa*, Kofi's moral weakness contributes to the tragic end of the play while in

The Dilemma of A Ghost, as a result of Ato's lack of openness, Eulalie fails to understand and appreciate the different world-view of her husband's community and that community is not told about Eulalie's American culture. She views the traditional practices and food of his society as primitive and barbaric and hangs on to the luxuries and comforts of her American life. Her failure to adjust makes it difficult for her husband's people to understand and accept her. Thus even though she comes to a society based on communal existence, it is only at the end that she is taken in by her mother-in-law.

Yet Eulalie's dilemma is not only due to Ato's weakness. Aidoo shows that the community also plays a role in her predicament. They castigate her as 'daughter of slaves', a 'wayfarer' (19). After Ato announces that his wife is descended from slaves, the reaction to her origins demonstrates the stigma still attached to slavery: 'The men get up with shock from their seats. All the women break into violent weeping' (18). Ato's mother, Esi Kom, besides herself with grief, walks around in 'all attitudes of mourning' (18), as the rest of the women wearing expressions of 'horror and great distress' listen to Nana's mournful lament 'My grand-child has gone and brought home the offspring of slaves...A slave I say' (19). Through such scenes, Aidoo illustrates some of the dilemmas faced by the freed black people who chose to come back to Africa. She demonstrates the feelings of alienation they were confronted with in their new communities. Aidoo suggests that their inability to try to understand the ways of their chosen societies, as well as the prejudiced reaction of the African communities, played a role in their failure to integrate socially.

The circumstances that led to Eulalie's presence in America are explored more fully in

Aidoo's second play, *Anowa* (Odamtten 1994). A play described by Banham (1991) as 'a fierce allegory on the contemporary exploitation of man by man' (8), *Anowa* recounts the story of a young woman named Anowa who decides to marry Kofi, a lazy lay-about who has done nothing to prove his manhood and claim his place in the society. When Anowa announces her decision to marry him, the community and her family, especially her mother Badua, are horrified. Yet Anowa defies them and marries Kofi. Later, she convinces him to make something of his life and together they leave Yebi and engage in a very successful long-distance trade in skins. After a couple of years, they acquire so much wealth that their fame spreads. Yet Kofi is dissatisfied with their fortune and decides to engage in the even more profitable trade in slaves. Although Anowa is fervently opposed to the idea of slavery, by virtue of his maleness, Kofi has his way. Starting with only a few, he buys many 'men and women', trades them to the 'white men' (93) and eventually becomes 'the richest man, probably, of the whole Guinea Coast' (104).

It is important to note that McCarthy (1983) documents the existence of two kinds of slaves in the Gold Coast before European presence; kinship slaves and foreign-born slaves. The Fanti culture of long-distance trading produced a wealthy class of people called *abirempon* whose affluence, like Kofi's, was reflected in the number of retainers they possessed (McCarthy 1983: 17). Kinship slaves were acquired when an economically impoverished man or family in the society offered their services in return for economic support, or, in extreme cases, a family would 'pawn' one of its members to an *abirempon* friend or relative as bond for money borrowed in an arrangement that promised his/her release after the debt was fully paid. Foreign born slaves on the other hand, were acquired as a result of war. The

observation McCathy (1983) makes about the existence of slavery before European presence on the Gold Coast, is a point that I believe Aidoo also makes in *Anowa*. Part of the play is set in a rural environment, which has not as yet been influenced by European culture. When the people hear that Kofi is making a tremendous fortune from his 'trade in humans', nobody actively challenges the moral principle of his action. Rather, they overlook the social exclusion they had imposed on him and which contributed to his and Anowa's leaving Yebi and claim him back as their son by celebrating his achievement.

Aidoo illustrates the callousness of slavery by indicating that children were not spared. She demonstrates this through the narrative of the eight-year-old twin boys Panyin-na-Kakra, who are part of Kofi's household in Oguaa. The play illustrates the senselessness and abuse of slavery through the children's job, which is to fan Kofi's empty gilded chair. When Anowa asks the twins where they come from, they can only remember their previous place of bondage, Tantri. Beyond living at Tantri they have no recollection of their roots. Such a situation resonates with the experiences of Yusuf in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* (1994), who as a young boy believed that Aziz, a long distance-trader, was his rich uncle rather than a merchant his father owed money to and who would one day take him as bond for his father's debt. The fact that these children are bonded to African men challenges commonly held ideologies, especially amongst Africans, that slavery was only a trade in African people by Europeans. In other words, the portrayal of Panyn-na-Kakra in *Anowa* like that of Aziz in *Paradise,* confronts the reader with the reality that Africans are implicated in the continent's history of slavery.

While Aidoo suggests that slavery existed in the Gold Coast before the arrival of white people, she also illustrates the impact of European presence on the practice. *Anowa* demonstrates how the Africans developed a mercantilist attitude towards slaves which I believe was in order to feed a desire for consumer goods. For instance when Anowa suggests that they should not get involved in slavery, Kofi argues 'What is wrong with buying one or two people to help us? They are cheap...Everyone does it...does not everyone do it?' (90). As a result of his slave trading, the house at Oguaa is full of foreign furniture and crockery, rich and opulent accessories, in addition to the pictures of Queen Victoria and of Kofi, which sit side by side above the absurd fireplace.

As Innes (1995) rightly points out, Aidoo links capitalism and the desire for consumer goods and material wealth to Africa's horrendous history of slavery and class divisions (10). Hence although Anowa is set at the end of the 19th century, the period of British colonisation of the Gold Coast, yet the time span of the play remains one of the most fluid of Aidoo's works. Time is blurred and action slips and shifts from the time Europeans first started to trade with Africans on the Gold Coast to the time of the need for cheap labour when sugar and cotton plantations were being established in the Caribbean and the Americas in mid-15th century (Ward 1958; Kimble 1963; Daku 1972; Ajayi, 1974 and McCathy 1983), through to the time after independence when many African leaders were felt to have let their people down by displaying an attitude which conflicted with the promises of nationalism made during the fight against colonialism. Thus read as a criticism of African leadership, the play exposes a cancerous materialism that quickly spread among African leaders and in the process eroded the continent of some of its socio-cultural values.

In fact, Aidoo carries the action of the play through to these post-colonial times, when, in addition to the legacies of 'our bigger crime' such as the forts at Elmina and the black people in the black diaspora, the dysfunctional economies and violent political situations of many African countries act as reminders. Accordingly, Chew (1977) describes *Anowa* as a 'keen reading of history' and an 'unflinching recognition of social responsibility' (39).

Spirituality: exploring the ancestral

Aidoo's interest in Africa and African issues not only relates to history, it includes an examination of the spiritual beliefs and practices of her people. Like Erna Brodber and Olive Senior, she writes from inside her community and by exploring her people's world from the inside, she illuminates their worldview. A vital aspect of African worldview, which Aidoo illustrates and which links her with Bessie Head, is the people's belief in the intermingling of the spiritual world with the physical. This is a point which, in *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), John Mbiti makes when he says: 'the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other' (74). Aidoo's narratives, especially the two plays, illustrate this link through the characters everyday actions and speech, which not only acknowledge the nearness of spirits but also illustrate the people's care not to offend them.

According to Mbiti, there are different categories of spirits: those expressed through natural phenomenon, those created as a race of spirits and those that were once human. Even though the world of the spirits and the physical blend into each other, spirits 'belong

to the ontological mode of existence between God and man' (Mbiti 1969: 74), and as such, they are generally feared and people try as much as possible to keep away from them. Mbiti suggests that this fear is especially so with spirits of those that died a long time ago and are no longer remembered by anyone living and whose spirits appear to humans only through dreams and possession (Mbiti 1969: 80).

Spirits of those recently dead, referred to as the 'living-dead' are the ones the people are more concerned with. Although they can also appear through dream and possession, they are believed to be physically visible and are identifiable by name. According to Mbiti (1969), 'it is through the living-dead that the spiritual world becomes personal to men' (80). The living-dead are the spirits who mediate between God and the people because, by virtue of their recent death, they can still speak the language of the people, while death means they can also speak the language of God/gods. These spirits constantly return to the people because they are still concerned and interested in their families and they are the ones called upon to mediate on behalf of the people in times of need. Despite their propinquity and necessity, the people also fear them. They are feared because the people believe that they can take revenge if offended. For instance, if someone was improperly buried or was affronted in anyway before her/his death, the people fear that her/his spirit might want revenge (Mbiti 1969: 83). Frequent visitations from the spirits are therefore undesirable and Mbiti suggests that although the food and libation offered to spirits symbolise hospitality and welcome, they also ask the spirits to leave (82). In other words, the spirits are 'wanted and yet not wanted' (Mbiti 1969: 83).

While her texts demonstrate the significance of spirits and spirituality to Ghanaians, Aidoo also conveys some of the complexities Mbiti underlines. Her work captures the people's paradoxical view and attitude. Both *Anowa* and *The Dilemma of A Ghost* demonstrate the need as well as the fear of spirits. In addition, they illustrate women's place in the spiritual aspect of the people's lives. The significance and nearness of the spirits to the people is conveyed, for instance, through spiritual invocations by the characters in both plays. Aidoo portrays this as taking place when the characters are anxious or afraid. This in my view conveys the people's dependence on, and belief in, the spirit's proximity to themselves. For instance, when Ato's family learns of Eulalie's background in *The Dilemma of A Ghost,* Ato's grandmother Nana wishes her 'spirit mother' had come to take her into the spirit world before Ato returned home with a wife descended from slaves (19). Nana suggests that she would have escaped the duty of explaining the curse Ato had brought on the family to the ancestors when she says:

> My spirit Mother ought to have come for me earlier.
> Now what shall I tell them who are gone? The daughter
> of slaves who come from the white man's land
> Someone should advise me on how to tell my story
> My children, I am dreading my arrival there.
> Where they will ask me news of home.
> Shall I tell them or shall I not?
> Someone should lend me a tongue
> Light enough with which to tell
> My Royal Dead
> That one of their stock
> Has gone away and brought to their sacred precincts
> The wayfarer!
> They will ask me where I was
> When such things were happening
> O mighty God. (19)

Nana's lament not only illustrates the people's belief in the proximity of the spiritual realm with the physical, it also conveys the spirits' reverenced status and therefore, nearness to

God, but also the social necessity for living right, taking care not to offend the spirits. Such necessity is also emphasised by Cissy's mother in Olive Senior's story 'Discerner of Hearts'. In addition, the lament illustrates Nana's link, as an elderly member of the Odumna clan, with the spiritual world. It suggests that by virtue of her age, she is the link between the ancestors, the people and the society's future generations; she is 'ethical advisor' but also 'spokesperson to the ancestors' (Wilentz 1992: 52). Such a portrayal links Nana with the Old Man and Old Woman in *Anowa* whose position as elders in the community, similarly associates and endows them with the authority of ancestral spirits. Nana's fear of the idea that upon her death and entry into the spiritual world the spirits will ask her some hard questions regarding Eulalie's presence amongst the people clearly conveys her awareness of her role and responsibility as oldest member of society. Esi Kom similarly conveys the people's belief in the nearness, concern and interest of spirits in the lives of the living and the necessity for living a life that does not affront them. After Ato beats Eulalie she reproaches his action and says:

> And we must be careful with your wife
> You tell us her mother is dead.
> If she had any tenderness,
> Her ghost must be keeping watch over
> All which happen to her... (52)

Esi Kom's advice here expresses the people's belief in retribution from slighted spirits.

The story of Anowa's birth further illustrates the people's need and dependence on spirits. When after several miscarriages, Badua continues to give birth to children who do not live beyond one day the family seek spiritual help through consultations with priestesses. Eventually, she is able to preserve the life of her last child, Anowa. The significance of the

spirits is once again conveyed through Kofi, who as soon as he and Anowa leave Yebi, seeks spiritual help through protective 'medicines'. According to traditional belief, protective medicines work by harnessing the powers of good spirits which then work against the malice of the jealous who also use spiritual forces such as witchcraft to harm others.

However, as well as spirits being needed by the people, they are also feared, and Aidoo conveys this paradoxical situation in both plays. For example, Nana's fear of retribution from Eulalie's mother's spirit in *The Dilemma of A Ghost* echoes the people's fear of Anowa in *Anowa*. Her individuality and assertive attitude, which in the community's view, demonstrates her difference from other girls and women is linked to her birth. As a spirit-child one of the consequences of her birth is fear of her. Due to her link with spirits, the community is cautious when dealing with her. Osam expresses the community's fear when he tells his wife Badua that: 'This child of yours...She was never a child in the way a child must be a child... I have always feared her' (91). Thus the only way to deal with Anowa's difference, he thinks, is to send her back to serve the spirit world and Osam suggests that they apprentice her to a priestess. But Badua opposes this proposition. She refuses to allow her daughter to be apprenticed to a priestess and her refusal is in spite of the 'glory' and 'dignity' she attributes to priestesses. I believe that Badua's reasons convey a paradoxical attitude towards spirits and their messengers when she says: 'I respect them, I honour them...I fear them. Yes, my husband, I fear them...But in the end they are not people. They become too much like the gods they interpret' (71). Badua's analysis here fits in with Mbiti's (1969) findings when he suggests that at the peak of spirit possession, 'the

individual in effect loses his own personality and acts in the context of the 'personality' of the spirit possessing him' (80-81). I suggest that it is this take-over of her daughter that Badua fears in *Anowa*.

Badua's fears are clearly based on the idea that, regardless of their closeness to people, spirits are 'invisible, ubiquitous and unpredictable' (Mbiti 1969: 80). As a result, the people prefer to keep away from them. Mbiti suggests that people do not desire a constant presence of the spirits because of fear of 'unsolicited' possession. They are afraid that wandering spirits might decide to take up residence in a human being against the person's will. This form of possession contrasts with the deliberately induced form which the Jamaican, Erna Brodber, portrays and celebrates in her novels. Brodber's work demonstrates that purposely-encouraged spirit possession is always beneficial to the people in that it imparts important information, warns or heals. Unsolicited possession on the other hand, can have a negative effect. It can cause torment to both the person and family through disease, by driving the person away from the community or causing them to inflict injury on their own body or that of others.

Although Anowa does not get apprenticed to a priestess, she nonetheless experiences spiritual possession through dream. In this play, Aidoo demonstrates that, like madness and possession, dreams are a form of spiritual communication and an important source of information and knowledge for the people. This view is shared with many other black people across the black diaspora. For instance, in Jamaica, Brodber demonstrates this point in her novels *Myal* (1988) and *Louisiana* (1994), where the possessions of some members

of community are used for healing and exorcism. In Southern Africa, Bessie Head similarly demonstrates the significance of possession and madness to the people in her novels *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973).

In *Anowa*, Aidoo weaves history, the people's spiritual beliefs and the situation of women together to foreground alternative ways of knowing. She locates women in spiritual roles which she suggests are crucial for the stability and well-being of society and by locating women in these pertinent roles of spirituality, Aidoo questions those ideologies that devalue women's contributions to society. One of the issues the play illustrates is that erasure or rejection of spiritual information affects not just the person entrusted with its delivery, but also society at large. From a conversation Anowa has with her grandmother, she learns of the horrors of slavery and of her people's role in the trade. And as Elizabeth in Head's *A Question of Power* gains knowledge through dream, Aidoo portrays Anowa as being similarly informed when in the night she has a dream:

> I dreamt that I was a big, big woman. And from my insides were huge holes out of which poured men, women and children. And the sea was boiling hot and steaming. And as it boiled, it threw out many, many giant lobsters, boiled lobsters, each of whom as it fell turned into a man or a woman, but keeping its lobster head and claws. And they rushed to where I sat and seized the men and women as they poured out of me, and they tore them apart, and dashed them to the ground and stamped upon them. And from their huge courtyards, the women ground my men and women and children on mountains of stone. But there was never a cry or a murmur; only a busting, as of a ripe tomato or a swollen pod. And everything went on and on and on. (106-7)

Phillips (1994) points out that a Eurocentric perspective would explain Anowa's dream experience in terms of dreams as 'aberrant fragments of experience which may elucidate problems previously encountered in waking life' (90). Aidoo on the other hand, suggests

that Anowa's dream is more than a consequence of her earlier conversation with her grandmother. Its portrayal and reception, especially by the women around Anowa, shows the seriousness with which dreams are received. The terror and panic expressed by the women and their determination to silence Anowa illustrates the link made between dreams and spiritual communication. It illustrates the reality with which dream information is perceived and held. Portrayed as a 'big woman', clearly a representation of Mother Africa, Anowa is shown her people being cruelly torn from their origins and mercilessly killed by giant lobsters who represent European slave traders. Such revelation makes Anowa a medium for spiritual communication. Like the prophets in the Old Testament who were given visions through dream, Anowa's is similarly shown a vision of the horror and pain of enslavement, and as spiritual medium her role would be to pass on her dream information of warning against slavery. Yet, when she tries to tell the women of her dream, it is rejected: 'When I told my dream, the women of the house were very frightened. They cried and cried and told me not to mention the dream again' (*Anowa* 106-7). The idea that they silence Anowa, prohibiting her from ever mentioning the dream again, not only conveys their knowledge and fear of the nearness of the spirits, it is in essence also a desire to wish the horror the dream foretells away, and by implication, a compliance with the oppressive status quo.

The reality of dreams and dream knowledge to people is suggested through the idea that because Anowa's message is stifled, disaster follows. According to Boston Soko (1992), failure to deliver a message from the spirits is catastrophic. It can result in social calamity, madness and/or death of the person entrusted with the delivery. Aidoo's portrayal of the

consequences of Anowa's silence locates her within this belief. Because she fails to pass on the warning against slavery from the spirits, the play ends with an insane Anowa who kills herself.

The significance of dreams to Africans is not only reflected in *Anowa*. Aidoo first emphasises dream messages in *The Dilemma of A Ghost*. When the protagonist, Ato, tells his uncle Petu of an afternoon dream he just had of a boy and girl singing the song of a lost ghost in their courtyard, Petu is concerned. Concern turns to worry when Ato says: 'But Uncle, the boy looked like me when I was a child' (30). From his reaction, Petu clearly believes that Ato is in danger. He believes that an evil spirit is trying to possess his nephew because traditionally ghosts are linked with and always suggest evil. And because the proximity of the dream-scene, their courtyard, brings this evil very close to home, Petu proposes to seek grandmother's insight into the significance of the dream. Such a portrayal in my view conveys the seriousness with which Ghanaians and African people in general, regard dreams.

A significant point made through Ato's dream is that dream information can be personal, just as it can be aimed at the whole society as in *Anowa*. Ato's portrayal is of his circumstance as an educated person in a traditional setting. The road to the old port of Elmina signifies age-old traditions while the road to Cape Coast, a new and modern city, signifies modernity. The presence of the ghost at the crossroads who is torn between going to either place, therefore reflects his personal dilemma and the complexity of his situation. Unfortunately Ato fails to decipher his dream and in my view, this reflects his inability to

deal with either his African heritage or the consequences of a Westernised education.

African oral tradition

Aidoo's concern with Africa is further reflected in her interest in the oral traditions of the continent. One of the arguments Frantz Fanon presents in his book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), is that the worst and most hideous effect of colonialism is its attack on the spirit of the colonised. As a result of colonial indoctrination, especially through its agents, Christianity and western education, many Africans have perceived the traditions and practices of pre-colonial Africa as inferior to the culture and education brought by the colonialists and missionaries. Thus even the oral traditions of the people were relegated to an inferior status in comparison with the written word. Oral literature was regarded as an early phase in the development of a people's artistic intellect (Aidoo: interview by McGregor 1967: 23).

Aidoo challenges such views by drawing extensively from the rich archive of Africa's oral tradition. In my opinion, this is a way of validating Africa and its oral heritage and cultures, as well as a means of claiming Africa's space within global literature. Like Senior, who acknowledges the influence of her African ancestry in her storytelling (*Callaloo* 36, 1988: 480), or of Buchi Emecheta who credits her aunt with influencing her creativity ('Feminism with a small 'f': 1988). Aidoo similarly acknowledges her mother and society as influences on her writing. In an interview with McGregor in *African Writers Talking* (1972), Aidoo says the play *Anowa* is 'more or less a rendering of a kind of ...legend, because, according

to my mother, who told me the story, it is supposed to have happened. The ending is my own and the interpretation I give to the events that happen is mine' (23). And in an interview with Sarah Chetin, Aidoo says that *Anowa* is 'a weaving together of many tale motifs' and that the disaster that characterises the play is based on a Ghanaian story where a domestic dispute deteriorates into 'a public washing of dirty linen' which eventually destroys the marriage (Chetin 1987: 24). The reworking of a community story and legend to create her own story makes Aidoo, like the women before her, a storyteller. She is a storyteller who employs her society's orature in her writing to create a new form of art which Wilentz calls 'performance oraliterature' (Wilentz 1992: 40), through which she addresses issues such as the African history that created the diaspora, as well as the dilemma of women as repositories of culture and how they pass on, maintain, defend as well as challenge the traditional values and practices of their society. Aidoo's creation of a new story from an old tale she heard from her mother also illustrates how stories are 'passed down through generations of women' (Wilentz 1992: 42).

In African oral literature the storyteller's art is a combination of poetry, acting and narrative plot. And a close examination of Aidoo's work reveals it to be a synthesis of the elements of orature and community participation. For instance, the dilemma form that structures her two plays and two novels, the poetic and lyrical speech patterns of her characters such as the two Women in *The Dilemma of A Ghost*, of the Old Man in *Anowa*, Nana in *Changes*, and the dialogue in proverbs between Anowa and Kofi in *Anowa,* are rooted in orature, while her characterization illustrates the idea of community participation. In an interview with McGregor Aidoo expresses a desire to write not just for the reader but also for

listeners:

> If I had my way really what I would be interested in is a form of theatre where you don't only have to produce a play - where you can just sit down and relate a story...I believe that when a writer writes a short story, it should be possible for the writer to sit before an audience and tell them the story of a boy and a girl in Accra, or London, or Paris. (23-4)

Aidoo successfully achieves her aim through a blending of contemporary material with traditional and imported forms (Brown 1981). In both *The Dilemma of A Ghost* and *Anowa*, history is clearly an important element because Aidoo engages in a remembering and re-articulating of the usually silenced history of slavery. While *The Dilemma of Ghost* synthesises history with contemporary issues through Ato's dilemma as a modern Ghanaian negotiating traditional society, in *Anowa* Aidoo weaves history, traditional mythology and contemporary political issues. Both plays employ a traditional form of storytelling found in most parts of Africa. The concept of a chorus in the plays, which is representative of the community, draws from the participation of the audience in traditional story-telling sessions. I make this observation well aware that choruses were also a feature of ancient Greek tragedies and that Aidoo's western education exposed her to this tradition. Such exposure and influence in fact reinforce the argument regarding Aidoo's versatile synthesising of multiple elements in her art. In a typical traditional African storytelling session such as those undertaken in Malawi, a storyteller's art is always dependent on a present and participating audience. Although a storyteller can assume different characters in the story through change of voice intonation and actions, she/he can also ask members of the audience to act as different characters in the story. Most commonly however, the audience participates collectively through a memorized chorus chanted at specific intervals in the story telling.

Such audience participation in the two plays is represented by the Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper in *Anowa* and the Bird of the Wayside in *The Dilemma of A Ghost*. At different moments throughout the play, the chorus gives vital information which not only clarifies issues but also progresses the action in the plays. The chorus is able to offer these vital insights because as members of the community, as neighbours or as elders, they have immediate knowledge of the issues. Thus the Bird of the Wayside is able to comment on the problems in the Odumna clan from where Ato comes because they have 'seen and heard'. Or, as is the case with the community of old people represented by the Old Man and Old Woman in *Anowa*, by virtue of their age, these people have knowledge of the historical association between the Fanti and the white men. As elderly members of community, they are traditionally regarded as being close to the ancestors (Mbiti 1969), and as such, their speech is believed to be imbued with the wisdom and knowledge of ancestral authority.

In both plays the chorus speaks directly to the audience. In *The Dilemma of A Ghost,* the Bird of the Wayside starts by introducing itself:

> I am the Bird of the Wayside-
> The sudden scampering in the undergrowth,
> Or the trunkless head
> Of the shadow in the corner.
> I am an asthmatic old hag
> ...
> Or a pair of women, your neighbours
> Chattering their lives away. (7)

In the Prologue of *Anowa*, as would a traditional raconteur, the Old Man directly invites the audience into the performance at the beginning of the plays. After contextualizing the play

by laying the historical background of his community, he introduces the protagonists: 'But here is Anowa. And Kofi Ako' (68).

Anowa, an eponymous heroine who defies traditional practice by her refusal to marry any of the men chosen for her, contrary to the contention of Eldred Durosimi (1976: 142) who limits its origins to West Africa, draws from a common African folk tale of a daughter who faces disaster as a result of her disobedience. And as in the numerous versions of this folk tale where the life of the heroine ends in disaster, Anowa's similarly ends tragically. In some of the versions of this folk tale such as the ones I was told by my grandmother, the very handsome and/or very rich man the girl opts to marry turns out to be a monster, a hyena or a python, whose plan is to fatten up the girl before killing and eating her. Sometime after the marriage however, either a villager, a brother of the girl or the girl herself accidentally discovers that the husband is not human. He is caught metamorphosing from either monster to man or vice-versa at the river where he went to have a bath or in the farm fields where he presumes he is alone by a passer-by who calls other villagers to come and witness the act. In other versions of the story, the wife becomes suspicious of her husband and one day, pretending to sleep, she witnesses his transformation from human to monster or vice versa. The endings vary: in some she runs away, but in most she is eaten.

While the lesson in these tales is, as Griffiths points out, that young women should be obedient to men and elders (Griffiths 2000: 292), Aidoo challenges such sexist lessons by illustrating the patriarchal cause of Anowa's situation. Aidoo suggests that Anowa's disaster is a result of her defiance and determination to speak her mind in a society that

demands silence from women. Additionally, through the use of the two choruses, Old woman and Old man, in which the women's position supports the very tradition that oppresses her sisters, Aidoo challenges African women to a reappraisal of their role in female subjugation through an illustration of the extent of hegemonic power and how women eventually become their own worst oppressors.

Besides using African folk material, Aidoo also employs the traditional form of the dilemma tale in her creative art. As a woman, traditionally the maintainer and instructor of cultural values and traditions, she uses the dilemma structure to '"initiate and instruct" the young on the conflicts of modern African life and the diaspora' (Wilentz 1992: 45). Her plays, her short stories such as 'For Whom Things Did not Change', 'No Sweetness Here', as well as both novels, *Our Sister Killjoy* and *Changes,* all incorporate elements of the dilemma form. William Bascom (1975) describes dilemma tales as:

> Prose narratives that leave the listeners with a choice among alternatives...The choices are difficult ones and usually involve discrimination on ethical, moral, or legal grounds...Like many other African folktales, their content is often didactic, but their special quality is that they train those who engage in these discussions in the skills of argumentation and debate and thus prepare them for participating effectively in the adjudication of disputes, both within the family or lineage and in formal courts of law. (1)

According to Lloyd Brown (1981), 'The dilemma tale usually poses difficult questions of moral or legal significance. These questions are usually debated both by the narrator and the audience - and on this basis the dilemma is a good example of the highly functional nature of oral art in traditional Africa' (85). In *African Folktales* (1983), Roger Abrahams notes that African dilemma tales: 'throw the floor open to debate, demonstrating yet again that in the African context the function of story telling is to initiate as much as to instruct'

(16). Aidoo uses the form to engage her readers in political and moral debates with a view to awakening consciousness and changing attitudes. As in traditional dilemma narratives, she does not offer solutions to the difficult questions she poses. Rather Aidoo presents situations and calls her reader/audience/participants to make their own judgements from the information she provides.

While in the novels Aidoo employs the dilemma format through, for instance, the contradictory situation the characters find themselves in as a result of their education and/or the choices they make as individuals, in *The Dilemma of A Ghost* Aidoo uses it more literally. The title of the play is derived from a children's folk narrative of a pitiful ghost who wanders up and down a junction unable to decide which road to take: Elmina or Cape Coast. Aidoo shows that as an educated Ghanaian, like the ghost at the junction, Ato is unable to decide between his conflicting possibilities. He fails to balance between the requirements of traditional practice and culture as represented by his family and the new way of life expressed through his education, civil service career and choice of wife. As the ghost, Ato is mostly only able to answer 'I do not know'; 'nothing' or 'oh' to the questions his family ask him. For instance, when his mother asks him where Eulalie has gone after he beats her, his answer is: 'I do not know' (50). Earlier when he is asked what is wrong with Eulalie for her not to be pregnant so long into the marriage, rather than tell them the truth about their taking contraceptives, his answer is 'Nothing' (44). Ato's dilemma is his inability to honestly face and deal with his situation.

In *Changes*, Aidoo again employs the dilemma format to explore the conflict engendered

by mixing western ways with traditional life but here she also examines the difficulties created by mixing different African traditions and cultures. She explores such conflicts through the relationships between Esi Skeyi, a woman from southern Ghana, a Christian stronghold, who divorces her husband Oko and remarries Ali Kondey, a Muslim from northern Ghana; between Ali and Fusena; and between Kubi and Opokuya. By placing all the central characters in Accra, Aidoo illustrates the mingling and mixture of different traditions and cultural practices in modern urban Ghana. Like Ato, both Esi and Ali are educated and are similarly confronted with the complex situation of seeking to reconcile their modern lives as educated members of society with the cultural expectations of traditional custom. Like Ato, Esi's dilemma relates to negotiation between a modern way of life and tradition. As an ambitious government data analyst, Esi is faced with the complex choice of leaving husband Oko and finding more time for her career or staying on in an unhappy marriage because of the importance of marriage and motherhood to women's identity. Although her grandmother, mother and friend Opokuya advise her against it, Esi divorces Oko. Not very long after her divorce, she decides to become a second wife to Ali Kondey. Later when the marriage with Ali fails to work, Esi makes the choice not to annul it. The debate Esi's choices generate relates to social expectations from women, especially to the conflicting situation of old traditions which emphasise marriage and family life for women versus new ways of life in which women can have demanding professional careers.

In the case of Ali, Aidoo uses the dilemma structure to demonstrate Ali's situation as he also struggles to find a balance between his position as a modern educated man with a

demanding modern business and as a man who wants to participate in the pleasure of traditional polygamy. After making the choice to have two wives, Ali fails to balance and share his presence and emotions between the two households as required by traditional polygamous practice.

Modernity and tradition

In his book *Writing Against Neocolonialism*, (1986), Ngugi wa Thiong'o suggests that from the late 1940s, African writing has gone through three phases which he categorises as 'the age of anticolonial struggle; the age of independence; and the age of neocolonialism' (1). Such division, as Odamtten (1994) points out, 'not only charts the various histories of selected African writers, it also outlines the political tendencies that have marked the history of contemporary Africa' (6). Ngugi's own work, like that of Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah, reflects these phases in African writing. Aidoo's concern with the contemporary situation of Africa, locates her in the latter category of writing. Her work aligns her with the economic, political and cultural struggles of her people in contemporary Africa.

Aidoo's two plays, especially *Anowa,* and her novel *Our Sister Killjoy*, are concerned with nationalisms and the growing neo-colonialism of the 1960s and 70s (Odamtten 1994). A period addressed by African writers such as Ngugi in *Petals of Blood* (1977), *The Devil On The Cross* (1982) and *Matgari* (1987); Chinua Achebe in *No Longer At Ease* (1960) and James Ng'ombe in *Madala's Children* (1996), these writers' view was that many political

leaders had abandoned their rhetoric of national unity soon after independence and created class structures amongst the people as a result. Such divisions, which were based on political and economic power, illustrate the role played by Africans in Africa's neo-colonial situation.

To address the neo-colonial situation of Africa, Aidoo first forefronts the continent's history including the impact of colonization on the socio-cultural situation in Africa. For instance, in *Anowa* through Kofi's involvement in a western form of slavery, Aidoo not only demonstrates the mercantilist attitude Africans developed in relation to slavery, she also illustrates the growth of an enormous appetite for consumer goods in many Africans. Kofi's regal dress style, the grandeur and opulence of his house at Oguaa, attest to his consumerism. In addition, in stories such as 'For Whom Things Did Not Change' and 'Certain Winds From the South' Aidoo deals with the effects of colonisation on the traditional African society. 'Certain Winds From The South' illustrates how the presence of colonialism disrupted family life by calling African men to fight in western wars or forced them to seek work in the urban centres. When Mma Asana's son-in-law announces his intention to leave to seek work the following morning, Mma Asana recalls her own experience as a young wife when her husband left to become a soldier in the English army which was fighting the Germans. Believing her family to be ill-fated, Mma Asana knows that although the son-in-law promises to return, like her own husband, he will not.

In 'For Whom Things Did Not Change' Aidoo demonstrates how the presence of western cultures in Africa confused traditional gender roles in the society. She shows how women's

responsibility in the preparation of food is disrupted as a result of men getting jobs as domestics in white households. The story demonstrates how while African men had no difficulty in preparing European meals, they were unable to prepare traditional meals. In fact they considered the cooking of traditional meals women's work. Thus when the white master in 'For Whom Things Did Not Change' leaves his station and is replaced by a black *Massa*, there is a problem when the black master desires traditional food. Zirigu, the African cook, is unable to prepare them. He considers the preparation of traditional food beneath his masculine dignity.

The main focus of Aidoo's creativity however, is neo-colonialism. Her writing is especially concerned with the role of Africans in the circumstance of contemporary Africa. Her texts address African people's link with the socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic situation in modern Africa. She does not blame all Africa's problems on colonialism. Rather, she challenges Africans to a re-examination of their contribution to Africa's situation. Such a view is reinforced by the fact that except for *Our Sister Killjoy*, which she significantly sets in the west, there is no white presence in any of Aidoo's works. Even in *Anowa*, the play that explores slavery, there is only a mention of white men. They are not physically present in the text. Such detail is significant because it challenges the tendency to blame all of Africa's problems on foreign presence.

In *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Ato's background parallels the situation of a number of African men who were formally educated, sometimes in the west, so that they could take up leadership positions in their societies. The aim of the missionaries who educated these men

was so they would take up leadership through pastoral positions such as becoming priests and teachers. But as a result of African people's recognition of the advantages of education, when the time came to choose leaders in the struggle against colonialism or to become presidents of independent nation states, the people turned to these educated men. The first group of African leaders such Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, belonged to this category of people. As leaders, they were however felt to have eventually failed their people.

Ato's family sends him, at great cost, to study in the west. In his case the decision to send him to school is based on the social value and expectations placed on male children who, in their adulthood, are expected to become leaders and take charge of their clans. As such, family property and valuables are sold to finance Ato's education abroad. His sisters who represent the people, are kept at home because of lack of money for their school fees. In fact the whole family gets into financial debt funding his education overseas. Yet Ato does not meet the family expectations on his return from abroad. Like Kofi in *Anowa,* he is a weak man. His weakness results in his denigration of the traditional practices and beliefs of his people. Adopting a life of individualism, he does not take on any of the responsibilities expected of him once he returns and he allows his mother and sisters to continue to live in poverty even after they spent the family fortune to educate him.

In addition, Ato trivialises the traditional customs and practices which are important for the survival of the people as a group. He illustrates this by marrying without family consultation and approval but also through the decision not to have children. Ato's erasure

of his people's traditional practices suggests that he considers the ways of his people as inferior. This is further illustrated through his preference for the comforts of American life represented in the play by luxuries such as chilled coca-cola, gin and tonic. Through Ato's character Aidoo illustrates the role of many educated Africans in the denigration of their own traditions and cultural practices which has resulted in cultural poverty in many modern societies.

In *Anowa*, Aidoo directly addresses the responsibility of Africans for the economic state of modern Africa. The play illustrates how Kofi's riches only serve himself as the rest of the people, represented through Anowa in the play, continue to live in poverty. After they leave their village to start business as traders, Kofi and Anowa work together, as partners, through rain and storm as long-distance traders buying and selling skins. Although the success of their business is mainly a result of Anowa's agency and determination, when their hard work eventually pays off, she does not share in its profits. The old cloth she continues to wear and her bare feet which contrast with Kofi's rich dress, demonstrates the disparity in the share of profits. Although Anowa personally also refuses to share in what she considers as fruits of exploitation of others, it is clear that Kofi already also sees her not as an equal but below him because she is a woman. For instance, not only does he regard her opposition to slaves as woman's talk (90), he believes that she does not give him enough respect as a man: 'I don't think there is a single woman in the land who speaks to her husband they way you do to me' (113). As a subordinate in their relationship, her labour like that of the slaves becomes exploitable. In fact Anowa identifies herself as fellow 'wayfarer' with the slaves in the play: 'Mm, I am only a wayfarer, with no belongings either

here or there...What is the difference between any of your men and me? Except that they are men and I'm a woman?' (96-7).

Through the relationship between Kofi and Anowa, Aidoo portrays Africa's 'internal history of exploitation and class division' (Innes 1995: 10) and links it with the spirit of capitalism displayed by African leaders in contemporary Africa. As an allegory of African leadership, Kofi's character illustrates how African leaders have forgotten the unity of the period of the struggle for independence, represented through the co-work between Kofi and Anowa on the highway, and become exploiters and oppressors of their own people. By locating Africans in the African circumstance of exploitation and corruption, Aidoo links the issue of exploitation of the people by those in leadership with the economic impoverishment that continues to afflict modern Africa. And in *Our Sister Killjoy* she illustrates the solutions of some of Africa's disillusioned intellectuals to the economic imbalance of their nations. When Sissie visits London, she comes across several African professionals who are reluctant to return home preferring to live instead a life as second-class citizens in London (88).

In addition to raising the issue of African responsibility for the socio-economic problems of contemporary Africa, Aidoo examines the conflict of interest and priorities resulting when modernity meets with traditional culture. In *Changes*, Aidoo explores the relationship between the sexes in the light of that social change. While earlier in her career she had deemed love a trivial issue in the face of Ghana's political and economic problems (interview by McGregor 1972: 19), in *Changes,* Aidoo focuses on relationships between

women and men to demonstrate that 'social change can only be effective if it also involves change in the basis of personal relationships' (Griffiths 2000: 293). Hence from a gathering and mixing of different people from different generations, social statuses, backgrounds and ideologies, Aidoo explores how Ghanaian society has changed and demonstrates how that change affects people's relationships.

Changes portrays four male/female relationships and in all of these Aidoo illustrates the continuing patriarchal bias of modern society, with African men wanting to be in charge economically and sexually. The stories also demonstrate that while the men are free to seek the pleasures of both traditional and modern worlds, when the women try to do the same, they are pushed back and forced to retain traditional forms of identity. In the marriage between Esi and Oko, Aidoo illustrates how a woman's aspiration for professional success and individuality is met with resistance. When Esi desires freedom and the right to pursue and develop her professional career, Oko, her husband, accuses her of putting her career above what she owes him as his wife (8). To Oko, Esi's real roles as a woman are as his wife and mother to their child. Consequently, while he feels justified to pursue his career even if it means relocating to different towns (*Changes*: 69), he constantly complains about his loss of face with his friends as a result of Esi's independence. For instance, he tells her: 'My friends are laughing at me...They think I'm not behaving like a man' (8). His feelings of anger which, in my view, illustrate the imbalance in the relationship culminate in the sexual punishment he metes out on her.

Esi's response to Oko's oppressive attitude is to seek divorce. While the idea of divorce

portrays some of the realities of modern Ghana by illustrating that it is a fact of life amongst the new generation of Ghanaians, Aidoo also illustrates how modern women can insist on the right to their sexuality through Esi's decision to marry Ali. According to Esi's grandmother Nana, who gives a traditional perspective on male/female relationships in the novel, it was traditionally inconceivable for a woman to walk out of her marriage or to marry outside her culture. Hence, Esi's marriage to Ali, a Muslim from the north, illustrates, some of the changes resulting from modernity. What the marriage with Ali also proves, as Nana told her grandchild when she divorced Oko, is that relationships between men and women have always been fraught with problems. While the problem with the marriage with Oko was that Esi felt suffocated and needed space and time to be alone, the relationship with Ali proves to be lonely. A rich man who travels all over the world, he is portrayed as hardly present at her house and he substitutes his presence with expensive material gifts. In effect, while Oko demanded sexual control, Ali takes economic control and expects gratitude and satisfaction from Esi. Although she finds such a relationship unsatisfactory, yet when the relationship ceases to be a marriage in all but name, she decides not to annul it. Her decision relates to the fact that as a woman, society would want an 'explanation from her as to why she would want to destroy that marriage too' (165). Aidoo's portrayals of these relationships articulate the ongoing disparity in expectations of standards of behaviour between the genders in modern Ghana and through them she suggests that social change can be effective only if it starts at the level of relationships.

Being a woman

As well as her interest in Africa, Aidoo is concerned with the situation of African women. As such, like other black women from Africa and the Caribbean including Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Erna Brodber, Olive Senior, Grace Nichols and Zee Edgell, women and women's issues are an important part of her writing. Through the experiences of her female characters she examines the socio-cultural conditions, practices and beliefs which disadvantage and oppress women. In her essay 'To Be A Woman', Aidoo sums up the situation of women everywhere when she says 'The position of a woman in Ghana is no less ridiculous than anywhere else. The few details that differ are interesting only in terms of local colour and family needs' (Morgan 1984: 262).

According to Chimalun Nwanko (1986), 'Feminism challenges with justification, the secondary status of women in all societies' (151). Aidoo's narratives participate in this challenge because they address the inferior status of Ghanaian women in society. Like many other black women writers, her narratives re-write the lives of black women, thereby revealing the 'concealed histories' of women through her portraits of strong, determined and resourceful women who resist a variety of oppressions. Unlike African women writers such as Head, Nwapa and Emecheta who are reluctant to accept the label, Aidoo is a self-confessed feminist. In fact, as a result of African women's long-standing struggle for their identity and survival as women against patriarchy, colonialism and neo-colonialism, she has argued that African women were feminists before western women (*Index-on-Censorship* 9/1990: 18). Through fiction, she not only illustrates Ghana's oppressive socio-cultural conditions but also how Ghanaian women struggle against and

challenge these difficulties.

Aidoo's texts, like Head's, are inter-connected. While Head's connect thematically (Ravenscroft 1976), Aidoo's are linked in their exploration of categories of women. The plays, short stories and novels cover a range of ages and classes of Ghanaian women. In *Anowa* and *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Aidoo portrays rural women; young, middle-aged and elderly. In *Changes,* Esi, her friend Opokuya, and Fusena, represent modern educated urban Ghanaian women while Esi's mother and grandmother Nana represent rural traditional women. By portraying such a range of Ghanaian women, Aidoo not only demonstrates her commitment to the reality of women's lives (Ogundipe-Leslie 1987: 5-13), she also illustrates how women's experiences of oppressions and marginalization are not specific to a particular age, class or situation. By juxtaposing older and/or rural women with urban educated women Aidoo is able to not only contrast attitudes and perceptions, but also illustrate how the different categories of African women deal with their positions of marginality. What I am suggesting is that, in addition to demonstrating women's strength, determination and resistance to their oppression, Aidoo is not afraid to expose moments of difference and contradiction in women's lives. In exploring issues such as marriage and motherhood which are regarded as vital to women's identity not only in Ghana but in all the other black societies I am examining (Aidoo 1984; Senior 1991), Aidoo reveals the complex realities of Ghanaian women's lives.

In *Anowa*, the eponymous heroine is first encountered as a non-conformist young rural woman. Six years after puberty she remains unmarried and continues to refuse any of the

men who ask for her hand in marriage. The community considers Anowa's behaviour 'strange' and a sign that something is 'wrong' with her. In a society that considers a woman's full humanity to be attainable only through marriage and motherhood, Anowa's refusal to conform becomes a source of communal worry and is regarded as demonstrating her possible inhumanity. According to the Old Woman of the chorus and Badua, such behaviour is only tolerable in women who are priestesses, and in Badua's view, priestesses 'are not people. They become too much like the gods they interpret' (71). Thus, when Osam suggests that they should let Anowa become a priestess, Badua expresses horror and tells him that she wants her daughter to be human:

> I want my child
> To be a human woman
> Marry a man,
> Tend a farm
> And be happy to see her
> Peppers and onions grow.
> A woman like her
> Should bear children,
> Many children,
> So she can afford to have
> One or two die. (72)

Badua's view, which clearly echoes her society's, recognises women's humanity only in marriage and motherhood. By refusing to replicate her mother's and other women's lives in Yebi, Anowa is seen as threatening society's constructions of what makes women human.

Eventually Anowa does find a husband, but in a further demonstration of the limited view of society, Kofi is unacceptable to her family. Kofi, the young man she falls in love with and decides to marry, is unwanted by her family. Badua rejects him as lazy, but compounding this problem is a rumour of a history of mental illness in his family (*Anowa*:

75). Defying both parents and community, Anowa demonstrates her strength and independence of mind by going ahead with her marriage. I suggest that crucial to Anowa's character is her decision to stand against society's constraints on women. The refusal at first to be contained by marriage and later, the decision to choose her own husband, articulate a challenge to rigid tradition.

However, although Anowa and Kofi enjoy a marital relationship based on friendship and hard work for a while, soon Kofi starts to assert socially-sanctioned male authority. The freedom and intimacy of the relationship starts to wane when he decides to buy slaves. When Anowa points out the immorality of the decision to buy slaves, insisting they do not need them, Kofi retorts: 'If you don't, I do. *Besides you are only talking like a woman.* Anowa listen. Now here is something I am going to do whether you like it or not' (90 my emphasis). By suggesting that she is talking like a woman, Kofi trivialises their earlier companionship and implies Anowa's inferiority on the basis of her biology. In the words of Trinh Minh-ha, he regards Anowa's arguments against slaves as, 'nonsensical', 'women's talk' (Trinh T. Minh-ha 1997: 26-32). Later in the marriage Kofi further endeavours to control his wife through dress. As his wife, he wants Anowa to dress in a way that will reflect his affluence and social standing and deplores her insistence on wearing her old working clothes, which he suggests, make her (and by implication, him) a laughing stock (114).

In spite of her militancy, Anowa's later attitude in the play articulates some of the dilemmas of women trying to assert their individuality within traditional society. The arguments over

the slaves eventually provide Kofi with the opportunity to attack and criticise Anowa's womanhood. As Chew points out: 'What is "strong" in her is made to chime with 'strange,' and her spirited ways are dismissed as "restlessness" brought about by the absence of family ties' (Chew 1997: 40). Because African society always blames childlessness in a family on the woman, as Osam and The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper demonstrate in this play, Anowa also starts to believe that she is to blame for the lack of a child in the marriage (96). The lack of children, something that would traditionally give her identity as a woman, eventually leads to Anowa's identification with the slaves as fellow 'wayfarer' (96-7), and to the proposal that Kofi marries a second wife: 'Mm...children. It would be good to have them. But it seems I'm not woman enough. And this is another reason why you ought to marry another woman. So she can bear your children' (97). Anowa's acceptance of responsibility for the absence of a child in the marriage without medical evidence conflicts with the perceptive and foresighted character who proposes the long-distance trading that earns the couple their vast fortune.

Badua and the Old Woman are similarly strong and determined characters, although their strength contrasts with Anowa's. These women are portrayed supporting and reinforcing society's patriarchal ideology. The Old Woman is one of those most opposed to Anowa's behaviour. Her attitude towards the young woman illustrates a traditional view that supports a socialised marginalizing of women. Clearly, the mind-set of women like her is a consequence of their internalising a traditional delineation of femaleness and as a result, opposes anything they consider a violation of tradition. Their intolerance is clearly fed by their feelings of inadequacy as people, a condition brought on by patriarchy. Because

Anowa does not replicate their lives as a woman through, for instance, marriage to a man sanctioned by family and community, and because she fails to produce children, she is unwelcome in the community. Unlike the Old Man who displays an understanding of Anowa's situation and argues that her behaviour is not unique, the women are merciless in their condemnation. The Old Woman says Anowa

> thinks the world has not seen the likes of her before. I wonder what a woman eats to produce a child like Anowa. I am sure that such children are not begotten by normal processes...They issue from cancerous growths, tumours that grow from evil dreams. Yes, and from hard and bony material that the tender organs of ordinary human women are too weak to digest'. (101)

Relegating Anowa to the extremity of social marginalization, the Old Woman concludes that Anowa 'Is a witch. She is a devil. She is everything that is evil' (*Anowa*: 100).

The Old Woman echoes Anowa's mother, Badua, whose position is, in my view, similarly harsh. Badua is opposed to Anowa's independence and would rather Anowa replicate her own life. Although Badua's views tend to conflict with her own character, for instance in the way she constantly argues and asserts herself with her husband Osam while arguing for women's silence, through her, Aidoo demonstrates how unconscious the internalising of patriarchal beliefs can be, translating into acceptance of female inferiority.

Such portraits of women demonstrate that Aidoo is not confined to simplistically exposing injustices done to women by men. Rather, her works are canvases onto which she paints pictures of women at different moments of their lives. Her characters are women she has seen around, 'human women', 'some weak and some strong' (James 1990: 18). Aidoo's

commitment to truthfulness, pointed out in Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's (1987) article 'The Female Writer, and Her Commitment', is demonstrated through her depiction of women's participation in their own subjugated situation. Aidoo controversially demonstrates that conflict does not only occur across genders, but that it can be dangerously overt between members of one gender.

In *Changes*, a novel portraying life in modern Ghana, Aidoo explores the consequences of the choice a contemporary woman makes in relation to marriage. As in *Anowa*, *Changes* illustrates the significance of marriage to women's identity and humanity through the attitudes and actions of the women in the four marital relationships portrayed. In this novel Aidoo explores the significance of marriage through the relationships between Ali and Fusena, a union from the Islamic north; the marriage between Esi and Oko and between Opokuya and Kubi from the Christian south; and that between Esi and Ali, a union which illustrates the mixing and intermingling of cultures in modern Ghana. From these relationships, Aidoo demonstrates how modern women are caught in a dilemma as a result of raised individual choices and expectations, which are not always compatible with traditional views and practices. For instance, through Esi, Aidoo demonstrates that the traditional view and attitude towards marriage, especially the importance of marriage for women's identity, has not changed. In a discussion between Esi and Opokuya, Aidoo shows how society erases unmarried women because it supposes marriage the essence of women's lives:

> 'It is even more frightening to think that our societies do not admit that single women exist. Yet...'
> 'Single women have always existed here too...'
> 'Women who never managed to marry early enough...'

> 'Or at all. Widows, divorcees'...
> '...It is easy to see that our societies have had no patience with the unmarried woman. People thought her single state was an insult to the glorious manhood of our men. So they put as much pressure as possible on her -'
> '-until she gave in and married or remarried, or went back to her former husband.'
> 'And of course if nothing cured her they ostracised her and drove her crazy.'
> 'And then soon enough, she died of shame, loneliness and heartbreak.' (48)

Such is the threat facing Fusena in *Changes*. After she passed her examinations and was selected to go to college, the family and rest of the community tried to stop her by pointing out to her mother, Mma Abu, that it would delay her getting married. But like Anowa, Fusena had her way. However when at twenty-six Fusena was still unmarried the community was laughing at Mma Abu behind her back. As a last resort, Mma Abu went to consult the family *mallam* who, from reading from the Holy Book and through divination, assured Mma Abu that Fusena's time would come. Mma Abu, however, expresses her concern for Fusena's womanhood when she asks the mallam: 'And sir, when the time comes, would she not be too old to have children?' (*Changes*: 59). Mma Abu's concern echoes Petu and Nana in *The Dilemma of A Ghost* who suggest that the reason women marry is to have children. Nana tells her grandchild: 'Esi we know that we all marry to have children' (*Changes*: 42). When an influential and rich *alhaji* comes and asks to marry Fusena, everyone is relieved. Yet Fusena later breaks the arrangement and decides not marry the man. Mma Abu expresses her pain, anger, frustration and worry through tears while the other women help by scolding Fusena. The pain of this moment is however quelled when Ali proposes to Fusena. The importance of this marriage is conveyed through the whole community becoming involved in the preparations for the marriage celebrations. The portrayal of Fusena's determination and resolve to go to teacher's training college and, later, her breaking of the engagement with the rich and influential *alhaji*, echo Anowa's

individuality and determination to choose her own husband in *Anowa*.

In Esi's case, the choice she makes, to divorce her first husband and later to marry Ali, illustrates ambiguity as well as strength as a woman. I suggest this because on one level we see that Esi has internalised the traditional belief that a woman can only attain full humanity through marriage and motherhood. Yet like Anowa, the choice also shows her individuality and determination to live the life she wants as a woman. Esi is portrayed as a professional, and the demands of her job are a constant cause for frustration and anger with her husband Oko who regards her career as the reason for Esi's neglecting of her 'real' role of wife and mother. Yet Esi is determined to make a success of her career. Consequently, she works harder than her male colleagues and regards Oko's constant demands for attention as standing in the way of her professional progress. In spite of these problems Esi stays married to Oko until he rapes her.

Marital rape is not widely acknowledged within Africa. Ground-breaking as she is in discussing African involvement in the slave trade, women-on-women oppression and the possibility of male infertility, Aidoo is particularly radical in her in dealing with a subject otherwise unmentioned in African literature. This is because 'Sex is something a husband claims from his wife as his right. Any time. And at his convenience' (*Changes*: 12). As a result, Esi's community, like many other African societies, has no name for such rape. The idea that Esi recognises it as a violation and names it, demonstrates her strength, individuality and independence of mind. After he rapes her, she angrily watches Oko as:

> He got out of bed, taking the entire sleeping cloth with him. Esi's anger rose to an exploding pitch. Not just because Oko taking the cloth left her completely naked, or

> because she was feeling uncomfortable between her thighs. What really finished her was her eyes catching sight of the cloth trailing behind Oko who looked like some arrogant king, as he opened the door to get to the bathroom before her. She sucked her teeth! (10)

The image of Oko as king echoes Kofi in *Anowa*, and by portraying him thus, Aidoo demonstrates how the position of woman has not altered from that of the sexual object Nana describes when she says:

> In our time the best citizen was the man who swallowed more than one woman, and the more, the better. So our kings married more women than other men in their communities. To prove that they were, by that single move, the best in the land. (109)

Esi expresses her individuality by divorcing Oko and later by making the choice to enter into a polygamous marriage with Ali. Added to this Esi is portrayed as giving up her daughter to her Oko's family. In a society that values children and regards them as a marker of one's womanhood and humanity, the decision to give up one's child amounts to a refusal to be contained within society's constraining structures. I suggest that the decision to let Oko's mother take Ogyaanowa, and the decision to become Ali's second wife, illustrate Esi's determination to live life on her own terms.

Although polygamy is generally regarded by western feminism as the most overt expression of African women's abuse, objectification and exploitation, Aidoo offers a different perspective on the practice. Her portrayal challenges received views that regard polygamy as an institution forced on women. She illustrates its complexity by demonstrating that it can be the marriage of choice for some women. In *Anowa*, Anowa suggests that Kofi marry a second wife. She offers to find him 'a plump mulatto woman

from Oguaa' to marry (115). 'Why don't you marry another woman...At least she could help us. I could find a good one too' (*Anowa*: 84). Here Anowa gives one of the reasons for polygamy from a woman's point of view, the chance for extra help with chores.

Considering the importance of children to women's identity, Anowa's offer is, in my view, also linked to her childlessness. 'Othermothering', a traditional concept of mothering children other than one's own, is common amongst many black communities (Senior 1991: 16). In such societies children do not necessarily only belong to the biological parents, but to the community, hence taking care of them is shared between women. Even those women without children can be given children to look after. Thus if Kofi married a second wife and had children, Anowa could hope to become a mother through the second wife's children. By refusing to marry a second wife, Kofi denies Anowa the chance of motherhood.

In *Changes,* Aidoo explores polygamy from the second wife's perspective, and through Esi's choices she challenges the idea of the downtrodden, voiceless African woman. Educated and a professional, Esi abandons her monogamous marriage and opts for a polygamous relationship with Ali Kondey. The choice to become Ali's second wife demonstrates individuality at the same time as it demonstrates that some women find polygamy advantageous. Esi's quarrels with her first marriage relate to space and time. She wants more space and time to herself, to pursue her career. Esi's decision calls to mind Alexander Joseph's household in Utah, America where Joseph was married to eight wives at the same time. According to his wives, the attraction of such a marriage related, like

Esi's, to space and freedom. The women claimed that the freedom and space to pursue their various careers, the chance for female bonding and shared childcare, as well as the stability of a marriage, far outweighed the sexual and privacy problems of the arrangement (Laver and Kaihla 1995: 44-50). In *Changes*, Esi's problem with her first marriage is solved through her choice to become second wife. That way she has the stability of marriage and the freedom to pursue her career.

In her essay 'Urban spaces, women's places: Polygamy as sign in Mariama Ba's novels', Obioma Nnaemeka provides the background to polygamy in traditional Africa and as is endorsed by the Islamic faith (Nnaemeka 1997: 162-191). Quoting Patrick Merand, Nnaemeka points out that the rationale for contracting a polygamous relationship in traditional African societies range from 'the superior numerical strength of women, to female infertility, to the acquisition of prestige' (Nnaemeka 1997: 192). In some societies such as the Ngoni of Northern and Central Malawi or the Sena of Southern Malawi, polygamy is also entered into so that a brother of a deceased man can look after children and widows. In such traditional settings there are specific living arrangements which everyone respects and abides by.

Traditionally, as is the case in some matrilineal communities of central Malawi, each wife lives in her village with her people and the man takes turns to visit each wife. Or, more commonly throughout Africa, the man and his wives live in the same compound. Each woman lives with her children in her own house and the husband has his own house as well. His sexual relations with his wives is on a rota basis. As husband, the man's

responsibilities include the general running, maintenance and welfare of the compound, while each woman is responsible for feeding and general care of her own children. The man is expected to treat his wives equally, both materially and sexually. The wives exist in a hierarchy with the first wife ranking highest and with overall authority over the women's side of running the compound. Fairness, equity, justice and respect, not just between man and wives but also amongst the wives, are of paramount importance in polygamy and each member is expected to fulfill their obligations and share in the responsibility of the arrangement.

In Islam, the Quaranic reason for polygamy is to provide for widows and orphans (AL Quaran, Surah Al-Nisa-3). A man is allowed to marry several women only if he is capable of materially providing for all his wives (AL-Quaran Al-Noor 33). As in the traditional African set-up, fairness, equity and justice in the man's relationship with his wives is crucial. Nnaemeka's (1997) study distinguishes between polygamy as an institution and men's polygamous instincts (162-191). As an institution, Nnaemeka refers to the traditional concept, which had checks and balances for ensuring equity, justice and responsibility. Polygamous instinct on the other hand, refers to men's philandering and infidelity, the desire to have multiple partners at the same time which, she rightly argues, can arise in any man, whether polygamous or monogamous (Nnaemeka 1997: 170).

Her study of polygamy from different perspectives does not blind Aidoo to its abuse or to some of its transformations as a result of modernity. In *Changes*, Aidoo explores polygamy as practised by affluent middle- and upper-class urban men in Ghana. Like Ramatoulaye's

husband Modou in *So Long A Letter*, Ali Kondey is wealthy, educated and a philanderer. His character and attitude towards women suggests a desire to enjoy both traditional and modern life, taking from each what is advantageous to himself. After he meets and decides to marry Esi, Ali violates a traditional requirement of polygamy by failing to inform and get the consent of his first wife, Fusena. Up to the time he goes to Esi's village with people from his own village, Ali conducts his marital arrangements with Esi in secrecy. And when she finds out, Fusena feels betrayed.

Such disregard and violation of tradition compromises the legality of a second marriage. As Ali's people tell him, a second marriage without the first wife's consent is not marriage (*Changes*: 106). The first wife has to be told long before a man's desire for another wife is made known to his community. Ali's people also tell him that to marry another wife and inform the first wife afterwards invalidates the union. The requirement to get the first wife's consent is important for maintaining the essential hierarchy and rank amongst wives which ensures order, respect and responsibility in a polygamous marriage. Ali's act of betrayal denies Fusena the rights of the first wife. Another violation of tradition occurs when, rather than a family representative, Ali takes an employee to his first introduction at Esi's village. Not only does this illustrate modern men's replacement of family ties and significance with wealth, it also suggests a devaluation of tradition, which, in my opinion, works against the woman. Esi's security and proper place in the marriage is watered down as a result of Ali's flouting of traditional practice.

Additionally, as a result of their urban setting, Ali's wives live apart. Although this is

workable in the traditional setting, Ali fails to balance and negotiate his time and affection between his wives. His only real home in his mind is with Fusena and his children and he makes sure that he spends all his nights with her. Time with Esi is limited to a few hours on those evenings he can spare. Ali substitutes and makes up for his absences with Esi through gifts. In other words, Ali's behaviour is that of a financial provider rather than a husband and he treats Esi more like a mistress than a wife. Nnaemeka's description of such an urbanised arrangement as a 'monogamous polygamy' or 'polygamous monogamy' that is 'vulgarised' is apt (1997: 175). It is this abuse of the institution of polygamy that Aidoo challenges in *Changes*. I believe that Aidoo's achievement in *Changes,* like Mariama Ba's in *So Long A Letter*, is to demonstrate and criticise the transformations to the traditional form and organisation up of polygamy, which have resulted from the younger generation's confusion of tradition with modernity. *Changes* suggests that Ali's flouting and breach of traditional requirements is what causes Fusena and Esi pain in their marriage. And through Nana's delineations of the practice in her times, Aidoo provides a contrast with Ali's modern version. What Ali's character, like Oko's, illustrates, is that men are able to take what suits them from the old traditions and from modernity while women are still subject to traditional views of what they should be. What this suggests is that women may be worse off now as they have to be workers outside the home and be mothers at the same time while still being seen as inferior sex objects.

Such is the situation of Opokuya, in *Changes*. Unlike Esi who challenges tradition and follows her own heart, Opokuya conforms to social expectations of women. Married and with four children, her life revolves around her children, her husband and family. In

addition she has a demanding job as a state registered nurse and midwife. Yet to her husband Kubi, these roles do not parallel the significance of his position as a man and government surveyor. He expresses his importance and the significance of his job by refusing his wife the use of his car, preferring to park it outside his office where it is no more than a status symbol. In the meantime Opokuya has to beg for transport from the hospital or catch public transport while still being is expected to fulfil her other roles as wife and mother.

Opokuya's story is however also about women's strength and determination. Like Nana's, it is a story of ways of survival and female solidarity. Aidoo presents Opokuya as a successful professional. She is able to keep abreast of the latest medical developments through her participation in clinical seminars and workshops. Despite her busy and demanding profession and roles of mother and wife, she finds time for her friend Esi in her time of need. Her friendship with Esi, which illustrates female bonding and echoes the friendship between Aissatou and Ramatoulaye in Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*, is open and unreserved. Opokuya's ability to negotiate through her multiple roles illustrates the ways black women survive. Rather than resorting to antagonism, she learns to negotiate. Clearly, Opokuya has learnt from the generations of women before her who, through their stories, initiate and instruct the young. Thus, when Opokuya asks Esi her reasons for leaving Oko, it is not surprising when the narrator tells us that: 'As Esi opened her mouth to answer she was also wondering how Opokuya could speak with her grandmother's voice' (*Changes* 43).

Aidoo's portrayal of the significance of the grandmother links her with Senior who also emphasises the role of the grandmother or mother in her work. Mildren Hill-Lubin (1986) observes that the grandmother is a representation of the continuity of the black family and community. She suggests that in America, the grandmother represents the African extended family and the survival of traditional practices and culture. But as well as cultural mores, survival of the physical family in many black communities, as the story of *Changes* demonstrates, is also dependent on the grandmother. As the oldest member of her family, Nana in *Changes* is the pillar of her family not only in terms of ensuring that her daughter Ena (Esi's mother) and granddaughter have knowledge of the society's practices and traditions, her lessons and attitude to her family demonstrate the female solidarity that has ensured women's survival and continuation. It is to her grandmother that Esi goes for advice after she decides to leave Oko, just as Fusena goes to the community of women in the village to seek their views after Ali decides to marry a second wife. In *The Dilemma of A Ghost*, Aidoo illustrates female solidarity and therefore strength through the idea that despite the insults and offences she suffers from her son Ato and his wife, Esi Kom is the one who in the end, accepts Eulalie, thereby enabling reconciliation with her daughter in-law.

Conclusion

The strength of Aidoo's creativity is her ease with her African-ness which she so easily passes onto her characters and transfers onto the pages of her texts. Aidoo is not afraid to write controversially about the cultures, practices and beliefs of her people. She is not

afraid to write the history of her people including the painful history of slavery. She is not afraid because of her belief in the importance of understanding the role of history in the continent's development and transformation. Thus her texts chart Africa's history from pre-colonial times to the present in the hope of helping to shape a more hopeful African future.

As regards women, Aidoo's commitment to African womanhood is not limited to exposing their oppressions at the hands of the patriarchal cultures. Her narratives are also about relationships between women. She is not afraid to write about the duty African women feel towards each other or the conflict that arises between women.

The strength of Aidoo's writing for me remains her ability to reveal the history and culture, and even the imaginations of the people she comes from and whom she writes about; the ability of the books to illustrate her people's beliefs and perceptions of themselves. By drawing from and utilising their history and oral tradition in her writing, in my opinion, Aidoo validates her people's way of life simultaneously as she challenges them to confront realities in their society which they might otherwise wish to erase.

CHAPTER THREE

ERNA BRODBER

> Our dead and living are shrouded together under zinc, sweet potato slips and thatch. Step warily
> (*Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*: 12).

> There are ways and ways of knowing (*Myal*: 76).

In this section I move beyond Africa to examine the concept of black womanhood in a Caribbean context. Erna Brodber is a black woman writer who has been acclaimed not only in her home country of Jamaica but also in the world beyond. From her work, it is clear that, amongst other issues, Brodber has been motivated by the racial and gender tensions of diaspora existence. Her commitment to the plight of the marginalized, which finds expression in her fiction, makes her work appropriate for examining black identities. I propose to explore Brodber's presentation of black womanhood in the context of her Jamaican space and location. Her novels *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980) and *Myal* (1988) will form the basis of my analysis. Brodber's sociological interest, which underpins her authorship, will inform this investigation.

In this chapter I wish to suggest that, like Senior, Brodber is committed to the predicament of marginalized people, and in Jamaica the majority of these are black. This commitment, which finds expression in her fiction, is similarly articulated in her work as a social scientist. In her article on fiction and the interpretation of history, Joyce Johnson (1992-93) points out that within the contexts of slavery and colonialism, descriptions of social life and individual character mirrored feelings imposed upon colonial subjects by imperial administrators, historians and writers, including novelists, travel writers and diarists who sought to justify colonial domination and to reaffirm their prejudiced ideologies (72). Writing about the contemporary period within the context of 'writing back' (Ashcroft et. al. 1989), Orlando Patterson (1971) observes that in view of the fact that 'white racism' has always used history as one of its major tools, 'it is only natural that history would play an important part in the Black counter-polemic' (298).

As a historical-sociologist, Brodber is concerned with the history of her society and this concern clearly surfaces in her fiction. When she wrote *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, she did not intend it to be a novel. Originally it was due to a lack of case studies for teaching a course in Human Growth and Development to social work students at her university that Brodber decided to write case studies in which she incorporated socio-historical issues such as black consciousness, male/female relationships and the women's movement, which she felt to be important to her students (Cudjoe 1990: 164). It was her sister, Velma Pollard, the scholar and critic, who persuaded her to get it published as fiction. Brodber's work demonstrates her activism by unearthing a history of her society that has been erased and/or undermined by the colonial experience. Like other non-white

Caribbean writers such as Olive Senior, Jamaica Kincaid, Zee Edgell, Grace Nichols, George Lamming and Sam Selvon, Brodber is interested in history, culture and the complex issue of identity for diaspora people. As a woman, the issue of the position of women also plays a central role in her exploration of that identity. I will explore how Brodber wrestles with this multifaceted subject and how she represents its complexities in her novels.

My argument in this chapter is that as a result of her commitment to community, Brodber dismantles structures of colonial ideology based on race. For Brodber, the survival of community is vital to the survival of the nation and because Jamaica's historical experience has resulted in the country's multi-racial communities, Brodber's textual representations call for co-existence and understanding amongst the diverse racial groups if Jamaica is to survive as a nation. Her work demands acknowledgment of Jamaica as a racially and culturally diverse country and the need for unity within that diversity. The focus however is on black people. Clearly this is linked to awareness of social imbalances based on race. Brodber's work, like Senior's, demands recognition and acceptance of black culture and practices and points to the unique contributions black people can make. Through her novels, Brodber illustrates that the African-derived practices that exist amongst Jamaicans are culturally important and should be acknowledged and shared with the rest of the world.

In addition to issues of race, Brodber's texts engage with gender and demonstrate the necessity of social harmony between men and women if social balance is to be maintained. Through her work, Brodber calls for an integrated society in which black, white and

multi-racial men and women exist harmoniously through listening to each other and where their diversity functions as strength and not weakness. Her texts rework traditional borders and insist on the configuration of new modes of understanding. Brodber's books rewrite the various systems of power and are therefore committed to decolonization, but they are also about stretching colonial limitations. They are about finding a common ground for communicating and working together with 'others' who look and see the world differently. Her narratives are about recognizing black people and black culture and the need for 'space' in which black people can express their cultural and spiritual life. The texts demonstrate that as a people, black people, just like everyone else, have something distinct and unique to contribute and that the rest of the world needs to recognise, acknowledge and share that experience. Brodber's way of posing this challenge is through crossing of borders of genres and disciplines. History, religion, sociological scholarship and literary criticism blend with activism in her texts just as there is an interweaving of poetry and prose in the work. My reading of Brodber will similarly cross disciplines. History, cultural practice and religious beliefs will inform my analysis of her fiction. My focus however, will be her concern with black awareness and liberation, being black and female, and male/female relationships will, therefore, frame my reading of her work.

Biography

Born on April 20, 1940 in Woodside, St. Mary in Jamaica, Brodber was brought up in a familial environment of active commitment to, and participation in, the affairs of the local community. A 'respected historical sociologist' (back of *Louisiana*), she is also one of the

comparatively (in relation to Caribbean men) few published women writers and scholars. Like other Caribbean pupils of the colonial age, Brodber's schooling in Jamaica followed a British curriculum such as the one Senior criticizes in her poem 'Colonial Schoolgirls'. According to an interview with Nadia Ellis Russell (2001), Brodber became conscious of race issues as a young girl. However, it was as an undergraduate that this consciousness translated into a desire to serve her people. This necessitated learning about their history in order to 'know' them and herself (Russell 2001). Discovering huge gaps in information about black people, her interest intensified and the decision to 'fill' the gaps was made (Cudjoe 1990: 164-5). Brodber attended the University College of West Indies where she first graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree (BA)(London) and later went on to attain M.Sc and Ph.D qualifications. Her postgraduate studies, which were undertaken in Canada and United States of America, included courses in sociology, social psychology, anthropology, psychiatry and social work (Cudjoe 1990: 165).

Brodber's fiction, which includes *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980), *Myal* (1988) which won the Caribbean and Canadian Regional Commonwealth Writers prize in 1989, and *Louisiana* (1994), is activist in that it aims to provide information in order to challenge prevalent attitudes and perceptions. In addition to her fiction Brodber has also published non-fiction works which include *Abandonment of Children in Jamaica* (1974), *A Study of Yards in the City of Kingston* (1975), *Reggae and Cultural Identity in Jamaica* (1981), *Perceptions of Caribbean Women: Towards a Documentation of Stereotypes* (1982 and *Rural-Urban Migration and the Jamaican Child* (1986). As well as being writer and activist, Brodber has held positions in the civil service and been a teacher and sociology

lecturer at the University of West Indies. Between 1975 and 1983 Brodber worked as fellow at the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) in Mona, Jamaica. Currently a freelance writer, lecturer and researcher, her work includes the 'Blackspace' project, a project aimed at bringing together Jamaican people of black descent and engendering a pride in themselves as a people which she runs from her home village of Woodside (Russell 2001).

Identity - Being Black and female

In the interview with Russell, Brodber says: 'I'm black, as you know, in every way that you can think of (although sometimes I tell my friends I'm partially black)' (Russell 2001). Brodber's assertion of her blackness demonstrates a number of things. Firstly, it illustrates a consciousness of identity, which in the African diaspora has a lot to do with the issue of race. In an environment that has always denigrated blackness, this is a political statement that challenges that negation. Brodber's racial assertion in the interview points to the racial mixture of Jamaica and the characterisation in her novels further reinforce this racial variety. Brodber depicts black, white and multiracial characters, a racial diversity aptly encoded in the Jamaican national motto of 'Out of Many One People'. Secondly, the statement demonstrates that race is a significant determinant of identity in Jamaica. This contrasts with most parts of Africa (except for Southern Africa), where blackness, in the language of the editorial group of *Charting the Journey*, 'has no social meaning' (Grewal et al, 1988: 5), and consequently, has never really been a part of the continent's debates on identity. In other words, Brodber's statement illustrates a racially marginalized individual's

determination to assert her identity.

In addition however, the statement also points to the complexity of the Jamaican situation. By claiming to be 'partially black', Brodber suggests that it is difficult for many people in the Caribbean to claim racial 'purity'. Brodber's statement encompasses the Caribbean's history of enslavement where black women were sexually exploited by white plantation owners and/or overseers, in a bid to acquire 'cheap' labour for their farms and for lust. While this practice served the purposes of the plantation owners, it was also responsible for the racial situation that exists in the Caribbean even today. A significant number of people in the Black diaspora are multi-racial or to use Brodber's term, 'partially black'.

Appropriately, therefore, Brodber's work, like Senior's, portrays a number of multi-racial characters. Nellie, her Aunt Becca, Aunt Alice in her first novel *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, Ella and William Brassington in *Myal,* are all multiracial. This is important because what it achieves is to reflect another angle of blackness and black experience. I suggest this because within the colonial politics that created the diaspora, multi-racial people were considered black, and through her work Brodber demonstrates that blackness is a diverse position that encompasses wide-ranging experiences. Brodber's texts therefore challenge the tendency to essentialise blackness and black experience. Her work demonstrates that black experience is varied and that black people do not necessarily mean those who look black.

In my chapter on Bessie Head, I demonstrate that one way in which the apartheid South

African government maintained control over the people was through a policy of 'divide and rule'. The people were divided according to race and in order to maintain the division amongst the black people, according to ethnic group. White people were deemed superior to both the blacks at the bottom and the multi-racial and Asian people in between. As a result, multi-racial people, who in South Africa are referred to as 'coloureds', did not feel a part of the black community. They felt apart and generally considered themselves superior to black people.

The situation is more complex in the black diaspora. One of the consequences of enslavement and the desire for 'cheap' labour is that multi-racial people have been seen and treated as black by white society. In her book *The Black Woman* (1980), La Frances Rogers-Rose confirms this when, describing the typical life of enslaved black women, she writes that as well as being overworked and suffering the same physical abuse as the black male, 'the Black woman had to withstand the sexual abuses of the white master, his sons, and the overseer...Some white men took Black women as their concubines. Out of these relationships and less stable ones children were born. These children took on the status of their mother: They were slaves and treated as slaves' (Rogers-Rose 1980: 20). In her poem 'So You Think I'm Mule?', Jackie Kay (1987) further reinforces this fact when the multi-racial female persona challenges the shifting identification white men use to define her. When the white male decides to define her as part of the 'half-caste' or 'mixed-race' problem, she retorts:

> and when they shout 'Nigger'
> ain't nobody debating my Blackness
> ...I'm not mixed up about it
> There's a lot of us Blackwomen, struggling to define

just who we are. (53)

The persona in the poem demonstrates acceptance of her blackness. But is this the self-perception of other multiracial people? Do they identify with their blackness? Or, like the 'coloureds' in South Africa, do they claim their whiteness and erase their blackness? What is the attitude of the black people with whom they make up Jamaican society? Brodber's texts are helpful in answering these questions. The struggle with definition that the persona in the poem suggests is something Brodber captures in her work. A number of her characters go through a phase of denial of their black background and only come to black consciousness at the end of the story. In addition, Brodber suggests that the struggle with self-definition or what Homi Bhabha calls being 'in-between' can be a schizophrenic experience. The novels present multi-racial protagonists who at some point in their lives suffer mental breakdown. And in all the cases, their psychic fragmentation is linked to the issue of identity. I propose to deal with madness and women in a separate section in the chapter. What is significant at the moment is the process of racial awareness that Brodber portrays in her stories.

In *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, a novel that focuses on the issue of identity, Brodber tells the story of Nellie, a girl descended from both black and white ancestors. Divided into four sections, the novel starts with a section entitled 'My Dear Will You Allow Me' which deals with Nellie's fragmented recollections of her childhood, education and the move from the village where she had grown up. The second section, 'To Waltz With You', focuses on her mental collapse and recovery which as Joyce Johnson (1992-93) points out 'symbolizes the traumatic experiences of reconnecting with her past' (75). In the

third section which Brodber calls 'Into This Beautiful Garden', Nellie re-examines the social practices and attitudes of her village environment. The last, eponymous, section re-states and brings together the main themes of the narrative. Significantly, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* starts with a delineation of Nellie's ancestry, a technique which illustrates the centrality of the issue of identity in Jamaica:

> Papa's grandfather and Mama's mother were the upper reaches of the world. So we were brown, intellectual, better and apart, two generations of lightening blue-blacks and gracing elementary schools with brightness. The cream of the earth, isolated, quadroon, mulatto, Anglican. (7)

Papa's grandfather, a 'pale' ancestor parallels two 'blue-black' ancestors - Granny Tucker, Mama's mother, and her black husband Corpie. From these two forebears descends the new generation of 'brown-skinned, middle-class, educated Anglicans' to which Nellie belongs (O'Callaghan 1993: 60). The narrator's reference to the new generation as lightened 'blue-black', clearly points to the situation described by Rogers-Rose and illustrates the fact that despite their light skin, bi-racial people have nonetheless always been regarded as black in white societies.

Unlike the multi-racial persona in Kay's poem who asserts her black identity, one of the tensions of the multi-racial experience of blackness is the desire by some to escape what they consider the trap of black existence. The relegation of black people to the lowest rung of an imaginary human ladder and the resulting perception of denigratory stereotypes about black people, have stimulated techniques for survival in the black person in the diaspora. Brodber's texts which explore this tension demonstrate some of these methods of survival. A starting point is Nellie's Great Granny Tia in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come*

Home. Through Tia, Brodber demonstrates one way in which marginalized people employ 'defence mechanisms' (Russell 2001) to deal with their dilemma. When Albert and Elizabeth Whiting died, leaving their eleven children in the care of their black nanny Madam Faith, the first son William fell in love with and married her black goddaughter Tia Maria. Between them, William and Tia gave birth to their 'khaki' (multi-racial) children. Materially, Tia's experience as a black child did not compare with that of white children. As a result, when she married William Whiting she knew what to do:

> Two roads lay before her : none was kind. There were his people and there were her people and she knew who had power. Love, luck and strength were not enough. She'd have to learn to bob and weave. And Tia started to weave one of those purely spun kumblas, growing out of the top of her head and billowing under her feet somewhat like a bridal ensemble. She nurtured one in each of her children. (138)

What Tia does reflects the 'ontological insecurities' O'Callaghan suggests are prevalent in the Caribbean and which are expressed through a 'continuing regard for foreign culture, denigration of local traditions, the need to seek an elusive "reality" in the metropolis, or to play out roles adapted from imported models/ideals - all revealing a lack of secure pride in our society and its image' (O'Callaghan 1990:104). The 'kumbla' which in the story is a metaphor for survival, involves 'annihilat[ing] herself, her skin, her dress, her smell' (*Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*: 139). Thus, eventually and deliberately, Tia 'didn't know the drum and very soon she did not know what a nine night was' (138). Furthermore she ensured that her children spoke differently: 'You musn't say bway, you must say bai. Talk like your father' (138). When Kitty, one of her daughters, chose to marry a 'pattoo' (a black man), she was in Tia's opinion, undoing the kumbla she had woven around her and Tia was devastated. Kitty's 'rebellion' consequently caused her mother madness.

As well as the position of a mother like Tia who might seek to protect her children through self-annihilation, Brodber offers another response to the multi-racial experience of blackness. Her texts demonstrate that multi-racial people take different views regarding their blackness. While some, like Tia, deny it, others embrace it. In *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* the protagonist, Nellie, struggles with self-definition. Nellie goes through a stage of denial and then acceptance of herself as black. Aunt Becca (who with Nellie's father, Alexander, are Kitty's children) reacts differently to her blackness. The most influential character in Nellie's childhood, Aunt Becca, is one of those who erase their blackness due to their socialisation. In what amounts to a typical colonial mentality, Aunt Becca associates negative things with blackness. She refuses to identify with black people and believes them to be inferior. In her opinion, light skin locates her and Nellie above 'those people' and she in turn tries to inspire similar feelings in Nellie.

Described as 'fair of face' (92), Aunt Becca tells Nellie to distinguish between 'them', 'those people' and 'us'. On several occasions, she repeatedly warns Nellie against 'those people' (17) 'those people so different - different from us' (73). According to her 'they' are a shameful people, who if one is not careful, 'will drag you down' (16). The consequence of this indoctrination, which starts from childhood, is that Nellie undergoes a phase when she too denies her blackness. Like her aunt she believes that she is better than the black people. This belief is despite the fact that she lives in the same location as 'those people' in 25, 5th street (49), a government housing location, which suggests that they share equal social status. When, as a young woman, she later joins the 'Brotherhood', an activist group whose aim is to challenge the ideology that positions ordinary people on the margins, the group's

position in relation to black people is once again from a point of superiority. It takes Baba, a childhood acquaintance, to help her come to the racial consciousness that relocates her into the black community. Nellie eventually therefore not only accepts her blackness and refers to herself as black (63), but also comes to the kin awareness in which her black cousins become important: 'I saw that if I knew all my kin...Obadiah, Teena, Locksely, Uroy, I could no longer roam as a stranger; that I had to know them to know what I was about' (80).

In *Myal* Brodber further explores the racial complexities raised in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home.* She examines race from the point of view of a black majority as well as a white perspective and illustrates the complex position of the black female subject. The protagonist in this novel, Ella, is like Nellie, the result of a union between a white man and a black woman. In this particular case, an Irish Police Officer named Ralston O'Grady who had been posted to Morant Bay behaved in a manner quite common to white colonialists by impregnating Mary Riley, the black woman working as his housekeeper. Rather than accept a move to Kingston where she would be inconspicuous, Mary Riley chose instead to go back to her village where she gave birth to, and brought up, her child Ella.

In a manner that calls to mind Margaret in Head's *Maru*, Ella is seen as strange from birth to adulthood. Because of her light skin she is alienated from the rest of the black community of the village. Her school colleagues and teachers are unreceptive and resent her because they feel that her skin colour is enough to help her get by in life, a privilege they do not have. I suggested earlier that one of the issues Brodber's texts demonstrate are

the methods of defence or means of survival for marginalized people. In Ella's case, she too finds a way of dealing with her dilemma in this all-black community. Describing the erasure at school, the narrator tells us that 'they stopped seeing her and she too stopped seeing them' (*Myal*: 11). As a way of dealing with her classroom erasure and alienation Ella escapes into the world of her books where through daydreams she is rendered visible. In this dream space her light skin becomes a source of identification:

> She met people who looked like her. She met Peter Pan and she met the Dairy Maid who could pass for her sister - same two long plaits and brownish. She met the fellow with the strange name who put his finger in the dyke and stopped the town from flooding. (11)

When she moves to America as Mrs Burns' companion, she meets and marries Selwyn Langley, the young white heir to the Langley fortune. In America Ella is once again forced to deal with her racial identity. The narrator tells us that Ella had 'trotted' behind Mrs Brassington in Jamaica and later Mrs Burns in America as white. She was quite unaware that there were places these two women could go and sit where she could not. Her marriage to Selwyn however, demonstrates a new experience of blackness. Selwyn denies her white identity: 'It was Selywn who explained to her in simple terms that she was coloured, mulatto and what that meant' (*Myal:* 43). Ella's marital relationship with Selwyn reinforces the idea of the 'otherness' of black people. Although he transforms her to signify western womanhood, he denies her that identity by pointing out that she is mulatto. In Homi Bhabha's language, what Selwyn demonstrates to his wife is that she is 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha 1994: 86).

Ella's difference arouses Selwyn's interest. He is interested in her story and eventually we

see him stealing it in his ambition to move the Langley enterprise into film and movie production. Ella's consciousness of her black identity comes at the end of the story. The last days of her stay in America are encumbered with mental disintegration and a phantom pregnancy. Although Selwyn belongs to a 'long line of chemists, manufacturers of herbal medicines and today doctors and travelling medical lecturers' (*Myal*: 42), western medicine fails to cure Ella. When Maydene Brassington comes over and brings Ella back into Jamaica where she is taken to Maas Cyrus, the hermit who administers a herbal cure, this also serves to bring about the awareness that relocates her into her black community of Grove Town.

The narrative puts forward the idea of Jamaican space as the place of belonging. It advocates Ella's connection with her native place and landscape. Belonging is also suggested through the idea that after Ella is healed and employed as a teacher in the local school, she demonstrates opposition to the text that is used as reading material for the pupils. Like Brodber herself, Ella is particularly opposed to the colonialist portraits drawn by the text she reads with her pupils. Through her opposition, Ella restates her kinship with the rural place and the black community of her childhood. My reading of the portraits Brodber paints in her books, therefore, is that through the multi-racial woman, she illustrates the diversity of black womanhood. Through her protagonists, Brodber concurs with the theory put forward by Grewal et al. in *Charting the Journey*, which points out that black womanhood is a 'multi-faceted, diverse and complex reality' (Grewal et al. 1988: 4).

Closely connected with the issue of race and class is gender. Both blackness and

femaleness are sites of marginalization. To be a black woman however, is to suffer triple marginalization. A black woman is marginalized on the basis of colour, of class and gender. In an article entitled '"This Infinity of Conscious Pain": Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition', Lorraine Bethel (1982) sums up the conditions of the black diaspora woman succinctly when she writes that:

> Black women embody by their sheer physical presence two of the most hated identities...Whiteness and maleness [in this culture] have not only been seen as physical identities, but codified into states of being and worldviews. The codification of Blackness and femaleness by whites and males is contained in the terms "thinking like a woman" and "acting like a nigger," both based on the premise that there are typically negative Black and female ways of acting and thinking. Therefore, the most pejorative concept in the white/male worldview would be thinking and acting like a "nigger woman". (178)

Brodber's focus on the black woman in her work therefore demonstrates awareness that even though marginalization is a collective experience which affects women in different societies, for the black woman, race and class also contribute to this experience. Brodber's work challenges the black woman's oppression and demands a re-examination of her social conditions through stories which focus on black women's experiences.

It is important to point out though, that in a multi-racial society such as Jamaica, Brodber's centring of black women does not suggest an underrating of the subjugation of, for instance, white women. Her American experience in the late 1960s where she came in contact with the Women's Movement and Black Consciousness would challenge such an assumption (Russell: 2001). Life in Jamaica and the United States, as well as involvement with the women's movement would have familiarized her with marginalization in non-black communities. This awareness is reflected in the Emancipation Day recreations

she helps organise in her village of Woodside in Jamaica. Russell (2001) reports how one character described as a 'light-skinned village woman' who is the object of mistrust because the villagers think that her planter heritage is a privilege, compels the narrator to state in her defence: 'We all suffer. It no matter the skin, we all suffer' (Russell 2001: 3). This is a profound statement which articulates the collective experience of womanhood. Nonetheless, in her society, partly as a result of a distorted historical representation aimed at justifying evils such as slavery and colonialism, and the patriarchal structure on which the society is constructed, the black woman remains most disadvantaged. It is as a result of this consciousness that Brodber foregrounds the experiences of black women.

A common starting point in Brodber's presentation of black womanhood is of young girls growing up. This is important because it offers an insight into the society. As well as revealing the practices of the society, it demonstrates the impact of socialization on women's lives. When the story in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* starts, Nellie is eleven years old and on the verge of puberty. In *Myal*, Ella and Anita are also young adolescent girls. Ella is thirteen and Anita is fifteen, and both are portrayed as wrestling with the process of physical maturity. As part of the process of 'growing up', female sexuality, as it does in a number of Senior's stories, plays an important role in Brodber's presentation of womanhood. In my opinion this is as a result of the contradictory sites black women's sexuality has been allocated in most male and colonialist discourses. The importance of sex, especially in relation to a people's continuity, which is very important within black societies, conflicts with the negative images to be found, for instance, in records of the colonized or enslaved written by colonialists. The story of Sarah Baartman,

commonly known as the 'Hottentot Venus' illustrates this point clearly. Used as a prostitute and paraded naked in the streets of western cities such as Paris and London, Sarah was believed to be a representation of black female sexuality. Biased portrayals such as the one demonstrated in Sarah's case illustrate the justifications given for keeping black women on the margins. Brodber's re-writing of female sexuality from the point of view of the black woman, therefore, demands a re-examination of such representations. Simultaneously however her writings also challenge traditional cultural practices as they reveal the dilemmas of black women within their societies. This is what Joyce Johnson alludes to when she points out that by following the women's physical growth, Brodber simultaneously 'gives insights into the experiences of the society as a whole' (Johnson 1992-93: 81)

In *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, more than in the other novels, Brodber grapples with the difficult issue of female sexuality. Contradictory aspects of sexuality in relation to women are explored through the character of Nellie. When she is almost eleven, Nellie Richmond undergoes her first lesson in female physical development and sexuality. Just before the onset of her puberty, Nellie's mother calls her to one side and tells her that: 'You are eleven now and soon something strange will happen to you...when it does, make sure you tell your aunt' (*Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*: 23). Nellie notices that as she speaks, her mother avoids making eye contact. Nellie's reaction is to wonder what 'shame' the mother is trying to hide from her. To compound her confusion, Nellie's relationships with her father, with her friend Maas Stanley and her male playmates are similarly affected by her physical development. Nellie narrates how one day her father looks at her from head

to toe, focuses on her middle and with strange solemnity, says: 'My. But you have shot up-' (23). Narrating her feelings at her father's reaction to her body's development, Nellie says: 'And my balloon stinks with shame. *Something breaks and there is no warmth no more*' (23, my emphasis). Clearly, Nellie feels a sense of unease at the altering relationships and understandably, finds it all confusing.

According to Daryl Dance (1990), the mother's reluctance to talk to Nellie about puberty and sexual development (which in the text is referred to as 'it' and which variously connotes menses, sex and sexuality), relates to the 'shame and filth' associated with female sexuality (170). While it is true that there is a certain sense of 'shame' for the women associated with female sexuality and Brodber's work questions this perception, it is also important to be aware of the complexity of the issue and to be able to contextualize this 'shame'. For instance in some societies such as the Nyau Secret Society found in Central and Southern Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique, blood is linked with life and to expose it is sacrilege (Kuthemba-Mwale: 1977). And it does not matter whose blood it is whether it is a chicken's or a woman's. Exposing blood is simply taboo. Connected with this is the idea that if a woman's blood becomes accessible, some evil people can use it to harm the woman. For instance a carelessly discarded sanitary towel, can, it is believed, be used to induce a continuous menstrual flow which would eventually kill its owner (Phiri: 1990).

In many black communities the shame is also linked to exposing something which is considered private. As most African women will agree menstruation is considered a private issue. Apart from the time at puberty where initiation celebrations reveal the onset of

physical maturity and simultaneously, in the words of Ama Ata Aidoo, serve to 'broadcast' that a girl is ready for procreation (Morgan 1985: 261), traditionally no one is supposed to know when a woman is menstruating. Even within marriage women do not talk about their periods. For example amongst my ethnic group, the Nyanja of Central and Southern Malawi, traditionally a sign, usually a piece of red cloth alerted the husband that it was that time of the month and he automatically slept on a different bed. What I therefore wish to suggest is that there is a strand in Brodber's narrative that Dance does not unravel. This is the link between traditional practices which are rooted in the history of the black people and modern practices.

Additionally, I wish to suggest that Brodber's portrayal of Nellie's mother's reluctance to discuss sexual matters challenges what western history has said about black women's sexuality. Repeatedly presented as 'over-sexed' and 'free' (for example Antoinette in Jean Rhy's *Wide Sargasso Sea* wants to be black so she can have sexual freedom; as well as the treatment given to the 'Hottentot venus'), the black women in Brodber's texts re-write black women's sexuality and point to a reality 'history' books have erased. I am not suggesting here that there are no black women whose sexuality undermines social restrictions, nor am I suggesting that society is justified in restricting women's sexuality. What I seek to point out is that through her stories Brodber successfully challenges some of the negative representations of black women's sexuality. Nellie's mother's action in the story demonstrates the fallacy of racist theories of black women's sexuality and points to the place of sexual matters in many black communities.

In most black societies, and the one I come from provides an immediate example, matters dealing with sex are taboo. They are not discussed publicly. Traditionally mothers would not discuss issues of sexuality with their daughters nor would fathers with their sons. In the case of girls, this is initially the responsibility of either an aunt, grandmother or close female friend of the mother, after which they are brought before *anamkungwi*, a group of women specially appointed to instruct the girls in matters of hygiene and sexuality. In the case of boys it is an uncle or male *anamkungwi* (Kuthemba-Mwale: 1977). There is evidence of this black socio-cultural practice in Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*. Nellie's mother leaves the responsibility of teaching her daughter about what she is going through physically to her aunt.

Having challenged the racist representations of black women's sexuality, Brodber simultaneously exposes contradictions in traditional practices and thereby demonstrates further dilemmas for black women. The story of Nellie in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* illustrates the social belief that in order to become a woman, sexual experience is important in a girl's life. Thus, while at university, Nellie submits to sex, an experience which is supposed to make her 'normal', 'like everybody else'. However, her recollection of the experience is in the image of a 'long nasty snail' (28), a 'mekke mekke thing' (28). Carolyn Cooper (1986) defines the word 'mekke' as 'Jamaican Creole word meaning 'mucous'; and having decidedly negative connotations; usually used to describe the consistency of unpalatable food' (147). The disgust Nellie feels explains why sex becomes a matter of endurance. She tells herself to 'Vomit and bear it' (28). Nellie's perceptions of sexuality disrupt colonial mythology. Her outlook demands recognition of the multiplicity

of positions black women occupy.

Similarly, the character of Madam Faith, Alexander and Elizabeth Whiting's black nanny, challenges western mythology about the over-sexed nature of black women. Madam Faith does not fit the stereotype of the over-sexed black 'temptress'. When his wife Elizabeth dies, Alexander Whiting becomes dependent on his black servant. She manages his household and property at the same time as she brings up his children. However, rather than 'tempt' her white master, Madam Faith merely 'mothers' Whiting's children in the same way that she mothers her goddaughter Tia. The absence of a sexual relationship between the two re-writes history by challenging the stereotype of the black woman as an over-sexed temptress who seduces white males.

Brodber's position here echoes Olive Senior whose stories similarly challenge the racist stereotypes of colonial discursive practice in the black diaspora, as well as reflecting the work of Aidoo and Head who explore black women's sexuality from an African context. What Brodber and the other women writers this thesis deals with do is challenge colonial discourses on black women's sexuality, as they simultaneously demonstrate the unthoughtfulness of men in general as sexual partners. Notably in the contemporary UK the idea of black men as inconsiderate sexual partners has also motivated the television series of 'Baby Father' recently broadcast on Channel 2.

In *Myal*, Brodber deals with black women's sexuality through Ella O'Grady, the mulatto girl who marries Selwyn Langley, heir to the Langley fortune and also through Anita the

other main character in the story. While Ella's case illustrates a colonial's marginalization of the black woman, Anita's story demonstrates black men's objectification of black women. In Anita's case, Brodber demonstrates how traditional Jamaican beliefs and practices objectify black female sexuality, marginalize and deny women their place in society. When the influential Maas Levi becomes sexually impotent, he resorts to *obeah*, 'a supernatural service used to deal with personal misfortune, grievances and disputes', in an attempt to regain his virility (Gordon 2002). The young girl Anita becomes the target of his *obeah*. Levi believes that by stealing the young virgin's spirit and strength, he can restore his lost virility. Maas Levi's action reduces Anita to a sexual object. Her humanity is erased and disregarded in his attempt to regain control of his sexuality.

Ella too suffers erasure at the hands of her husband as he uses her to achieve his own ambitions and dreams. Originally however, and unlike Nellie's negative perceptions of sex in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, Ella's attitude to sexuality in *Myal* is different. When Selwyn introduces her to the pleasures of sex and sexuality, the narrator tells us that 'Ella was hooked and she liked the drug' (43). Ella clearly enjoys the attention. Her childhood life of invisibility changes into 'fun' with Selwyn. She becomes 'the happiest little married lady on earth' (43). It is clear however that the sexual pleasures are costly. Selwyn indulges in a recreation of Ella which erases her black background. She is, for instance, required to pretend that both her parents were Irish. In addition:

> There was the powdering and the plucking of eyebrows, the straightening of the hair... and just in case, just in case there should be the rare occasion on which she would be called upon to wear a no-sleeved bathing dress, he taught her the habit of shaving her armpits...The creator loved his creature. (43)

Not only does Selwyn recreate Ella in accordance with western ideologies of femininity, she is also the object of his self-enhancement. Selwyn is concerned with his self-image as a man and Ella is the means to achieve that image. This is what Dyer (2000) means when he points out that the discourse of whiteness 'implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject not allowing her/him space or autonomy, permitting neither recognition of similarities nor an acceptance of difference except as a means for knowing the white self' (544).

Ella's personal perception of sex and sexuality in the story is, however, functional, and this links her to her black background. Selwyn's desire to recreate her into a 'full Irish girl' (43) does not satisfy her. For Ella, 'There was just one little thing that she couldn't brush off. No big thing yet...after a whole year, there was no little Ella forthcoming. This was beginning to disturb her' (44). This passage illustrates that Ella considers having a child important to her being. Not only would a baby provide her with company, considering Selwyn's frequent and lengthy absences, she sees it in terms of a future. Her thinking reflects a common belief among black people that children are an investment in the future. They take care of you in old age, materially and emotionally (Senior 1991: 67). In their books Nnaemeka (1997), Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Davies (1994), Senior (1991), Nasta (1991) and Rogers-Rose (1980), point to the importance of children and of motherhood to black women. These writers demonstrate that motherhood provides black women with a sense of identity, prestige, status, power and authority within the traditional patriarchal structures that erase and deny women subjectivity. Through their role as mothers, women challenge and undermine their marginalized conditions.

Male/female relationships

Brodber's work clearly focuses on the situation of black women in her society. However, there is also a persistent foregrounding of a Jamaican identity in her work which in my opinion links her ideologically with African and Black-American women. In *Re-creating Ourselves* (1994), Ogundipe-Leslie points out that African women desire social transformation which includes both men and women (229). La Frances-Rose in *The Black Woman* (1980), identifies the basis of this political position when, writing about Black-American women, she says: 'the lives of Black women cannot be separated from the history and lives of Black men and their children' (12). Thus, although black women are opposed to and challenge those traditional practices that devalue them, practices which are mostly enforced by structures that favour men, the women nonetheless believe in men's importance and necessity to their lives.

Similarly, therefore, as she examines Jamaican women's situation, Brodber does not deprecate men's contributions. She acknowledges the contributions men have made to the women's lives. This is important because it clearly illustrates the integrative spirit Ogundipe-Leslie and La Frances-Rose attribute to black women's feminisms. In *Myal*, Reverend William Brassingston's concern for his adopted daughter Ella illustrates the positive contributions of men to women's lives. When western medicine fails to cure Ella in America, he disregards his Christian ethics and submits to the demands of the traditional healer, Maas Cyrus. The narrator tells us that:

> In the state in which he had been, he would have done anything that anybody told him to do, so long as it promised a cure. They had said the boys should go, so the boys had gone with him. He did wonder as he made his way along the narrow track, his jacket entangled now and again with prickly tree limbs, about Saul and the

> witch of Endor, but it made no difference. He was promised a cure. He went on. (94)

Brassington's behaviour makes people like Cook point out that, if one was not aware of the truth, anybody would have thought Ella was Brassington's child 'the way him look after her. Den she so favour him again' (94).

In addition, Reverend Simpson's role in the community and the influence he has on the society, and more especially on Ella, further reinforces the point about Brodber acknowledging the contributions of men to women's lives. As a teacher, Ella feels disturbed with the reading lessons given to the pupils. She recognises the colonial politics in the story of Mr. Joe's farm. However, given the constraints of the educational system within which she must work, Ella is acutely aware of the necessity for communal backing if she wants to advocate change. The only person she trusts to understand and help her is Reverend Simpson. And she is right. Reverend Simpson understands Ella's concerns. From his reaction, it is clear that he is aware that the community needed someone with her kind of perception to help correct the eroded image of the people. And rather than dictate a course of action which Ella must follow, Reverend Simpson asks her whether she is forced to teach, uncritically, what the writer writes. Reverend Simpson's question points at Ella's importance and responsibility as a member of the community.

However, even though she does not belittle men's contributions to women's lives, Brodber does not ignore the issue of subjugation of women by men, and in *Myal* a number of relationships illustrate this point. The relationship between Maas Levi, his wife, Miss Iris, and the young girl Anita, as well as the relationship between Ella and Selwyn, are cases in

point. While the relationship between Ella and Selwyn operates on the level of colonizer versus the colonized, that between Maas Levi and his wife and that with Anita are rooted in the social practices and beliefs of the community, and through them Brodber challenges such practices.

Throughout the community Levi is respected and feared. Portrayed as physically strong, hardworking and morally incorruptible, he clearly represents Jamaican society's concept of a decent man. Levi's high merit as a man is further reflected in his treatment of his son and wife. He is a strict and no-nonsense man and one of the ways in which he expresses this is through his harsh treatment of his son. The relationship with his wife is similarly guarded. For instance Levi thinks it is not worthwhile to share issues with his wife. If there is a problem he deals with it alone and merely informs her of the outcome afterwards. Such treatment which, in my opinion, amounts to an infantilising of his wife is, however, unchallenged by Miss Iris. Instead Miss Iris fears him. She feels helpless and believes that there is nothing she can do but pray (*Myal*: 62).

Maas Levis's relationship with Anita in *Myal*, which parallels that between Selwyn and Ella, also illustrates female subjugation and objectification. To Selwyn, Ella represents a manifestation of his dream to extend his family's business into movie making and film production. Even though the Langley family has been known in America for generations for its contribution to human health (they are chemists, doctors and medical lecturers) (*Myal*: 42), Selywn sees in Ella 'A marvellously sculpted work waiting for the animator' (46). For Selwyn, Ella is the object that will help him achieve his ambitions. Similarly,

when Maas Levi discovers that he has lost his sexual energy, he seeks solution in *obeah*. He believes that he can regain his virility by substituting his spent powers for those of a young virgin. Levis' perception of the young girl as a mere vessel for getting back his manhood undermines Anita's humanity. Her pain and suffering are insignificant to him. Levi's attitude illustrates a male perception of women as essentially inferior and points to the unequal relationship between the sexes where women are seen as necessary but expendable beings. Writing about such practices is one way in which Brodber challenges and forces a re-examination of some of the traditional beliefs of her society.

Madness

Lillian Feder's (1980) observation, as I show in the chapter on Head, is that many writers of western literature employ madness as a theme to express an individual's quest for personal fulfilment, socially and politically. R.D. Laing (1962) on the other hand, suggests that madness is a mechanism people use to combat life's difficulties; that psychosis is a reaction to life in a destructive society and that schizophrenia is a 'strategy' an individual might employ in order to cope with unlivable situations (79). An element of insanity which I find common in the patterns of madness represented in black women's texts is its use to express pain and suffering in addition to being a tool for resisting oppression. In fact although Feder (1980) acknowledges the literary use of madness to denote resistance, her view of madness as a state of being in which the unconscious processes of mind 'predominate' over the conscious to the point of controlling them (4), implicitly acknowledges the victim's lack of control and, in my opinion, also their pain and suffering. Black women's texts

express resistance through the female characters' anger towards their sources of oppression. Additionally, the writers portray resistance by depicting female characters who as the story comes to its conclusion, are recovering or have recovered from their mental fragmentation. The portrayal of the characters at the point of recovery illustrates, in my view, that the writer's aim is not to depict insanity as such, but to reclaim women's place in society.

Brodber portrays a number of mad women in her work. In *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home,* she portrays two women, Nellie and her Great Granny Tia Maria, as suffering mental fragmentation, while in *Myal* the protagonist Ella is depicted as similarly suffering physical and emotional fragmentation. I pointed out in the first chapter that in many black societies insanity can be both disease and a 'possession'. Greed, jealousy or malice are believed to be capable of inducing some evil people to afflict whoever they wish with the disease of madness. As 'possession', madness is thought to ensue from the spiritual realm. Possessing spirits are believed to be either good or bad depending on purpose and nature of possession (Soko: 1992), and people believe that bad spirits cause affliction and disease while good spirits induce divine prophecy.

In *Myal*, Brodber portrays 'possession' through Miss Gatha, while in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, Nellie, like Head's Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*, communicates with a male spiritual figure. In her third novel *Louisiana,* Brodber depicts the protagonist, Ella, as spiritually able to communicate with spirits of what in African philosophy are referred to as the 'living dead', spirits of recently dead members of the community. By

virtue of their recent death, the 'living dead' are believed to be the link between the people and spirits of ancestors and God/gods. Psycho-pathologically, claims of communication with spirits of dead people would be interpreted as a manifestation of fragmentation and therefore, a form of madness. Within black cultures however, to be able to communicate with ancestral spirits is a privileged position that commands respect. The figure of Miss Gatha in *Myal* portrays this clearly. Her power and influence are understood by and affect the whole society. From the actions and achievement of Miss Gatha, it is clear that part of Brodber's aim, as it is in *Louisiana,* is to celebrate the devalued knowledges of marginalized people and to challenge received forms of education which have been imposed on black minds through westernised educational institutions and the Christian religion. I will deal with possession in more detail later in the thesis.

Cazenave's (2000) division of mad characters into those who have existed on the periphery from birth and those whose marginalization results from evolution – in other words, those who move from a position of favour, economic power or physical beauty to a marginal position which causes their madness – is reflected in Brodber's work. As women, her female characters already exist on the borders of the community, but in the case of Great Granny Tia in *Myal*, her madness also results from loss of influence over her daughter Kitty. Ella's madness, however, is caused by what amounts to an evolution from her position as Selwyn's wife. Ella first experiences what Helen Tiffin (1993) calls 'separation of mind from body' (916), a condition which in psycho-pathology is symptomatic of the schizophrenic mind, as a child. When teachers and fellow pupils refuse to acknowledge her presence Ella embarks on fantasy journeys that do not require human acceptance nor

acknowledgment. Every time a map is brought out to be studied, for Ella, 'it rose from the paper in three dimensions, grew big, came right down to her seat and allowed her to walk on it, feel its snow, invited her to look deep down into its fjords and dykes' (*Myal*: 11). Even though she had not been to England nor seen young white people, in her fantasies she made friends with Peter Pan and the Dairy Maid who 'looked like her' (11). Ella also traveled to Scotland where she watched Scottish pipers playing their bagpipes and to England where she once went into a coal mine and up a chimney with Peter. In a science lesson about osmosis, the process becomes real so that she actually 'sees' thin substances pulling in thicker ones. In Freud's psychoanalytic language, this amounts to 'delusion' or 'hallucination'. Significantly, Ella develops a 'stare' which within Laing's theory amounts to a way of dealing with her oppressed situation. At break times she would go and stand at the place in her classroom that became her recess spot near the door and stare into space. Later as an adult and a teacher, her lessons and conversations are continually broken by spells of 'staring' into space.

According to Freud, 'delusions' and 'hallucinations' are a part of the pathological process. Freud suggests that they are a pathological product because they are an 'attempt at recovery' (Strachey 1966-74: 71). He argues that delusion and hallucinations express an attempt by the psychotic to recapture a relation with the world around her/him. Such a view in my opinion, also underscores the idea that madness is about suffering and not necessarily about the achievement of glory. If by becoming mad, all one sought to achieve was glory, there would then be no need to seek a relationship with the people and the world around. However if one feels isolated, a condition most mad people are said to experience,

then the search for a relationship with other people and the world is essential. This argument links with the suggestion that in many cases, insanity reflects a condition of dislocation and consequent suffering. The oppression women undergo in a male supremacist and hierarchically structured society, whether subtle or overt, imposes the suffering that can result in insanity. Ella's oppression in *Myal* is on two levels, as a mulatto and as a woman.

It is when she is married that Ella really slips into insanity. The suffering which had found an outlet through bouts of staring when she was a child concretises into actual madness when Selwyn takes her to see *Caribbean Nights and Days,* the 'coon' show he has produced from her life story. For a long time Ella has silently endured his frequent absences. After he steals her story he moves further and further away from her. The longing for a child, which as Nnaemeka (1997), Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) and Steady (1981) point out, is important for black women, is not fulfilled as Selwyn is too busy to have any intimate relationship with his wife. Like many black women, Ella sees motherhood in relation to the future. In her thinking, a child would provide her with the company she is denied by Selwyn. To compound her isolation and loneliness, Selwyn completely misrepresents her story. Not only is the setting and structure distorted, the characters are similarly misrepresented. The familiar people of Grove Town are 'polished, wet, polished again and burnished' (83). Ella discovers that Selwyn has given them all a shining blackness relieved only by the whiteness of their teeth and eyes. In addition everyone is dressed in the strips of material Ella had said Ole African wore. And all, like Ole African, wear their hair plaited. Ella finds herself similarly erased from the story. The main character who is supposed to be herself is

not black but a white girl with flowing blonde hair. Selwyn depicts her being 'chased by outstretched black hands grabbing at her and sliding and being forced into somersaults as they missed their target' (84). From his actions, Selwyn clearly represents not only patriarchy but also colonising power. As she watches the show, Ella cannot help but whisper under her breath: 'It didn't go so' (*Myal*: 84). The intensity of her shock and anger is such that these are the last words Ella speaks. In the language of Cazenave (2000), Ella 'shuts herself up within a form of solitude that constitutes a response and a system of defence in reaction to a specific event that has deeply disturbed her sense of identity and definitively pushed her to the edge' (68).

In *The Divided Self* (1960), Laing suggests that mad people often display evidence of split personalities. He points out that the schizoid is 'not able to experience himself "together with" others or "at home in" the world, but, on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation; moreover, he does not experience himself as a complete person but rather as a "split" in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves, and so on' (15). He goes on to say that 'One of the fragments of the self generally seems to retain the sense of "I". The other "self" might then be called "her". But this "her" is still "me"' (158). The relationship of these selves is often grounded in guilt, and Laing suggests that this is because 'in the natural order of things' the relationship of these selves can only exist between two persons (158).

Brodber's portrayal of Ella confirms Laing's theory. After she stops speaking, the narrator tells us that 'long conversations between her selves took place in her head' (*Myal*: 84).

Typically, one of Ella's 'selves' is encumbered with guilt and bitterness while the other chastises the first self for giving away and letting Selwyn take everything Ella possessed: her identity, her history and her self. The defence to this which is uttered by one of the selves is: 'But I didn't even know when I was giving it, that it was mine and my everything' (*Myal*: 84). The argument between the two personalities becomes violent when one of the selves calls Ella 'mule', a term of ridicule for childlessness women amongst many black communities. Brodber once again points to the significance of children for black women through the narrator's comment: 'Now that - mule - was a bad thing to call Ella at this time and she really got very vexed and set about trying to tear out her hair... she pulled at the long straightened hair, a thing she had never done to anybody before much less to one of her own selves' (84). Two months later Ella swells with a phantom pregnancy and significantly this also marks the first return of her voice. Understandably, however, the only thing she utters relates to her desire for a child. Ella tells Selywn that: 'Mammy Mary's mulatto mule must have maternity wear' (*Myal*: 84). When read in the context in which she perceives the possession of a child, her utterance amounts to a claiming of her future. Thus, in addition to illustrating the depths of her suffering, Ella's madness also demonstrates her rebellion at the condition Selwyn imposes on her.

The point of the story, however, is the reclamation of Ella's place as a member of Grove Town community. When western medicine fails to cure Ella in the USA she is brought back to Jamaica where the traditional herbalist Maas Cyrus heals her. Brodber clearly suggests a link between physical suffering and psychological fragmentation because as soon as Ella's stomach is cleared she regains her psychological balance. After taking Mass

Cyrus' herbal medicine Ella emerges whole again, physically and psychologically ready to take up her place in the community. Even though Brodber shows the depths of Ella's suffering through the occasional spells of staring Ella continues to have, she nonetheless emphasises the healing which is celebrated by all, including the spiritual group of Grove Town. At the end of the story Ella works as a teacher in her local school where she demonstrates awareness of the political nature of colonial texts. She displays an awakened consciousness through determination to correct the distorted image of the colonial subject by ensuring that her pupils learn to read texts critically. The resolve to ensure that the children learn the truth about the texts and about themselves illustrates, simultaneously, acceptance of her own black identity.

In *Jane an Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, Nellie and her Great Granny Tia Maria similarly slip into madness. These women's madness, like Ella's in *Myal*, is grounded in pain and suffering. In the case of Tia, her madness is linked to children and their significance in the black woman's life. When her daughter, Kitty, decides to marry a 'Pattoo' (a black man) named Alexander Richmond, she does so against Tia's wishes. Because of her own experiences of disadvantage as a black child, Tia was determined to ensure that her children did not replicate that life. So when Kitty got pregnant and chose to marry her black man, Tia was devastated. It was this desolation that led to her eventual madness.

Nellie similarly experiences mental fragmentation in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home.* The idea of her 'loss' or 'lack' of balance and 'spinning around' or 'twirling madly' point to her fragmented psyche. The pain of her condition is described through the images

of an icy cold lump which she contrasts with the warmth of her upbringing (9). While Tia represents the colonized mentality analysed by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks,* Nellie embodies the modern black woman. Young and educated (she is a doctor) like all the other women she nonetheless exists on the borders of the society. For instance, even though she is a member of 'the Brotherhood', a group of educated people which is meant to uplift the ordinary people, as a woman her role is limited to taking minutes of the men's discussions. This position calls to mind Aunt Becca's repeated declarations that 'Woman luck de a dungle heap' (17).

As female, Nellie undergoes numerous traumatising experiences which eventually lead her to madness. In her youth Nellie has a protected childhood. She tells us that: 'Mountains ring us round and cover us, banana leaves shelter us and sustain us, boiled, chips, porridge, three times a day. You should see the poor insipid sun trying to penetrate us! You had to help him on. You had to go for him and pull his hand, crawling behind you even then in a long shadow' (*Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*: 9-10). Nellie further describes her early protection in images of a chicken when she says: 'Ever see a fowl sitting on eggs in cold December rain. We knew the warmth and security of those eggs in the dark of her bottom' (9). Things change however, as she grows up. Firstly through Aunt Alice she learns her family history and its class and race divisions. Nellie then comes face to face with gender division at the onset of puberty when her mother behaves strangely and in addition, her male playmates, her much-loved neighbour Maas Stanley as well as her father suddenly seek and maintain distance from her.

The secrecy surrounding everything to do with menstruation and sex is held in the community suggests shame and this confuses Nellie. When her breasts start to appear Nellie demonstrates her confusion when she says: 'Have you ever seen a new sucker trying to grow out of a rotten banana root? My whole chest was that rotten banana root and there were two suckers' (119). Later, after Nellie has her sexual experience, something that is socially deemed necessary if she 'wants to be a woman', to be 'normal', she thinks of it with shame and disgust. Her mental images of the experience are of a 'long nasty snail, curling up, straightening out to show its white underside that the sun never touches' and a 'mekke mekke thing' (28). Nellie's traumatising experiences are later compounded when Cock Robin, her 'young man', dies in a fire accident. Nellie herself attributes her mental breakdown to Robin's death. Dance (1990) points out, however, that Robin's story is problematic especially because of the sarcastic tone in which the death is recounted and the numerous references which also stand for herself and which suggest that it could be a story from Nellie's own imagination (174). It is likely therefore that Nellie's earlier comment in relation to the multiple complexities of growing up as female of 'What a weight! Slowly it adds up' (21), is apt. The tensions and confusions which start in childhood slowly add up and are eventually responsible for Nellie's mental collapse.

Clearly therefore, Brodber uses the theme of madness to point to the psychological effects of the divisive elements of Jamaican society. Colonialism, racism and classism as well as socio-cultural practices and beliefs such as patriarchy and sexism are shown to have a negative effect on black women's psyches. Brodber uses madness to point to the tensions typical of black feminine being. She shows how women's madness is triggered by border

positions and that it is rooted in pain and suffering. In addition however madness becomes a way of demonstrating a compelling sense of rebellion against a marginalized condition. Like other black women writers such as Head and Aidoo, Brodber also uses madness as a mode of resistance. The women shut themselves up as a reaction of defence against events or issues that erode their sense of identity.

Making latent knowledges visible

In an interview with Sneja Gunew, Gayatri Spivak (1990) imagines a young 'politically correct' white male student stating that because he is bourgeois, white and male, he cannot speak. Spivak's response to such a proclamation is:

> Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced?...Then you begin to investigate what it is that silences you, rather than take this very determinist position - since my skin colour is this, since my sex is this, I cannot speak. (62)

Taking up the position of a black woman, a 'subaltern', ready to interrogate the silences imposed by both colonialism and patriarchy, Brodber engages with silencing such as that Spivak addresses. Black women's limited education in societies that considered formal education necessary for authorship as a male prerogative, and the difficulty the comparatively small number of black women writers face (specifically in Africa and the Caribbean) when trying to get their works published, is a silencing which the patriarchal structures of most black communities and western publishing houses imposed on women. The determination to write, to tell their own story, challenges the perceptions of male authors who, for a long time, had been accepted as recording the reality of women's lives.

Read in this context, women's texts, especially those that insist on 'correcting the imbalance in the portrayal of women' (Chukukere 1995: 9) amount to an expression of rage against the subjection Spivak identifies. In addition, the tendency of black women writers such as Brodber and Senior to write in the creole language spoken by the ordinary people in Jamaica challenges the authority and hegemony of the colonizer's language, thereby claiming specifically Jamaican identity.

One cannot, however, escape the fact that colonialism's negative interpretation of black people, their cultural beliefs and practices, has affected more than black women's authorship. It has also affected the people's psyches. For instance, a female friend with whom I went to high school and who later trained to be a doctor and has her own practice provides an illustration. Firstly she became a 'Born-again-Christian' and refused to hear anything about traditional herbal medicines, even straightforward ones that have no rituals attached. To her they all became part of a heathen practice. When she got married and had her children in the early 1990s, they were not allowed to speak their mother tongue, Chinyanja. To ensure that the children do not speak the language, my friend sends them to an English-only speaking school and employs only nannies that speak English to take care of them after school. If a nanny is caught speaking Chinyanja to them, she is severely reprimanded or disciplined. In addition, traditional Malawian foods are rare in her house. The family mostly eats foreign meals such as fish and chips or potatoes (identified as English or Irish potatoes in Malawi) or rice with peas and chicken and fruits such as apples and grapes which are imported from South Africa. In my opinion, my friend's position demonstrates two things. Firstly it is a way of survival. She is concerned about the survival

of her children based on her perception of western culture. In addition, I feel that she is an illustration of the long-term psychological effects of colonialism in inculcating in black people a belief in the superiority of the West in everything from diet to language.

In *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home,* Tia illustrates a tendency amongst black people in the Caribbean to denigrate and erase black practices and beliefs as a means of survival in a world that privileges western ways of life. Brodber's texts express her rage against the silencing of these black knowledges and practices. Critics such as Helen Tiffin (1993) in her article 'Cold Hearts and (Foreign Tongues): Recitation and the Reclamation of the Female Body in the Works of Erna Brodber and Jamaica Kincaid', as well as Carolyn Cooper's (1991) '"Something Ancestral Recaptured": Spirit Possession as trope in Selected Feminist Fictions of the African Diaspora', rightly point out that feminist diaspora texts such as Brodber's are about decolonisation, the rewriting of the various structures of power, as well as confrontation with the different brands of racisms. In addition, however, they are about resurrecting and fore-fronting previously silenced knowledges, from the inside, in order to illustrate the validity of such knowledges as a way of giving back the people to themselves. By foregrounding the people's knowledges and demonstrating their significance, Brodber also illuminates their centrality to people's sense of identity.

In the scientific disciplines of social anthropology and ethnography in which Brodber's authorship is grounded, the idea of writing about a society from the inside positions her as an 'indigenous ethnographer' (Pratt 1992: 41). This is important, especially in view of anthropology's association with 'spirit thievery', which Reverend Simpson in *Myal* (37)

defines as the taking away of a people's 'knowledge of their original and natural world and [leaving] them empty shells, duppies, zombies, living deads capable only of receiving orders from someone else' (*Myal*: 107). Brodber's books engage directly with the West's association with spirit thievery. In particular this is related to traditional anthropology (especially social or cultural anthropology) and its presentation of the study of 'other' people's way of life as the study of 'primitive societies'. The West's equating of primitivism with other cultures and the ensuing project of 'civilising' those people, by which was meant denigrating their cultures and indoctrinating the people into western culture, amounts to the 'spirit thievery' or 'zombification' Reverend Simpson defines. Brodber's writing is therefore a 'participation' in the anthropological project, especially in J.M Coetzee's sense of anthropology as a process which leaves the reader 'better informed' (Coetzee 1992: 338).

Unlike traditional anthropology which positions the Western anthropologist in a hierarchical position of superiority, Brodber's writing, like Aidoo and Senior's, positions her as an equal. Brodber's insider view links with Vincent Crapanzano's dissatisfaction which he expresses through the contention that traditional ethnography tends to contain 'no understanding of the native from the native's point of view'; rather, it contains 'only the constructed understanding of the constructed native's constructed point of view' (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 74). In addition, by writing from the inside, the scientific demand of objectivity in anthropological methodology is challenged by Brodber's belief in the importance of the 'I' in the study of her society (Cudjoe 1990). The suppressed knowledges Brodber's work foreground have throughout an essence of participating empathy. A frequently quoted although lengthy example of this empathy is Anita's exorcism scene

where the people's belief in the intermingling of the natural and spiritual world is portrayed with insider understanding:

> Fainting was one thing. They could fan her and rub her up with smelling salts. And they did. But what to do when the child's face changed to that of an old woman and she began in her stupor to moan and groan like Miss Gatha and her companions at the tabernacle? Where Miss Gatha herself had fallen to the ground; where she was thrashing, boxing and kicking and screaming what seemed like "Let me go"; where her face changed to that of a beautiful fifteen-year-old and back again to that of a woman of Miss Gatha's sixty odd years and back again and back again and back again until she was silent, her limbs quiet and she was fifteen years old. In the tabernacle there was no consternation at these changes. There was instead joy: "Amen", "Thank the Lord", "Telephone from earth to heaven, telephone". There, water mother, full in white, lifted the whistle from her belt and with its cord still joined to her waistband, moved it to her lips and blew one long, sharp report. All jumping, singing, drumming and groaning ceased and everyone including water mother herself froze. She blew again, said softly "It is finished" and with that all took what they had and left Miss Gatha's form with its fifteen-year-old face on the ground. (73)

As Cooper (1991) also points out, by underscoring the ordinariness of the people's faith in the workings of the spirit, Brodber's narrative, even though 'potentially sensationalist', avoids being voyeuristic (72).

Brodber contexualises 'other' knowledges in *Myal* by firstly portraying how western knowledge and culture is indoctrinated in the colonial subject. Chapter two of *Myal* opens with young Ella O'Grady at school reciting a poem by Kipling. Significantly everyone, including Revered Simpson, applauds her effort. However, Brodber demonstrates the effects of colonial indoctrination through Ella's resultant identification with the fictive characters Diary Maid and Peter Pan. Brodber dramatises the problems of such identification through the imaginary incident at a coalmine in Scotland from where, after Ella and her white friends emerge from a chimney covered in black soot, Scottish street

children tease and laugh at them calling them the 'little blackamoors' (*Myal*: 12). The children's outlook resurfaces through Selwyn's attitude and treatment of Ella. Even though he grooms her to western standards, the reality of his society is, as Homi Bhabha says, that Ella can only be 'almost the same but not quite'. She remains outside the limits of racial acceptance.

Brodber further explores the consequences of colonial indoctrination through William Brassington who, like Ella, is multi-racial. One of the consequences of his education, part of which was undertaken at Cambridge, is William's alienation from his black background. Ironically however, it is his racial difference that arouses Maydene's father's interest in him. When he becomes a church minister and moves to Grove Town, like other missionaries, he undertakes to 'save' the black people. In other words, William's education and socialisation makes him a tool through which the people are alienated from their beliefs and culture. His interpretation of the people's beliefs and practices as heathen is based on Christian ethics. The desire to replace the people's traditional dress during worship is a physical manifestation of what William does with their spirits, to 'exorcise and replace' (*Myal*: 18) a thing which compels Maydene to challenge his outlook and call him a 'spirit thief'. Ella's education has similarly led to her alienation but unlike William, Ella comes to a consciousness of her black identity and experiences healing, by the time the story ends.

Against such a background of colonial influence, Brodber demonstrates the validity of black culture, beliefs and practices, thereby telling what Ole African in *Myal* identifies as

'The half has never been told' (34, 35). Brodber presents issues such as spirit possession and healing from within the society, a position which challenges the stereotypical nature of colonial naming. In her article entitled 'Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality' Janice Boddy (1994) defines spirit possession as 'the hold exerted over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than she' (407). Citing Helen Tiffin whose analysis of the novel *Myal* is that it is about decolonisation and opposition to the false universalizing of imperialism, Neil Kortenaar's (1999) article 'Foreign Possessions: Erna Brodber's "Myal," the Medium, and her Message', suggests symmetry between spirit possession and cultural imperialism. Kortenaar points out that 'both threaten loss of the self and a hostile takeover of the vacated body by another' (51). In her turn, Shalini Puri's (1993) article 'An Other Realism: Erna Brodber's *Myal*' describes spirit possession as a 'controlling concept-metaphor' for cultural imperialism.

Without invalidating the metaphorical readings of critics such as Kortenaar and Puri, I wish to suggest that Brodber's texts also demonstrate how spirit possession enhances the character of the possessed. Because of her insider view of the role of possession among black people and the knowledge that is gained as a result of spiritual journeying, Brodber exposes the limitation of western views that charge spirit possession with a hostile takeover of the bodies of the possessed. In other words, Brodber uses spirit possession to claim her people's identity.

The idea of spirit possession as a source of knowing challenges the colonial dimension which has been used to prescribe a negative identity on the colonised. Moreover, it links

with the historical use of spirit possession among slaves as a way of remembering their African homeland and as a source of opposition to their enslaved condition. The moment in which *Myal* is set, the second decade of the twentieth century, is a time when churches such as the Anglican, Methodist and Baptist were well established in Jamaica (Kortenaar 1999: 52). In addition to these churches however, there is the African-oriented alternative, the Kumina tabernacle. The Kumina tabernacle, which allows the people, through spirit possession, to 'journey back to Africa' (*Myal*: 7) is headed by Miss Agatha Paisely. The idea of identity in the novel is suggested through the spiritual link which filters through religious beliefs and connects Miss Gatha, the two male African healers, Ole African, a stilt-walker and Maas Cyrus, a herbalist, with Reverend Simpson, the black minister of the Baptist church.

In a presentation that demonstrates an African belief in the rebirth of spirits of ancestors, the spirits of Dan, Willie and Perce have existed and been in touch for centuries. This is how the history of the people has lived. In the present life, the spirit of Dan possesses the body of Reverend Simpson, Willie that of Ole African and Perce, Maas Cyrus. Hence as he walks into Grove Town 'pushing away the high cutlass grass ... Reverend Simpson remembered a time six hundred years ago' (38). As well as the idea of reclaiming bodies, as a Christian minister, Simpson's possession by a being from the past also suggests reclamation of the spirit. Brodber demonstrates that while the spirits 'gain bodies through which they can act in the present' (Kortenaar 1999: 53), the memories and knowledge of the people, going back centuries, are retained through these figures. In other words, history inhabits and informs the psyche by a convergence of spirits from the past on people in the

present.

Besides establishing the role of spirits in the historical memories of the people, Brodber demonstrates the humanitarian nature of spirit possession. Miss Gatha's story, which is linked with Anita's, parallels that of Maas Cyrus who, through *myalism,* a countervailing force against obeah, cures Ella. For some time the mysterious force that has persistently troubled young Anita eludes everyone. Like everyone in the village, Anita's mother Euphemia is helpless, especially when the idea that it is a young man in love who is probably responsible for the stones on the roof turns out to be unfounded. When Anita moves to live with the Holness', the force manifests itself as an invisible power that comes every night and early morning, and pins Anita onto her bed. The prayerful attempts by her adopted parents to help her fail to achieve any results. It is when Miss Gatha gets into 'the spirit' and dances the *myal* dance, a trance-possession which acts as antidote to *obeah*, that Anita is exorcised. The nature of Anita's affliction is such that it can only be combated by indigenous means and Miss Gatha carries out the necessary exorcism. Through spiritual communication and transformation, Miss Gatha lures the offending spirit into her body and thereby cures the young girl. The validity of the practice is suggested through the success of the operation and the communal participation of other spiritual figures.

In addition to demonstrating the humanitarian nature and communal benefit of spiritual possession among black people, Miss Gatha's portrayal demands a re-examination of black womanhood. In his analysis of spirit possession in Jamaica and Haiti, Richard Burton claims that spirit possession is oppressive because it 'descends' on the powerless (Burton

1997: 223). Burton's analysis, which in my opinion is limited to the spontaneous and temporary possession typical of a *Vimbuza* ritual in Malawi or *Voodoo* in Haiti, does not consider possession in the sense Brodber portrays. Admittedly, Anita's and even Ella's 'possessions' are oppressive. There is an essence of a 'take-over' of their spirits in the portrayal which I suggest illustrates the temporary possession analysed by Burton. But the two young women's possession also demonstrates the link between sexual prowess and manhood and how spiritual possession can be gendered in traditional African societies. In other words, Brodber addresses the power disparity in her society by showing how young women can be targets of male power. In the case of Ella the possessing spirit is linked to colonialism, especially through western education, an agent which in postcolonial theory is rightly linked with masculine power. Anita is possessed by Maas Levi's *obeah* who wants to use her to regain his sexual power. Levi's action points to the presence of traditional forms of spirit thievery among black people. The idea that Mass Levi uses *obeah* to try and steal Anita's spirit as a remedy for his impotence, in the language of Cooper (1991), is a 'particularly perverse manifestation of the sexual exploitation of woman' (71).

Miss Gatha's possession on the other hand, is both temporary and long-term. On the day she 'gets into the spirit' she manifests the spontaneous possession such as that experienced by *Vimbuza* dancers in Malawi which is characterised by loss of, for example, use of their limbs (Soko 1992). She kicks and thrashes and screams yet she cannot walk (*Myal*: 73). However, as part of the spiritual group of Grove Town Miss Gatha's possession is long-term. She is permanently possessed by the spirit identified as Mother Hen.

I call 'long-term possession' the situation where an ancestral spirit is believed to reside in a person's body permanently and as a result of which that person takes on the mannerisms and sometimes even the appearance of the ancestor. Amongst communities in Malawi this is said to occur, for instance, in children who, when named after a dead relative, become inhabited by the spirit of the dead person. In this kind of possession, the possessed individual has all her/his human senses and movements but also becomes more powerful. This is because when a spirit inhabits a person it brings its personality, its knowledges and its power to that person, and by asserting its presence adds to the person. This calls to mind Chielo, the Agbala priestess in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Kortenaar (1999) makes a pertinent point about the long-term possession Brodber portrays through the spiritual group of Grove Town when he says there is nothing to suggest 'ownership' nor 'control' in that spirit relationship. What takes place rather is 'enhancement' of the possessed persons (54). The physical people, Simpson, Ole African, Maas Cyrus, Maydene and Miss Gatha are made more powerful by their spiritual knowledge. In the case of Simpson, the spirit of Dan actually helps him prepare for his church sermons but also warns him in advance of the happenings in the village (*Myal*: 36-7). In the case of Miss Gatha, Maas Cyrus and Ole African, the spirits help them perform *myalism*, whose long-term effects benefit the whole society.

Brodber's insider portrayals of the cosmological world of her people clearly demonstrate the validity of black people's cultures and beliefs in Jamaica. Through the portraits she paints, Brodber challenges the colonial perceptions that have unfortunately socialised some of the people to think negatively about themselves. Through characters such as Miss

Gatha and her participation in the spiritual world, Brodber not only illustrates women's place in this important area of the people's lives, but as with the other spiritual figures of Grove Town, Miss Gatha's participation in spiritual matters demonstrates a positive use spiritual power and the humanitarian nature of traditional practices such as *myal*. Furthermore, Miss Gatha's portrayal challenges the myth of black women's weakness, docility and unimportance other than as wives and mothers. Brodber uses her to illustrate other areas where black women have held authority, of which spiritual leadership is one. Validity is also illustrated through the idea that, unlike the Christian churches, which divide people into, in this case, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists and heathens, Miss Gatha's Kumina Tabernacle is for everyone.

Conclusion

Brodber's work clearly demonstrates an activist's concern with the negative effects of the colonial encounter in her society. By exploring the damaging effects of colonialism on the psyches of some Jamaicans, Brodber agitates for a consciousness of and pride in people's black identity. The presentation of indigenous practices and beliefs from within the culture and the demonstration of their humanitarian nature challenges colonial interpretations of black people's traditions. Brodber demonstrates that the psychological effect of this negative reading has been the people's negation of their identity through undermining or erasure of their African-based practices and beliefs. Brodber's exposure of aspects of the people's practices and beliefs that were never told by the coloniser illustrates their validity and worth. Brodber re-writes and celebrates the people's identity by demonstrating that the

practices and beliefs that were deemed evil by a colonial master who did not understand them, are - often though not always - positive elements used to the benefit of the whole society.

The idea of community, which is vital in a people's sense of identity, is demonstrated through the multiplicity of characters, of both genders, that make up Brodber's fiction. The demonstration of the people's interdependence through, for instance, spiritual relationships where men and women work together or depend on each other, reinforces the importance of community. The interdependence advocated in the stories suggests the need for a re-examination of those social relations that marginalize women on the basis of their gender. In addition, the idea that unless the people learn the truth about themselves which, due to the lack of written records, Brodber suggests is only possible from the fragmented records originally retained in the collective archive of the people's memories further reinforces the importance of community to the people's identity. Such emphasis on history links Brodber with Aidoo who similarly views the past as crucial to a people's being and identity.

Brodber is also concerned with the issue of women and this forms a central aspect of her authorship. By focussing on women she moves them from the margins to the centre of society, thereby re-writing their value as members of the community. Through a collection of female protagonists, Brodber's work illustrates the social existence of black Jamaican women. She shows how they are a marginalized group in Jamaica and demonstrates that their marginality is not only a result of colonialism, but that some traditional practices

collude with colonialism to objectify women. Brodber's focus however is not on the women's marginalization; rather, through historical journeys in memory, Brodber demonstrates how women have held central positions, such as spiritual leadership, in the past. Through presentations such as this, Brodber calls for change in the social perception of black women and also in the women's attitude and perception of themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR

OLIVE SENIOR

"No book make yet that could write down everything. Learn that!" (*Discerner of Hearts*: 5).

This chapter investigates how Olive Senior portrays womanhood in some of the stories in her three collections, *Summer Lightning* (1985), *Arrival of the Snake Woman* (1986) and *Discerner of Hearts* (1995). Senior's commitment to the plight of the marginalized black people, and her identification with this group of her Jamaican society, which is expressed in her work as a sociologist and writer, makes her distinctively fitted for an exploration of discourses of womanhood from the African diaspora. I examine how Senior grapples with the problematic issue of identity, which as a result of their geographic dislocation from Africa and history of enslavement, I believe is a central issue for black diaspora people. I explore how Senior delineates and defines black womanhood and how she represents this in her stories. In other words, who is the black woman and what defines womanhood in a society in which race, class and colour are inextricably intertwined and in which so many people are, as a result of the historic experience of enslavement and to borrow from Homi

Bhabha, located 'in-between'? (Homi Bhabha: 1994:13)

The chapter opens with an outline of Olive Senior's life as a Jamaican woman. It examines how the geographic location of the Caribbean and the experience of enslavement have shaped ideas of identity in the Caribbean region and specifically in Jamaica, since the Middle Passage. As a determinant of social position and status, the section also explores how as a writer Senior deals with the problematic concept of race in relation to class and gender. Finally Senior's concerns as a writer – namely motherhood, the importance of children, religion, orature and story telling, and the ideologies of race, class and gender – are explored in the context of her stories. My argument in this chapter is that while gender and class play the main role in conceptualising black womanhood in the African context, as Aidoo and Head's stories demonstrate, in Jamaica black womanhood is a similarly problematic construction. Its elaboration in Senior's stories show black female identity to be a matter not only of gender and class but also of race and colour as well as the history and cultural practices that impinge on Jamaican social mores.

The broken vase

One of a poor farming family of ten children, Olive Senior was born in a 'small, very backward village in Jamaica' called Trelawny in 1941 (Rutherford 1986: 12). The community in this village was mainly black and African. The values and beliefs in this rural setting were rooted in African traditions of the community. For instance, Senior talks of learning the importance of age and vocation in determining social status. The elderly

would command respect and influence on the strength of their age alone. Similarly important members of society such as herbalists, midwives, prophets and prophetesses acquired status because of their work. In other words, the rural setting taught her to value people in 'non-materialist terms' (Rutherford 1986: 12). In addition, Senior learnt about African rooted social practices and beliefs such as *obeah* and *myal,* and about traditional wisdom through the people's folk tales and stories (Rutherford 1986:12).

At the age of four, Senior was sent to live with her mother's relatives in an urban parish called Westmoreland. This family of her great aunt and uncle, who were childless, owned property and were therefore comparatively well off. The practice of shifting children between families of relatives or to strangers is common in the Caribbean. As a social practice, it has roots in African societies where people exist in village communities made up of close and/or distant relations as well as strangers or 'aliens' seeking or needing new environments. In these communities children belong to the community and it is common practice for a child to be reared in a household other than the biological parent's home.

The beliefs and practices of Senior's rural home differed significantly from the European values of her urban home. In her new environment of a 'pallid pseudo-European gentility' (Rutherford 1986: 12), Senior was socialised to respect European values. In the process, traditional society and culture of her village life were undermined and down-rated. Significantly, the lessons at school complimented those at her urban home. The Jamaican school syllabus, as in colonial Africa, was based on a British curriculum and the pupils learnt about British history, society, landscapes, language and literature and nothing about

Jamaica. In her poem 'Colonial Girls School' from the collection *Talking of Trees* (1986), Senior criticizes this denial of knowledge about the community as Jamaicans. A refrain says: 'nothing about us/there was nothing about us at all' (quoted from Chew and Rutherford 1993: 161)

The shuffling and shifting between two households located at extreme ends of Jamaican social fabric exposed Senior to the notions of race, colour and class which underscore Jamaican society. She became aware of 'difference' based on colour and economic worth. This moving between two different worlds eventually resulted in the fragmentation of her identity. As a child Senior talks of confusion, of feeling alienated and displaced. It was only as an adult that she came to realise that she belonged to both parts of her heritage, the rural African and the urban Westernised Jamaica (Rowell 1988: 480). Her collection *Summer Lightning* (1986) especially represents a coming to grips with that fragmented childhood. It signifies negotiation and a reclaiming of identity. In 'Bright Thursdays' for instance, she directly deals with alienation, displacement and feelings of confusion as a result of being of mixed race. The world of the two grandparents where the young girl Laura is sent is very different from the rural home of her black mother. The experience of two such radically different households however displaces her completely and we are told that she 'soon felt alienated from *others*' (*Summer Lightning*: 41, my emphasis).

A central aspect of Senior's village life was that, in her own words, 'we were never allowed to feel that we were superior to other people' (Rutherford 1986: 12). This idea is very important in relation to Senior's career as a writer. A close look at her stories reveals that

the lessons of her village life provide a central basis for her authorship. Her stories reveal carefully drawn portraits of a society she identifies with and cares about. She writes from the position of insider and powerfully articulates and affirms Jamaican culture and way of life. She focuses on and allocates central space to those on the margins of the already marginalized Jamaican society. Children, women, and social outcasts are brought in from the periphery of society to occupy centre stage in her narratives. By writing about, and in the voices of, the ordinary people, Senior gives them 'subjectivity'. The cultures, bodies and world of silenced Jamaican voices are reclaimed and restored. Senior gives back to her people their selves and her effectiveness is heightened by the fact that she writes from within her society.

Senior's interest in her society was first shown when she worked as a journalist beginning while she was still a student at Montego Bay High School. Her interest in society eventually took her to Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, where she obtained a degree in print journalism. Later, she obtained a Thomson scholarship and studied in England. The concern with her society eventually translated into a career in sociology where she has undertaken studies on various Caribbean societies, including the socio-cultural relations and practices of Jamaicans. A former editor of *Social and Economic Studies*, Senior's career includes working as public relations officer at the University of West Indies Institute of Social and Economic Studies, as Managing Director of the Institute of Jamaica Publishing Company and as editor of *Jamaica Journal*.

Senior's writing includes non-fiction works such as *The Message is Change* (1972), which

looks at the 1972 Jamaica General Elections, *A-Z of Jamaica Heritage* (1984), *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English-Speaking Caribbean* (1991), two collections of poetry, *Talking of Trees* (1986), and *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994) and the three short story collections, *Summer Lightning and Other Stories* (1986) which won her the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1987, *Arrival of the Snake Woman* (1989) and *Discerner of Hearts* (1995). As well as the Commonwealth Literature Prize, Senior also won the Jamaica Centenary Medal in 1980, the Commonwealth Writer's Award in 1986, and the Silver Musgrave medal for Literature in 1988.

Concerns as a writer

The pervasive global exclusion and silencing of women, through tightly controlled and limited publication opportunities as well as the comparatively fewer critical analyses of women's works, has led to a concerted effort on the part of many women to claim subjectivity. One way of achieving this has been through the authoring of texts that focus on women and address and deal with women's issues. For black women the exclusion has been multiple. Not only has the black woman been excluded because of gender, she has also been excluded because of her colour. And as I point out in the chapter on Bessie Head, in multiracial societies such as the Caribbean, North America, Britain, and apartheid South Africa, race is linked to class. In these communities, multi-racial people are often regarded as black.

By virtue of their colour, black people have been allocated the lowest rung of the human

ladder. To be female compounds that marginalization even further. In Alice Walker's book *The Colour Purple* (1983), the character Celie asserts her identity as a black woman when she says: 'I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook...But I'm here' (176). This declaration, which is spoken against the multiple positions from which the male voice seeks to erase her, succinctly articulates the position of women writers such as Senior whose writing is an assertion of women's visibility. It is a claim to subjectivity, which the women recognise as the right of all members of a community. The focus on women in her stories and the publication of *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English-Speaking Caribbean* (1991), a sociological text that discusses the lives of ordinary women in the Caribbean, underpins Senior's commitment to examining the socio-cultural position of women in her society.

As well as women, Senior is concerned with other members of the community such as children, the elderly, outcasts, poor people and the insane. Many societies perceive such groups as insignificant with nothing to contribute to the well-being of society. Even though the elderly might sometimes be respected for their wisdom, many are nonetheless also considered as being past making a beneficial contribution to society. Senior's stories re-write the position of such people by asserting their importance as members of society and worthwhile literary subjects. The assertion of visibility is linked with the issue of value. Senior is concerned with the worth of people regardless of their colour, gender, class or age. Black, Indian, mixed-race people categories which have been relegated to the margins because of colour and cultural practices are brought in from their usual marginal to the centre of her world, as are children, the elderly, the insane and poor people. Senior is

concerned with the value of marginalized people to each other and to others. And through her stories she calls into question the socio-cultural practice that makes judgements on people based on the colour of their skin and their economic worth.

In addition to racial value, Senior is concerned with economic value. The issue of material well-being in Jamaica is tightly woven with the historic experience of slavery from which black people have emerged as the most disadvantaged. Senior is therefore concerned with poor people and their position in the society. Through her fiction Senior brings the poor from the periphery to the centre of the Jamaican society.

Senior's stories also communicate her social vision of an integrated Jamaican society. To achieve her goal she does three things. Firstly, she draws her characters from across the range of the racial, economic, gender and age divisions of her community. This allows her to provide a profile of Jamaican society and challenge any hierarchy based on Westernised stereotypes of race, class, gender and age. Secondly, Senior concerns herself with ways of knowledge that, in the west, have been regarded as inferior because they are rooted in an African background. Her stories offer traditional African culture and practices not as subordinate, but as alternative ways of knowledge, complementing the received knowledge of Jamaica's western heritage. Traditional practices such as harvest celebrations, offerings of sacrifices to placate the gods, and root medicines as offered by Mister Bunyan in 'Discerner of Hearts' are presented as ordinary and everyday practices which are important to the people. These practices are exploited to reveal aspects of her society which have otherwise been erased through colonial practice. Thirdly, she incorporates storytelling, an

African heritage that links Senior with the African women writers such as Aidoo, Ogot, Emecheta and Head, in the writing of her stories. As an art learnt from Jamaican and African 'foremothers', storytelling provides Senior with an archive of material and practices which she uses alongside her received western heritage of writing. This incorporation of multiple genres of storytelling, including folktales, myths and traditional wisdom in her art provides a model for the integrated society Senior calls for.

Storytelling/orature

In an interview with Charles Rowell, Olive Senior acknowledges the influence of oral literature on her career as writer: 'I was born and grew up in rural Jamaica and my early childhood was far removed in space and time from any substantive external contacts and influences. My major influence then was the oral tradition - storytelling, "hot" preaching, praying and testifying (for religious influence was strong), "tea-meetings", and so on. Later came formal exposure to "English" literature in high school' (Rowell 1988: 480). In an earlier interview with Anna Rutherford, she talks about her exposure to the poetry of the now famous Caribbean woman poet, Louise Bennett. Because Bennett's work was in dialect and was created out of everyday Jamaican activities and way of life it underwent the literary lynching faced by many black writers. It was not regarded as literature. Senior's acknowledgement of the significance of women such as Bennett articulates the influence of 'foremothers' in her creativity (Rutherford 1986: 18-19).

The idea of women looking back to the tales of their foremothers to create their own stories

is prevalent amongst Africans and people of African descent. Aidoo whose play *Anowa*, she tells us, was based on a legend she heard from her mother acknowledges this heritage. Buchi Emecheta acknowledges her aunt or, as they are called in West Africa, 'big mother' ('Feminism with small 'f'' 1988: 173) while Grace Ogot pays homage to her grandmother (Interview with Lindfors 1976: 57). In many black societies storytelling is a woman's role, usually undertaken late in the evening after the day's work is done. The history, culture and values of the society, what Wilentz calls 'cultural preparedness', are passed on to the younger generation through these stories. As storytellers, the women are therefore responsible for children's socialization. Beverly Stoeltje calls this 'generational continuity' and acknowledges its importance in the education of children (quoted in Wilentz, 1992: xii).

As I will show, Senior's stories are similarly born from a childhood exposure to oral literature. Like Bennett's poems, her stories are created out of the daily life of rural Jamaica. The stories convey the cultures and history of Jamaican people. Through what has survived of African tradition, Senior embarks on a re-articulation, a re-discovering and reflecting on those African roots which would help rebuild communities and would be more in line with, and take into account, the African cultural values of society. One way she achieves this is through use of the orature. Senior acknowledges the significance of storytelling to her career when she says:

> I think that the oral tradition has profoundly influenced me as a writer because I grew up in a society where the spoken word was important. We created our own entertainment, every night as a child living in the village I remember an adult told us stories - Duppy stories, Anancy stories, or whatever, or we told each other stories. There was also something dramatic in the quality of real life, people would narrate everyday events in a very dramatic way...I suppose fundamentally I'm a

> story teller and I attribute that to my early experience of growing up in a rural culture. (Rutherford 1986: 19)

In *Oral Tradition as History* (1985), Jan Vansina points out that 'oral tradition' includes oral history and orature. He distinguishes between oral history which he says deals with 'accounts of events' and orature which has to do with the 'interpretation of experience'. Gay Wilentz calls it 'oraliterature' (Wilentz 1992: 38). Orature includes folktales, songs, and proverbs which, as Vansina points out are: 'among the main well springs of what we call culture' which are taught, through stories, to children at the same time as they learn to speak. Orature is therefore a method of education and the role of the mother, aunt or grandmother as storyteller is important. This importance of the woman as storyteller is echoed in Filoma Steady's claim regarding the ideologies of many African societies when she says: 'The woman is of intrinsic value...and represents the ultimate value in life, namely the continuity of the group' (Steady 1981: 32). In other words and as Gay Wilentz puts it, orature and literature 'are part of many women's daily struggle to communicate, converse, and pass on values to their own and other children, and one another' (Wilentz 1992: xiv).

As a woman writer, Senior continues the role of woman as storyteller. She is a modern 'griot' and 'chief instructress' on whose shoulders rests the role of educating the young about the history, culture and values of society. Through her use of oral tradition in her stories, she communicates her cultural heritage to the generations of readers who represent the 'next generation'. This claim is reflected in the orality of her writing style. Firstly, Senior writes with what Ernest Emenyonu (1975) calls a 'keen ear for village voices' (31). Her stories are about rural people who speak in the linguistic varieties of their regions. I

deal with this idea in more detail in the section on language. Secondly her stories draw from the collective folk material of her community. For instance, 'Arrival of the Snake Woman' is based on the folktale of Anansi, a spider that survives numerous hardships and difficult situations. Thirdly, her narrative style uses the voice in such a way that the characters in the text speak directly to the reader. Through this direct communication, the reader gets to know more about the characters. In addition, the text might demand the participation of the reader as audience.

For example in 'Ballad', a story that focuses on Miss Rilla, a social outcast, a young girl's composition on 'The Most Unforgettable Character I Ever Met' is destroyed by her teacher because the person she writes about, Miss Rilla, is not considered socially respectable and therefore 'not fit person to write composition about' (*Summer Lightning*: 100). Miss Rilla had been ostracized in the community because of her life style. She has numerous relationships with different men, one of which results in a fight in which one of the men is killed. Not long after this incident, she marries Poppa D, one of the most prosperous men in the community. However, Miss Rilla has no children, a situation that compounds her ostricization. Because she is not allowed to write about Miss Rilla, Lenora, the narrator of the story, decides to 'tell' the story. As she tells Miss Rilla's story, Lenora's own story, her life and circumstance is also communicated. The style of 'Ballad' presumes a listening audience. Lenora includes the listener in the narrative through her direct reference to the reader as 'you' and her use of 'we'. Senior further reinforces the idea of a present audience through the concept of a 'chorus' which is a group's response to the solo performance of a lead singer/performer. Lenora tells us that:

> When Miss Rilla die I wish I could make up a Ballad for her like they do for famous people in old days. Don't ask me why only when we sing ballad song in school I get sad and think of Miss Rilla. But I cant sing or play guitar and nobody make music round here since that Blue Boy gone away and beside this whole thing too deep and wide for a little thing like a Ballad. So I will tell you the story of Miss Rilla and Poppa D, Blue Boy and me though is really about Miss Rilla. And when we come to the sad part we can have something like a chorus because they have that in all the ballad song they sing but I don't think bout the chorus yet. (100)

Such a use of 'oraliterature' (Wilentz 1992: 38) links Senior to her African background and to women writers such as Aidoo and Head. Senior demonstrates that like her African counterparts she draws from the oral tradition of her African ancestry in her creative art.

Problems of identification: race, colour, class and gender

As a result of the historical experience of enslavement and colonisation, descendants of the enslaved black people, descendants of the white plantation owners and/or overseers, descendants of the contracted Indian and Chinese labourers and the mulattoes or 'coloureds' (as they are called in Southern Africa), collectively make up what comprises modern Jamaican society. In her interview with Anna Rutherford (1986), Senior points to the complexity of such a multiracial society. Her own position as a person of mixed-race lends credibility to her recognition of the dilemmas of an interracial state. When asked about the racial tensions existing in her community as she grew up, Senior replied that: 'I didn't really have a consciousness of race; I came to this kind of consciousness later when I went to high school' (Rutherford 1986: 12-13). In the interview with Rowel (1988) she talks of realising quite late in life that as a child of mixed race she was a product of the two extremes of Jamaican society and belonged to both worlds.

In his essay entitled 'New Ethnicities' Stuart Hall demonstrates how racially, ethnically and culturally diverse groups of people can forge a common identity on the basis of a shared experience (Donald and Rattansi 1992: 252-259). His essay shows how the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain became the catalyst for a politics of resistance amongst groups with diverse histories, practices and ethnic identities. The situation they found themselves in produced a collective identity that came to be referred to as the 'Black Experience'. As a British colony, Jamaican society was similarly structured. The people who were not white experienced a similar positioning. When they were brought in, black people were located at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The contracted Indian and Chinese labour force that replaced the Africans at emancipation although slightly better positioned than the blacks was nonetheless never incorporated into the white community.

From her stories as well as from her interviews, it becomes clear that Senior is not only aware of the complexity of the Jamaican situation in relation to race and class but also identifies with those on the 'border' of the society. Race, class and colour marked identity and located people within specific social locations. However it is important to recognise that there are grey areas that challenge simple binaries. When asked about the complication of race and colour to her identity she says:

> I think I was far more conscious of class tensions than of race. In terms of the hierarchy my adopted family had status because they had land and they were also light-skinned, whereas though my parents were light-skinned, they were poor, so their status was quite different and so both related to darker-skinned people in different ways…I don't think race can be separated from class and nowadays I would suggest that class is a far more important determinant of all kinds of things than is race. (Rutherford 1986: 13)

What Senior suggests is not an underrating of race as a determinant of status and therefore identity. Rather she demonstrates the intertwining of race and colour and class and how these determine social positioning. Thus even though her parents were light-skinned, the other factors of location and economic status came into play in determining who they were socially. It is therefore from this consciousness of the intertwining of multiple concepts and the importance of class in determining identity that Senior writes the marginality in which she clearly locates herself. As a woman that marginality is doubled. Her existence, in spite of the colour of her skin, is linked with that of the mostly black women located on the margins of Jamaican social hierarchy. The focus on women in her stories and the writing of *Working Miracles,* her study of the lives of ordinary Caribbean women's lives, demonstrates this identification. Senior's personal position differs to the situation in, for instance, Bessie Head's South Africa, where coloureds felt automatically superior to black people. In *A Question of Power* Head demonstrates this elevation and alienation and reveals the reluctance of South African coloureds to identify with those Uledi-Kamanga (1999) calls 'full-blooded black Africans' (40).

Senior's women - the dilemmas of womanhood

George Lamming's description of his upbringing as a child illustrates the situation of many children in the Caribbean. Simultaneously, it also shows the dilemmas of many mothers. Expressing the predicament of growing up without a father in his novel In *The Castle of My Skin* (1953), Lamming writes: 'My father who had only fathered the idea of me had left me the sole liability of *my mother who really fathered me*' (3). In a now famous study of Jamaican rural communities, Edith Clarke uses this phrase as the title of her book, *My*

Mother Who Fathered Me (1972). Amongst other achievements, Clarke's study reveals the dual existence of Jamaican women as mothers. Similarly, Lamming's lament points to the socio-cultural dilemma of many Caribbean women. As single parents, the women undertake dual roles as nurturers and discipliners. According to studies such as Clarke's, this is not always easy for the women. It is a complex position in which the women need to constantly negotiate their roles. In their turn, the children might find the mother's double role confusing and alienating. Senior's stories, especially in *Summer Lightning*, which demonstrate the alienation Lamming points out, achieve two things. First they bring into perspective the structure of numerous Jamaican households. In many of the stories there is no father figure. The stories are about the relationship of a child with the mother and/or extended family. This is important for the statement it makes about single motherhood. Unlike western culture, which has basically been based on Christian morality, single motherhood is not condemned in the stories. As it is in many African communities, Senior demonstrates that motherhood is an important part of Jamaican women's lives and that marriage is considered a separate issue. Secondly, the stories reveal the dilemmas of the women as mothers.

The absent father and consequently the assumption of a dual role by the mother are common in the ordering of the family in the Caribbean (Senior 1991: 180; Rutherford 1986: 17). This is similar to what Head observes in Botswana. As a result of most men's migration to the urban centres in search for work, rural women in Botswana are left to manage the family and raise the children alone. Quoting J.D. Elder (1968), Senior points out that as a single parent, the woman is both nurturer and discipliner, both 'satisfier and

depriver' (Senior 1991: 40) Socially, this duality of roles has played an important role in formulating Jamaican women's identities. As a result of the multiple roles the women have had to undertake, there has emerged the idea of the 'black matriarch'. Historically, because black women's existence during enslavement necessitated that they take on enormous burdens as slaves and as mothers to children (some of which they were forced to birth as a cheap labour force for the plantations), the women, understandably, had to be strong. A whole day's work in the fields followed by caring and cooking for one's children in the evening is a demanding role. Yet the women were determined to survive.

One found a similar situation for women in Southern Africa in countries such as Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique and Malawi in the later 1950s up to late 1970s, when a lot of men migrated to South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) to work in the mines. This left their wives the responsibility of bringing up the children. Under such circumstances, even with the support of the extended family as was the case in most of the Southern African families, the women would take on extra work on the farm or as petty traders in order to supplement what the husbands sent home. In this regard, the situation on the Caribbean plantations was somewhat different. The social conditions of the slave women were such that they did not have the extra support the African woman got. The women on the Caribbean plantations had to survive and be strong for their children as single parents. It is this strength, which was necessary for the women's survival that has earned the black woman the term 'matriarch'. The idea that black diaspora women are domineering, aggressive, super-powerful and managing, and which as Rogers-Rose (1980: 11) shows, to have been mostly propounded by western social scientists, is a biased reading which ignores the

reality of the women's lives.

Clearly, diaspora women needed to be strong and a number of writers from the Caribbean portray the image of strong, powerful, and capable black women in their texts, for instance Tanty in Sam Selvon's The *Lonely Londoners* (1956), Martha in Caryl Phillips' *Crossing The River* (1993), the Fat Black woman of Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984) and Lorna Goodison's women such as the one featured in the poem 'My Mother'. The front cover of Senior's last collection, *Discerner of Hearts,* published by McClelland and Stewart, can also be read as portraying this image. The cover shows a bust of a young black woman cast in concrete up to just below full and very large breasts, resting on a square block of solid concrete. The full breasts represent the nurturing associated with motherhood, which in the traditional Jamaican world-view is an important expression of women's identity and the essence of their womanhood. The concrete material used for the bust as well as the proud lift of the face, echoes the idea of strength, capability, endurance, determination and permanence. In addition, the front cover of Senior's study of Caribbean women's lives, *Working Miracle,* presents a mahogany carving portraying two female figures. Entitled 'Market Women', the figurines, which are carrying baskets on their heads, are a sturdy solid mass and re-echo the idea of strength. However, the women's texts similarly convey the dilemmas of black womanhood. The cover of *Discerner of Hearts* has a snake encircling a young woman's neck. The garden in which the figure is shown and the snake encircling the figure's neck evokes the biblical figure of Eve and the serpent. These contrasting images of strength and helplessness articulate the contradictory reality of black women's existence.

Strength, capability, enduring determination and helplessness in the face of tradition characterise the Snake Woman in *Arrival of the Snake Woman.* When she arrives as a new bride in the community, the woman is unnamed and refused the space in which to name herself. She does not speak. The boys call her 'Miss Coolie' while the parson of the Christian church renames her Gertrude at baptism. Ishmael, the narrator tells us:

> I don't think that anyone ever knew her Indian name or anything about her, partly because she hardly spoke at all. It was as if, crossing over the mountains to start a new life, or perhaps even earlier when she crossed the seas, she had left behind all that reminded her of the old, shed her identity and her history, became transformed into whatever we would make of her, our Miss Coolie. (6-7)

The society in Mount Rose is unreceptive, unwelcoming and hostile towards her. To the Christian parson she personifies the evil in his sermons and becomes a receptacle for all the sins he has been preaching against. She is 'Daughter of Zion', 'Whore of Babylon' and she becomes the reason behind a new fervour in his effort to bring the 'Heathen into the fold'. Even her dress is offensive to the parson and the rest of the community find it curious. However, Miss Coolie is composed and quietly undertakes her daily chores of cooking, gardening and later on, trading. Her gradual abandoning of the markers of her Indian-ness, her jewellery and her *sari*, are not an acceptance of her marginalized treatment; rather she abandons them because they obstruct her manual work. Her early life as a farmer is replaced by trading. Miss Coolie sells farm produce in town and returns with necessities such as soap and salt to sell in the village. Through trading Miss Coolie eventually becomes the focal point of the community's life. When her son Biya turns five years old, she accepts baptism, abandons her traditional dress and adopts the white loose dress worn by the other women because she wants to get her son into the mission school. By wearing the clothes demanded by society and by going to church and getting baptised, Miss Coolie

is however, only superficially converted. She simply puts her culture on hold until such a time as she can resume it. Years later, after achieving her goals, we are told that:

> She has reverted to wearing saris again, ones with gold and silver borders now, put back on her bangles, her rings, earrings and her nose ring; put a red spot on her forehead to show she is a married lady…And she gave all her daughters Indian names and adorned them with gold ornaments as soon as they were born and forsook the church as soon as the government school came in. (43)

Even though she is Indian, Miss Coolie's character is clearly modelled on the Anansi figure, a very common feature of Caribbean mythology. This myth which originates from West Africa has parallels in other African mythology and folklore. By endowing an Indian woman with attributes from an African myth, Senior challenges the divisive racial and gender categories Jamaican society is structured on and calls for the integration of society. Anansi, a spider, signifies resistance, subversion and survival in African mythology in a similar manner to other animals such as the hare, monkey and tortoise. In the folktale, Anansi is calm yet always alert. He/she overcomes and survives hardships and difficult situations through shrewd planning and patience. Similarly, through patience and strategic planning Miss Coolie circumvents dominant western and Christian ideology, and gradually becomes a central figure in Mount Rose.

Significantly, Miss Coolie's existence in her new environment is shrouded in silence. Ishmael, the boy who narrates her story says: 'I never knew whether she spoke so little because she was naturally very reticent or whether she never really felt comfortable speaking English, or whether in her early years of hardship, isolation and exile she had got into the habit of not speaking' (*Arrival of the Snake Woman*: 7). The uncertainty with which Senior surrounds this silence opens it up to multiple interpretations. Miss Coolie's silence

could be seen as a matter of choice, in which case it is empowering because it is rebellious. It is a refusal of the imposition of the 'other's' language. However, the attitude of the community is clearly also silencing. This is a society whose capacity for accepting others has been arrested as a result of the Parson's sermons as well as the community's own myths about racial difference. The entire district shuns her and no one speaks to her because they consider her an interloper. Her arrival exposes the community's racial and gender prejudices.

As she challenges her own marginal position, Miss Coolie however, also participates in the perpetuation of gender prejudices through the way she brings up her own daughters. Senior is demonstrating the complication of women's existence and calling for a re-examination of their value system. When Ishmael marries Najeela, her first daughter, he points out that she is a very good wife. One of the reasons for this 'goodness' is because she 'never opens her mouth in public' (*Arrival of the Snake Woman*: 42). In his opinion, the fact that his wife is 'silent' proves that she has been well brought up. The social expectancy of silence from women is one Miss Coolie participates in through the way she brings up her seven girls so differently from her son, Biya. From age five, Biya is groomed for success. His mother tells Ishmael that he is going to train as a lawyer. He is consequently sent to university after high school. Meanwhile the girls are not educated beyond elementary school. Miss Coolie's service to them is to ensure that they are married to the best men in the area and she betroths them at very early ages.

If her own marriage to SonSon is used as a model for the marriages of her daughters, the

portrayal of Miss Coolie's strength and determination is complicated. It camouflages her helplessness and a desire for survival through which, as a woman, she simultaneously contributes to her own and other women's marginalization. Miss Coolie's survival method, which includes slaving away for the lazy SonSon and making sure that he is a happy husband, undermines her out-manoeuvring of society. According to Alison Donnell, in an article entitled 'The Short Fiction of Olive Senior', Miss Coolie's behaviour is not subservience but rather a mode of 'strategic survival' (Conde and Lonsdale 1999: 126). Though Donnell is right, I suggest that it is nonetheless also participation in woman's marginalization and subjugation. The rearing of her daughters shows her participating in a socio-cultural practice that says that because they are women, they are expected to work hard and provide for the family while like SonSon, their husbands lounge about and grow fat. Ishmael's wife Najeela testifies to this later in the story. Miss Coolie has trained her so that she insists on doing everything for her husband. Thus, as well as out-witting society, Miss Coolie's character demonstrates women's participation in their social oppression and clearly, therefore, communicates their dilemmas as women.

Furthermore, *Arrival of the Snake Woman* points at several polygamous relationships. Miss Coolie's arrival at Mount Rose is into what amounts to a polygamous relationship. And here one is reminded of Esi in Aidoo's *Changes* who similarly enters into a polygamous relationship with Ali after breaking up with her husband Oko. Miss Coolie's husband SonSon is already attached to two women with whom he has three children. What is interesting is Senior's ambiguity in handling the issue. Senior presents polygamy simply as part of Jamaica's socio-cultural life and therefore not worthy of attention. Apart from the

one time we are told that Jestina, the younger of his two wives, takes to frequenting Ishmael's house so she can '"throw word" and "Cut-eye" at the "coolie-gal" next door' (*Arrival of the Snake Woman:* 7), the story is silent about its effect on the women. Several of the male characters are involved in polygamy. Moses has two wives, Geraldine in Mount Rose and Trinna, the sixteen year old who is his wife for the four months he spends cutting cane at the Bay. After he grows up, Biya also engages in numerous sexual relationships which result in children and which he brings to his mother's house for rearing. SonSon's taking on a third wife is not surprising to the community. What seems to be problematic is Miss Coolie's racial difference. Through the polygamous relationships she describes, Senior demonstrates the prevalence of such relationships and the women's attitude to it. She shows how Jamaican women accept roles such as those demanded by polygamy as part of their lives and demonstrate how they can use such relationships to negotiate their own identities.

In her analysis of the polygamous relationship, Awa Thiam (1978) points out that men will take on more than one wife as a display of their worldly goods, where the women become an expression of their affluence or within rural societies, as a means for labour. A peasant man who decides to marry several women is almost always driven by the desire to increase his chances of making profit after selling the agricultural produce grown by his numerous wives. As soon as she arrives in Mount Rose, Miss Coolie becomes the worker typical in the polygamous relationship of a rural man described by Thiam. With her bare hands, she rebuilds SonSon's old, falling-down house and transforms the weed-filled yard area into a 'magical garden' (*Arrival of the Snake Woman*: 9) producing different vegetables and fruits,

both local and exotic. Later she uses the small profits from the gardening to set herself up in a trading business. As her children get married and have their own children, she buys the Top House and extends it so that everyone is accommodated. Meanwhile SonSon's contribution to her labour is 'to grow fat and very contented' (*Arrival of the Snake Woman*: 6). At no point does the story suggest that the Snake Woman is unhappy with her position in relation to her polygamous marriage. Miss Coolie's happiness seems to entirely depend on providing for and ensuring the future of her children and grandchildren. Senior is clear about SonSon's marital contentment. However through his absence from most of the action it is obvious that he is not the centre of Miss Coolie's life. The children are. The emphasis on children links Senior to African women writers such as Emecheta who separate motherhood from wifehood and focus on the mother/child relationship which many black African women find empowering.

Writing in relation to polygamy, Zulu Sofola offers her perspective from a West African angle (Nnaemeka 1998: 51-64). Sofola's argument is that within polygamy, man is a 'shared commodity' (63), amongst the women. And the more the husband is shared, the less he becomes central to women's lives. Instead it is the mother/child dynamic that takes central space in the women's lives. Sofola calls for a contextual understanding of polygamy before it is condemned and suggests that it is normally the educated African woman, who has embraced monogamy and wants to keep her husband to herself who is most opposed to it. In agreement with the idea of the importance of the mother/child dynamic to women's lives, Obioma Nnaemeka (1998: 1-35) shows how many African women writers delink motherhood from wifehood and focus on motherhood and what the mother does for her

children. This, she suggests, is because of the empowerment of motherhood to women's lives.

As an African woman I agree with Nnaemeka's point about the empowerment of motherhood to women's lives and also Sofola's idea that issues that relate to Africa need to be understood in context before they are condemned. The point here is not to suggest that polygamy is only an African issue. Other communities outside Africa also practice it. However, what Sofola's argument does not deal with in relation to polygamy are the power relations within marriage. Her argument does not address the origins of the institution. To suggest that because women share a man they are in control is problematic.

Apart from the provision of labour that Thiam points out, polygamy also suggests that it is an absolute necessity for men to have a ready supply of women for sexual gratification. When one is not there another takes her place. This is not the case with the women who are expected to abstain between births. After the birth of a child, a woman is not expected back on her husband's bed until after the time it takes to wean a child. And in some of the African societies that practice polygamy this can be up to two or three years. In addition, Sofola does not deal with the emotional and physical stresses possible amongst the women as a result of sharing their husband. It is not only educated women who are susceptible to emotional and psychological pain. Even though the polygamous man is generally not expected to have favourites, the cases of conflict, emotional and psychological trauma between women in polygamous relationships are too numerous to treat lightly. By writing about polygamy, and how the women handle it, Senior's 'Arrival of the Snake Woman'

once again demonstrates the dilemmas in the women's lives.

In 'Zig Zag', Senior tells the story of a woman named Desrine. Desrine is washer woman, cook, cleaner and nanny to the children Muffet and Sadie in Allen Chance's household. The character of a black maid working for a white family, which articulates the reality of many black women, is common in Senior's stories. There is for instance Cissy in 'Discerner of Hearts', Gatha in 'The Lizardy Man and His Lady', Clarissa, Irene and Cherry also in 'Zig Zag', Mirelle in 'Tenantry of Birds' and Mirie in 'Bright Thursdays'. These women's lives demonstrate Jamaica's social exclusions based on colour and gender. Because they are black and female, the only work they are allowed to do is menial.

However, the women possess a determined resolve, which challenges their oppression. As individuals they survive the ostracized conditions in which they live by, for instance, carving a niche for themselves within the space of their marginalization. For example, Desrine claims her work area in the Chance household. Sadie calls it her 'lair'. No one is allowed access and within it we are told 'Desrine was like a coil there, man, like a snake, ready to spring if you just say, "Fe!"'(*Discerner of Hearts*: 162). If anyone or anything upset her, she would bang pots and pans and cupboard doors and no one dared to come and ask her why. Similarly, Cissy claims her quarters in the story 'Discerner of Hearts'. In addition the women confront the marginalized existence of their people through their determination to improve the lives of their children. As mothers they are determined that their children will not replicate the marginalized life they have lived. This is what Senior refers to when she says: 'There is something sacrificial yet noble about the lives of poor

women especially because they end up investing everything in their children' (Rutherford 1986: 17).

In this story Desrine has seven children. As a single mother she shoulders all the responsibility for them and struggles to make ends meet. Desrine is nonetheless determined to ensure that her children will have a better future. Aware of the opportunities to be had through education, she leaves her children with her parents and finds a job as a maid in a white household in town. Every payday she takes her wages to her parents for the children's education and upkeep. Desrine's sacrificial responsibility towards her children is further demonstrated in that no matter how tired she feels she always makes it a point to see them every fortnight. She catches the bus or walks to the village in the mountains. The heavy October rains and floods are not a deterrent. They do not stop her. In addition, Desrine owns only one pair of shoes, which she often slings around her neck in order to protect them from bad weather and fast wear. She also owns only one good dress, which has patches under the armpits. Yet Desrine is determined to effect change. The awareness that education or the learning of a trade is the only method for challenging black people's marginal existence makes her determined to educate her children. Working persistently and for long hours, she saves her wages for her children's school fees and even pays for extra lessons in order to help them achieve better.

In addition, 'Zig Zag' demonstrates the intersection of race with class and gender and how these impact on the society. These concerns link Senior to Bessie Head in *Maru* and *A Question of Power* where Head explores similar issues within a Botswana society. In

'Arrival of the Snake Woman', Senior demonstrates the prejudice of a whole community. In 'Zig Zag' the prejudice is at individual level. In this story the family of Allen Chance, his wife, Mother Dear, and their daughters Muffett and Sadie, are snobs whose attitude displays their racial complex. Their black servant Desrine and her daughter Manuela are the targets of that complex. In *Black Feminist Criticism* (1985), Barbara Christian suggests that in racially hierarchized societies there is always the need for a pariah, someone to look down on in order to enhance the dominant society's sense of worth. This happens in the Chance household. Even though the family is partly black, as shown through the fact that the second child Sadie has what they call 'natty' hair, a derogatory reference to the curl of African hair, the family considers itself white and therefore, superior. The mother's claim to whiteness makes her and her daughters fear 'turning down', a down-grading of colour and class through association with black people. Thus, when Manuela becomes pregnant at thirteen, Mother Dear says:

> I just don't understand *you people* at all. But Desrine, I don't want the girls to know anything about what has happened to Manuela, do you hear? I don't want my children to grow up faster than their years. Not a word, you hear? (*Discerner of Hearts*: 196, my emphasis)

And later she says:

> Desrine, maybe I shouldn't say it, but is same way you started young…Seven of them you have. With no father to mind them. You took a heavy burden on yourself and it looks as if Manuela is following right in your footsteps. (196)

The use of 'you people' by Mother Dear is denial of human sameness. It is similar to other racist stereotypes such as 'acting like a nigger' which links action to skin colour. The story however, suggests similarities between the women through, for instance, the idea that both

are anxious for their children and also that both women suffer from high blood pressure. Yet Mother Dear clearly links Manuela's early pregnancy to her black colour. Her idea of the ideal family is for children to be born to married couples where a man takes on the responsibility of minding them. By having children outside marriage Desrine and her daughter supposedly prove their immorality as black women. Mother Dear is deliberately blind to the reasons a young Jamaican woman would want her own child. Senior's main point in the story is to demonstrate the importance of children to black women. This is why Desrine's original disappointment with Manuela's pregnancy soon disappears. It is replaced with a subtle pride and preparations for being a grandmother.

Another point that Senior demonstrates in the story is related to the internalisation of racial superiority, which can complicate the women's lives. The story profiles Mother Dear, who believes in the racial superiority of white people even though her family is of mixed race. The social conditions of the society suggest that to be white is better. And because Manuela is lighter than the other children, she gets preferential treatment from her mother. She is not allowed to do manual work because Desrine is afraid that it will toughen her hands and therefore downgrade her. Desrine's misplaced sense of beauty, which is clearly dictated by a colonised mentality, makes her rub expensive pomades and creams into her daughter's hair and skin in order to enhance her looks. Desrine also promises to straighten Manuela's hair to compliment the enhanced skin even though she cannot afford shoes for all the children. Desrine's attitude, which evokes Fanon's theory of colonised peoples by demonstrating the lasting psychological damage of colonialism on racially marginalized people (Fanon: 1952), simultaneously demonstrates Desrine's survival strategy. The

determination to change the life of her child makes Desrine follow the only path she sees open for achieving such change.

In addition Desrine's character reveals an internalising of the gender complexes of her society, a condition that demonstrates the contradictory lives of the women. Paralleling the determination that characterises her, Desrine's attitude also makes her a participant in the oppression of her own gender. Her relationship with her daughter demonstrates mother's complicity in women's oppression. For instance, one of the things demanded of Manuela by her mother and society is 'proper' behaviour, which in this case also means silence. The multiple identities of child, black and female position Manuela on the silenced borders and her mother is part of the structure that maintains that silence.

In Desrine's presence Manuela is not allowed to 'forget herself' for instance by speaking or laughing out loudly. If she did, 'Desrine's hand would flash out like lightning and…give Manuela a good quick slap, for Desrine never made joke with her children' (*Discerner of Hearts*: 172). Consequently we are told that '…she didn't speak unless she was spoken to, and even then she hang her head and mumbled. Manuela was after all Desrine's daughter, and Desrine made sure she never forgot her place' (172). The idea of 'not forgetting' one's place in society reinforces the lack of choices for Desrine. Unfortunately, this is the same place that Mother Dear, Muffett and Sadie allocate Manuela (*Discerner of Hearts*: 213). The determination to improve the status of her daughter, positive as it is, also implicates Desrine in the marginalizations of her society.

Motherhood

The structures on which Jamaican society is built are similar to most African cultures through the way they proclaim motherhood as very important and, ideally, the centre of a woman's life. As in many African societies, in Jamaica childlessness is construed as a failure of one's womanhood and by extension, a woman's humanity. For instance, amongst the Nyanja of Central and Southern Malawi, a woman is expected to conceive soon after marriage. If she does not, someone elderly, usually a woman is sent to find out why and offer assistance. Almost always childlessness is assumed to be the woman's fault. This is the idea that informs Aidoo's play *Anowa*. Anowa is ostracized by the society because she apparently cannot have a child and because she has internalised her society's beliefs she blames herself and feels inadequate as a woman.

In Senior's 'Discerner of Hearts', childlessness has a similar effect on Cissy. She feels inadequate and therefore incomplete as a woman. Similarly, in 'Ballad', Senior presents Miss Rilla's barrenness as contributing to her position of social outcast. As they do with Cissy, the other women call her 'mule' and claim that her condition is a curse from God (*Summer Lighting:* 113). What these instances demonstrate is the different outlook on motherhood, society's and the women's. On one hand socialization makes women view motherhood as what makes their lives complete, and on the other is the significance of motherhood or 'mothering' to the women. By calling Miss Rilla or Cissy 'mule' the women demonstrate their socialization by a patriarchal society.

In her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution* (1986), Adrienne

Rich distinguishes between motherhood as institution and motherhood as experience. Her argument is that patriarchy constructs the institution of motherhood whilst women undergo the experience. As an institution, motherhood is dangerous to women because it is oppressive. It denies women an open and free world and the creation of subjectivity (Allen: 315 quoted in Nnaemeka 1997: 5). As experience, the women hold motherhood or 'mothering' differently. It is an important part of their being and therefore valued. Although the women acknowledge that it has painful moments, as far as they are concerned, these are balanced by the rewards of the experience. The women see motherhood as rewarding and empowering.

In his analysis of writing by women in the Caribbean, and using Cherly Albury's poems, 'Poem for Mothers' and 'Superwife' to argue his point, Kenneth Ramchard suggests that one method for making their case was for women writers to look at the traditional roles of women and 'kick against them' as a way of trying to delineate a new place for women and womanhood (Butcher 1989: 24). In the poems he examines, the woman is, for instance, said to be 'high on detergent cleaners/and children's knickers/DID YOU SEE HER?' (Butcher 1989: 24). Roles such as cleaning and child rearing traditionally performed by women are written against and challenged in order to show how burdensome the women find them. However, rather than always kick against the traditional roles of women, many black female writers celebrate them. For instance, writers such as Lorna Goodison, Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head celebrate female roles including mothering in their works. Senior's delineations, which show the complex existence of Jamaican women, are nonetheless also a celebration of their womanhood. Through her portrayals she

foregrounds Jamaican socio-cultural beliefs and practices and demonstrates women's place in this society. For instance, she shows the importance of motherhood (experience) to women's sense of themselves and their desire to experience it. An example is Cissy in 'Discerner of Hearts'.

In 'Discerner of Hearts', the story that also gives the title to Senior's third collection of short stories, Senior explores the idea of motherhood simultaneously as she deals with issues of race, class, culture and gender. Jamaican traditional practices and alternative ways of knowledge are foregrounded and used to inform her exploration. Discerner of Hearts is about a young woman's search for subjectivity, which within Jamaican socio-cultural belief is linked to a woman's capacity for motherhood (Senior 1991: 66-81). Cissy, the protagonist, is a young black woman who comes to work in the Randolph household as a maid. The marginal position of servant, which simultaneously foregrounds the racial hierarchy of Jamaican society, resonates with her border site as a woman. Because of her colour, she has not had the opportunity for formal Western education that is the benchmark of success in society. While white, or 'backra' children as they are called, or those born with light skin and therefore socially privileged, have the chance to go to school, the economic and social conditions of the black people make formal education difficult. Cissy's education has instead been in the role of child rearing. As a child, she stayed at home to help her mother look after her siblings (*Discerner of Hearts*: 4). Later in her life Cissy experiences feelings of inadequacy because she is childless. The fact that girls much younger than her, including her own sisters, have children while she remains childless, compounds her sense of inadequacy.

Through Cissy's story, Senior illustrates the significance of children to women's identity as well as society's perception of women's worth. The story shows the value of children to women because of the status they accord a mother. It shows the importance black Jamaican women attach to motherhood. Cissy's desire for a child indicates her eagerness to experience mothering, and because she has no child Cissy is overwhelmed by feelings of incompleteness and failure. Her conversation with Theresa conveys her distress:

> Theresa, you too young to understand, chile. I am nothing, but a mule. Everywhere I go, I know them calling me mule. Even my own mother start up bout it now. What good is a woman if she can't have pickney? The girls my age, some of them have all two, three pickney. And me can't have even one little one. My own little sisters and all having pickney. Everybody except poor-me-gal. (11)

Cissy's way out of her situation is to attract Fonso, the most eligible young man in the community. By using the love potions, which she acquires from the herbalist Mister Burnham, Cissy eventually becomes pregnant with Fonso's child. Through Cissy's determination to have a child Senior demonstrates the importance of motherhood to women and reveals the lengths they will go to experience it.

Spirituality and madness

As do other black women writers, Senior uses the themes of madness and spirituality to assert black womanhood, but also, to focus on the complexities and tensions typical of feminine reality. In 'Discerner of Hearts' Senior portrays a traditional medicine-man engaged in spiritual protection and healing of his community. Such a portrayal links Senior with black women writers such as Erna Brodber and Ama Ata Aidoo, who similarly demonstrate through their narratives black people's belief in the existence of other levels of

reality. In *Anowa*, Aidoo suggests that Kofi's desire for charms and medicines for 'protection' as well as Anowa's acquisition of knowledge through dream, are manifestations of the intermingling of the spiritual world with the physical.

Similarly, in *Louisiana,* Brodber portrays the protagonist Ella as continuing to communicate with the spirit of Mammy, the principal informant in her project who dies before Ella's research is completed. From the grave, Mammy continues to convey the history of the people into Ella's tape recorder. According to Mbiti (1969), Mammy's recent death positions her spirit amongst the 'living dead.' And as a member of those recently dead, she still has some attachments to the living. Mammy clearly illustrates her attachment through the communications beyond the grave. From this narrative, Brodber illustrates the people's belief in the intermingling of the spiritual world with the physical.

In *A Question of Power* and *Maru*, Head also demonstrates the possibility of gaining knowledge through dreams and spiritual possession. She demonstrates the variety of dream knowledge through the portraits of Margaret, whose spiritual possession in *Maru* enables proliferation of her artistic output, while for Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*, her spiritual knowledge brings her to a consciousness of the evil of power and to an acceptance of her black identity.

Senior conveys the idea of the validity of other knowledges in 'Discerner of Hearts' through Mr. Burnham whose position as 'Bringer of Light, Professor of Peace, Restorer of Confidence, Discerner of Hearts' (*Discerner Of Hearts*: 22), illustrates his spiritual

significance and importance to the people. Senior portrays this through Cissy who seeks his spiritual help in order to find a man and to have a child. In a society where a woman's identity is linked to her ability to have children, Cissy feels inadequate and incomplete as a human being. To compound her problems, Cissy is unable to attract men. Senior portrays that following a 'reading', what Cissy calls a 'spiritual bath', and which involves use of herbs, oils and potions from Mr. Burnham (*Discerner of Hearts:* 10), Cissy eventually attracts the eligible Fonso who soon makes her pregnant. Cissy also visits Mr. Burnham when she needs him to neutralize the *obeah,* which she believes Ermine has put on her because of Fonso. Later, she also seeks the healer's help in order to appease the spirits, and in order to enable her reintegration into the community after she had alienated herself when she tried to steal Fonso from Ermine.

Mr. Burnham is portrayed as unable to read in the story. He brings all his written correspondence to his white neighbour, Mr. Randolph who reads it for him. The community's belief that Mr. Burnham is able to 'read' people and help them accordingly even though western views categorise him as illiterate, challenges the denigration of black people's traditional knowledges. Though he is unable to read in the way one is taught in school, Senior conveys the validity of his traditional 'reading' and knowledge through his using it for the service of the community. In addition, by suggesting that Theresa, Randolph's daughter is also served by Mr. Burnham's spiritual power, Senior implies the possibility of its being used to help everyone. When halfway through her pregnancy, Cissy believes that she is going to lose her baby because Ermine has *obeahed* her, Senior portrays young Theresa as the one that goes to seek Mr. Burnham's help on Cissy's behalf. While

there, Theresa also experiences the reality of Mr. Burnham's healing when he restores her confidence. Thus the Theresa who returns home is different from the shy recluse that came in search of the spiritual healer. Later, after Cissy is healed through the 'spiritual baths' she gets, Theresa recognises the arrogance of her mother's attitude which, by insisting on calling Mr. Burnham evil because he deals in the spiritual, is based on a refusal to accept and see good in difference.

The idea of the existence of other ways of knowing is also expressed through the advice Cissy's mother gives her daughter. By telling her 'what to look out for' and 'how to know' (28), Cissy's mother points her daughter to different ways of knowledge acquisition which are not linked with western views of knowledge gain. What Senior suggests through this narrative is that formal education is not the only way 'to know'.

Like the other women writers in this thesis, Senior links spirituality with madness in *Discerner of Hearts* (28). Through Aunt Millie's story, she illustrates the idea of nearness of spirits to the people. Senior portrays that because Aunt Millie had not learnt the people's traditional ways of knowing, she had been unable to avoid an evil spiritual-take-over of her body. Her people were unable to deal with her affliction and ended up committing her to a mental asylum against their will. I suggest that Aunt Millie's position in the story articulates the possession by 'bad spirits' identified by many black communities. According to Mbiti (1969) and Soko (1992) bad spirits are responsible for causing disease and/or death. This is Aunt Millie's fate in 'Discerner of Hearts'. She dies by drowning. Although the community held a memorial for her for three nights so that her spirit would be united

with her family and mediate on their behalf (Mbiti 1969), Senior portrays that her spirit refused to rest. Clearly the belief in danger posed by wandering spirits is real for black people and Senior illustrates the precautions the people take through Cissy's mother who provides her daughter with a new and more powerful *guzu*, a charm to wear around her waist for protection (28-29). In my view, the idea of a madwoman whose spirit continues to wander beyond the grave conveys black women's painful existence.

The aim of the women writers such as Senior is not to focus on the pain of madness. Rather their concern is to portray women's strength, resistances and determination to survive. In 'You Think I Mad, Miss?' Senior portrays Isabella Francina Myrtella Jones, a mad woman who begs at Lady Musgrove Road traffic lights. And as a storyteller, she uses her art of storytelling to challenge black women's marginal position. Similarly, Isabella challenges her peripheral position by telling her own story to the motorists at the traffic lights.

I pointed out in the chapter on Head that Cazenave (2000) identifies two categories of madness portrayed in black women's literature; those who exist on the border of community from birth and those whose descent into madness is a result of evolution from a position of power whether economic or born from physical beauty. Isabella's position in this story fits both categories. As a woman who is also black, she is from birth located on the border of society. Yet as trainee teacher who gets intimately involved with Jimmy Watson, an assistance teacher at her college, she also descends from a position of power. Through the determination to tell her own story, Isabella resists her marginal place (Carol Davison 1990; Sarah Chetin 1991; Anisa Talahite 1990) and locates herself at the centre of

the narrative. She complicates the condition society labels 'mad' by forcing the society to re-examine its own madnesses.

In 'You Think I Mad, Miss?' Senior traces Isabella's ostracization from an earlier period. Beginning at a time she was a trainee teacher at Shortwood Teacher Training College, Isabella story tells of a determined dedication to succeed and get her certificate, until she gets involved with the assistant teacher Jimmy Watson. Although he was already attached to a girl called Elfraida, Jimmy abandons her after he meets Isabella on the pretext that Elfraida is not educated. Yet the relationship with Isabella does not last. According to Isabella, he abandons her after she becomes pregnant and publicly denies ever having touched her. Backing Jimmy Watson's story is Dr. Bartholomew's medical authority. According to Dr. Bartholomew, Isabella was never pregnant. Rather she is an insane woman who suffers delusions. He uses his authority to lock her up in a mental asylum. From the portrayal of the doctor's authority and Jimmy Watson's denial of ever touching Isabella (in the presence of her mother), Senior illustrates the link between women's oppression and patriarchy. She demonstrates how men use their maleness to assert social authority. By locking Isabella up at the institution in Bellevue, Senior illustrates patriarchal silencing of women. Isabella however, displays the same determination with which she pursued her studies at the teacher's training college and escapes from the mental institution.

Strategically positioning herself at a set of traffic lights, she ignores all offices of authority such as policemen in her determination to tell her own story. The idea that she escapes from the asylum, and makes her home old boxes along the roadside and which she calls

'Sheraton', amounts to a refusal to be confined by the patriarchal structures of society. Isabella's rejection of patriarchal confinement and silencing conveys her refusal of the misnaming of a society she considers unjust. By portraying that Isabella's fragmented psyche is connected to her belief that the society has taken away her child, Senior links women's insanities with patriarchal oppressions.

Children and childhood experience

Writing about children and childhood experience in literature is a common feature in Caribbean literature. As well as Senior, writers such as Edgel, Brodber, Kincaid, Lovelace, McKenzie, Philip, Lamming and V.S. Naipaul variously use the character of the child in their texts. Senior's attitude to children is however, very different to most male writers whose focus on children is modelled on the *buildungsroman* (Donnell 1999:123). A number of male writers tend to follow a child's development from infancy through to maturity, a strategy that makes the child, in the words of Fredric Jameson (1986), a 'national allegory' (66). The child is meant to reflect the emergence of a new and independent nation. Jameson identifies George Lamming's *In The Castle of My Skin* (1953) and V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) as illustrating this trope. In comparison, Senior's stories treat the children as individuals. Taking them from the sidelines of society, a site they occupy together with women, she puts them at the centre and treats them seriously. Through this she demonstrates her belief in their significance as important members of the society. The stories, especially in *Summer Lightning*, deal therefore with the emotions of children. According to Senior, they 'express some of the powerlessness,

frustration and lack of understanding by the adult world' she herself felt as a child (Rowell 1988: 484).

'The Boy Who Loved Ice cream' demonstrates this childhood experience clearly. The story deals with a young boy named Benjy whose desire to taste ice cream is perpetually postponed by a self-centred father who puts his own interests first. After hearing about ice cream from his sister Elsa, Benjy waits dreamily for two years before he can hope to taste it. He fails to go to the crucial Harvest Festival Sale the first year because he gets measles. Elsa's description of ice cream bewilders him so much that he fails to find a comparison in familiar things. In a world which is otherwise full of incomprehensible adults such as his father, the thought of ice cream becomes the only constant. It is always on his mind.

Through the use of suspense Senior builds the boy's desire for ice cream up to the day of the next Harvest Festival Sale, two years after Elsa first mentions it. One of the issues Benjy does not understand in relation to the adult world is why his father is constantly irritable towards him and why he blames him, even when he was not at fault. The result, we are told, is that Benjy 'lived in a constant state of suspense over what his father's response to him was likely to be' (*Summer Lightning*: 85). On the day of the festival Benjy gets up early and is ready before everyone else, but true to character, his father blames Benjy for making everyone late. After they get to the Sale, rather than buy the ice cream immediately as Benjy expected, the father keeps postponing the buying, thereby reducing Benjy to tears.

Meanwhile, throughout all the delay, Benjy is haunted by numerous fears. He is afraid of

his father telling them that he does not have enough money to buy the ice cream; he is afraid that the ice cream will be finished before his father is able to get some; or that when it gets too dark the adults might decide to go home before his father had a chance to buy it. Eventually however, and just before it is time to go home, Benjy's father buys three ice creams, one of which is for Benjy. Benjy's delight at getting his ice cream makes him decide to savour its sight before eating it. As he enjoys its colours, something happens which Benjy does not understand. In a sudden move, his father grabs him, and half walks and half runs in the direction of where his mother is talking to one of the vendors from town. Benjy does not realise at what point he loses his ice cream leaving only a quarter piece of the cone clutched in his hands.

Through her manipulation of language, Senior conveys Benjy's alienation and failure to understand the adult world of his parents which is full of jealousy and mistrust. Words, such as 'don't know', 'don't understand' common in children's vocabulary, aptly convey Benjy's childhood and a child's confused feelings. In addition, the image of the sky swimming in his vision unmistakably communicates the expression of a child's frustration and helplessness. But more important is the link Senior makes between children and women. Through her focus on children's treatment she demonstrates how as a category they occupy the same marginal site occupied by women in society.

Even though Senior's child protagonists are both male and female, the female child appears more frequently. Out of the ten stories in *Summer Lightning*, seven are told from a girl's point of view and similarly, of the seven stories in *Arrival of the Snake Woman* three are

told from a girl's perspective, two from a woman's point of view. In the same manner that Senior demonstrates the strength and struggle of the Jamaican woman, the young girls in her stories are also struggling. Thus, in stories such as 'Do Angels Wear Brassieres?' where Senior deals with children's marginalization, she also foregrounds their resistance to adult oppression.

'Do Angels Wear Brassieres?' is a story that is narrated from the point of view of a young girl named Beccka. In this story Senior uses humour, dilemma, suspense and childhood actions to narrate the story. The story opens with eleven-year-old Becka on her knees saying her goodnight prayers. While she is praying her mother, Cherry, tells her to also pray for her Aunt Mary, asking God to bless her. Annoyed that her mother is interrupting her private conversation with God, Beccka refuses loudly: 'No. Not praying for nobody that tek weh mi best glassy eye marble' (*Summer Lightning*: 67). When Cherry tries to reproach her, Beccka merely sticks out her tongue, winks at God, who in her mind, is in the shape of a fat spider Anansi. Unlike the Christian God of her Aunt and the adults around who resides somewhere in heaven, Anansi hangs in a corner of their roof. Senior here demonstrates how children see things differently from adults. She shows how children interpret the complexities of the world from the familiar issues of everyday. What makes this story humorous and interesting is Beccka's articulacy and unpredictable reactions to the adults around her.

As do a lot of African and other Caribbean texts, 'Do Angels Wear Brassieres?' focuses on the oppressive use of religion to control the young. In this story Senior shows Beccka

undermining the tool of oppression and using it for her own ends. After her mother goes into Aunt Mary's room to try and make amends for Beccka's behaviour, Beccka grabs a torch and settles under her blankets to read the Bible. Young Beccka uses the reading of the Bible which within Christian practice would be regarded as an act of devotion, for resistance. Beccka has decided to read the Bible from cover to cover not because of Christian conviction, rather she reads it because she wants to find faults which she can use to challenge the Bible's authority and the adults who justify their control by frequently quoting from it.

Beccka's chance comes when the Archdeacon comes to visit the area and accepts tea at Aunt Mary's house. When he invites Beccka to ask him any questions she might have from the Bible, he is unable to answer most of her questions including the one that has puzzled Beccka for a long time, whether angels wear brassieres. The Archdeacon's problem, which is also that of many of the adults in the community, is the perception of children as insignificant members of society, whose questions and opinions are not serious and therefore not important. This links him with Aunt Mary's attitude which is also formulated on a flawed Biblical ideology and emphasises 'licking' as a way to mould and correct the children. Aunt Mary believes that 'Who can't hear must feel for the rod and reproof bring wisdom but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame' (*Summer Lightning*: 69). Aunt Mary's impatience and the Archdeacon's attitude and failure to provide answers to Beccka's questions demonstrate a flawed adult authority. Through this story Senior also draws attention to the contradictions between Christian doctrine and practice and points to the use of religion as a tool of oppression by adults.

Religion

In the interview with Rutherford Senior voices her concern in relation to religion when she says: 'I felt more oppressed by religion as a child than I did anything else. A very restricted, narrow kind of Christianity combined with poverty is, I think, a ruthless combination, in that they both attack the spirit, they are both anti-life, they are both anti-freedom, soul-destroying as far as I am concerned' (Rutherford 1986: 15). These sentiments link her with Head who also felt that religion was oppressive and therefore destructive. In 'Country Of The One Eye God' Senior explores this concern. She demonstrates the psychological damage religion can inflict on the mind of a child.

'Country Of The One Eye God' tells the story of grandmother Ma Bell and her relationship with her grandson, Jacko. One of the achievements of this story like, 'Do Angels Wear Brassieres?' as well as 'Confirmation Day', is the demonstration of women's role in religion. In these stories Senior illustrates that women are tools of the Christian religion. They are the ones who enforce its ideologies at family level in society. Yet the Christian religion is framed as a patriarchal structure which is oppressive to both women and children. When Jacko's parents went to look for work and eventually settled in a foreign country, they left their son in the care of his grandmother, Ma Bell. As a member of the Pentecostal Church of Christ the Redeemer, religion is an important element in the upbringing of her children. For Ma Bell, God is a present presence whom she finds comforting and with whom she has constant dialogue.

Simultaneous with this closeness is awareness of the wrath of God. Even though the story

is not explicit about God's anger, the idea that He is a punishing God underscores Ma Bell's religious practice. She uses the idea of a vengeful God to discipline her children and grandchildren. While the story is silent about how the other children reacted to their upbringing, Jacko's bitterness is clear. He rebels and leaves home. Jacko leaves home because he fails to reconcile Christianity's doctrine of love with Ma Bell's violent behaviour. Like others of her generation, all they seemed to know was, in Jacko's view 'How to drop lick and chastisement' (*Summer Lightning*: 23). Jacko links Ma Belle's use of religion to poverty, suggesting that because they are poor, she and the rest of her generation use religion for authority. They use it to control and oppress. Thus when he turns up in the middle of the night demanding money to help him escape the country, Ma Bell's advice that rather than run, he should give himself up, and her argument that 'Judgement Day must begin at the house of the Lord' (*Summer Lightning*: 24), has Jacko sneering. He points out what he deems a generational stupidity:

> Nutten change, eh? Same ol foolishness bout God and judgment. That is the trouble with the whole lot a unno. All unno think bout is judgement and future life. But from morning me study seh in this country fe you God id one eye God. Him only open him good eye to people who have everything already so him can pile up more thing on top of that. Him no business with rag tag and bobtail like unno. God up a top laugh keh keh keh at the likes of you. Fe see you, so poor and turn down think you can talk to the like of him so high and mighty. Keh keh keh. (24)

The story illustrates the appropriation of religion in the upbringing of children. It demonstrates how religion becomes the basis for oppressive action by adults and how it is used to stifle life out of children. The children are not allowed independent thought and expression. If they express themselves they are threatened with the wrath of a vengeful God. And the authority of the Bible justifies the actions of the adults. And as she does in 'Do Angels Wear Brassieres?', Senior demonstrates how children think differently from

adults.

In 'Confirmation Day', Senior takes the child's rebellion against religion a step further. Unable to physically escape the mould into which she felt she was being squeezed, the child seemingly goes along with the plans of the adults but in fact, rebels inside and thereby finds herself. In this story, a young girl asserts her spiritual independence from an oppressive and frightening God professed by the adults around her. As in the other stories that deal with religion, adults seek to enforce religious mores. The girl's mother, aunt and grandmother and Bishop variously contribute in ensuring her religious socialization.

However, the image of God they convey is similar to Ma Bell's in 'Country Of The One Eye God'. In the young girl's mind, as a result, God is a terrifying Being who 'raced in clouds of terror across the sky' 'transforming' and 'transmuting' the clouds into 'shapes of awe that funnelled into eternity'. He chased her in 'clouds of horror everyday' (82). He sat on the clouds from where he passed out His judgement which was 'swift and terrible' (82). The girl's reaction to this God is to proclaim her independence. The process of Confirmation which is supposed to mark her becoming a 'child of God' becomes the moment of resistance to His obliterating greatness. She reclaims herself, reclaims the power within her. By the time her Confirmation ceremony is complete the girl has made up her mind that 'not the reeds in the river nor the wine nor the blood of Christ nor the Book of Common Prayer can conquer me. And not a single cloud of god in that sky' (84). Like Jacko in 'Country Of The One Eye God', the young girl claims her liberation from this vengeful God. Through the thoughts and actions of the children, Senior challenges the

adult's use of the Christian religion. She questions the method of its use by demonstrating its psychological effect on the young.

Language

Olive Senior is of course not unique as a woman writer in the Caribbean. She was influenced by women such as the Louise Bennett and has similar concerns to Zee Edgel. In her interview with Anna Rutherford, Olive Senior acknowledges this influence. Louise Bennett's poetry she says was recited by Jamaican school children even though for a long time her work was not regarded as 'literature'. Through her poetry, Bennett is certainly one of the foremothers of Jamaican literature, especially that written by women. Her influence is easily traced in the work of modern dub poets, but also in the fiction of such writers as Olive Senior.

In the introduction to *Jamaica Labrish*, Rex Nettleford quotes the description that identifies Bennett as the 'only poet who has really hit the truth about her society through its own language' (Bennett 1966: 5). What Bennett achieves through her dialect poetry is to force the Jamaican society to confront the limitations of colonialist linguistic practice. By using a Jamaican dialect, rather than the Standard English of the metropolis the mastery of which, according to West Indian ideology during colonialism, marked one as 'civilized', Bennett challenges Jamaicans to self re-examination and leads the way towards an acceptance, a cherishing and an appreciation of the various dialects as valid and worthwhile forms. The picturesque attributes of Jamaican dialects have consequently

become an acceptable artistic medium and are recognised as such even beyond Jamaica.

In his article 'Yoruba Thought, English Words: A Poet's Journey Through the Tunnel of Two Tongues', where he explores the complex relationship between Yoruba and English over time and space, Niyi Osundare (2000) asserts that 'When two languages meet they kiss and quarrel' (15). What he draws attention to is the pliability of language. He points to the emergence of new forms within the inevitable conflict and convergence when two or more disparate linguistic forms meet. This idea, which is clearly articulated in his poem 'Lovers Quarrel', also reflects the Caribbean linguistic situation. Osundare's perceptive analysis echoes Chinua Achebe's declaration in relation to the African writer and the English language: 'Let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English for we intend to do unheard of things with it' (Achebe 1975: 7). The dialect texts of the Caribbean articulate the 'unheard things' Achebe talks about and shows the pliability and appropriation of language.

By writing in Creole, especially in her first collection *Summer Lightning*, and in a style that echoes and reverberates with an oral ancestry, like Bennett, Senior subverts a colonialist ideology that seeks to undermine and suppress the African descent of the writers. Through language, and again like Bennett, Senior lays claim to a cultural identification with her African ancestry and simultaneously shows the versatility of Jamaican daily life and culture. In addition, the use of varieties of English, or in Bakhtinian terms, 'heteroglossia', according to Richard Patterson (1993), shows a 'counter colonization of a language once associated with hegemonic authority' (15). The use of heteroglossia is especially important

for the black woman writer. Firstly, it allows the writer dialogue through which the plural facets that constitute black female subjectivity are addressed. Secondly, it allows her dialogue with those who define her. As woman and as black, the black woman writer's position is as 'other' of the same gender but also an 'other' of others in relation to race.

In 'Ascot', a story about a young man who leaves Jamaica for North America in search of fulfilment of a life-long ambition to 'dress up in white clothes and drive a big white car' (*Summer Lightning*: 29), Senior catalogues a variety of Jamaican speech. Thematically, the story acknowledges linguistic shifts in the society. It recognizes the influence of North America on Jamaican society. However there is an implied refusal to give the alien but nonetheless powerful force of North America central space in the lives of the ordinary people. And Senior achieves this through the focus on a Jamaican location and the use of a narrative voice that foregrounds Jamaican subalternness. The only information offered of Ascot's American life therefore, is through the three very short letters he writes home to his mother. When a bunch of bananas Master Jackie had been ripening for the Harvest Festival disappears, Lily the narrator tells us that:

> So the Saturday morning before the Harvest Festival one bangarang no bus at the house! Papa go into the buttery and the bunch of banana no gone way clean. Jesus. You should hear the noise he make. Then him calm down and he just stand there a look at the ground for along time and is sad we think Papa sad for is the best banana that he ever grow. But finally him say, "All right. Is Ascot do it. See him guilt there plain as day. Is Ascot one have foot that size". (*Summer Lightning:* 27)

Later Jackie calls for Ascot:

> Come Ascot me bwoy Harvest Festival Pospone and gwine nyam banana caan done tidday …Yes bwoy feas tidday. (27)

Ascot's reaction when the bananas are discovered missing is:

> Whaa Mass Jackie…Nutten could go so afta nobody bolnuf come ya and walk weh wid yu banana. (28)

Senior here clearly celebrates ordinary people and their speech and she challenges the hegemony of the 'Queen's English' through her use of dialect. The reproduction of the natural speech of ordinary people is a demand for dialogue with those on the margins. It is a demand for and claim for subjectivity. When Ascot comes back after his long stay in America, he pretends to no longer speak like one of the villagers. When he introduces his wife, it is in a variety very close to Standard English 'An this … is my wife Anthea' (31). This clearly contrasts with the parting shot of the banana incident. The society's reaction to this attitude is fore-grounded through the narrator's gaze, which focuses on Papa Jackie. Even though the community is generally proud of Ascot and agrees that he has gone and done well for himself, his pretentiousness causes the big vein in Papa's head to immediately 'tighten up' and therefore stand out, which happens every time Papa is annoyed. This textual symbol of disapproval at Ascot's denigration of his language and implicitly of his culture echoes the disapproval of the narrative voice.

The call to cherish and appreciate the various dialects as worthwhile is also the point of the story entitled 'Real Old Time Ting', in which because of her marriage to a prominent lawyer, Patricia, Papa Sterling's oldest daughter suddenly drops the dialect of her upbringing and adopts what she thinks to be Standard English, a dialect she deems suited to her new social status. In this story in which Senior once again addresses the encroaching influence of capitalism on the Jamaican society, language as it represents the culture of the

people is significant. After her marriage, one of the benefits of which is that she joins the ranks of an upcoming middle-class community, Patricia suddenly decides that her father's house is too small and that he should have a new one built. When Papa Sterling pretends not to understand why he should have a new home, she answers:

> Poppa, why yu so hard ears and make everything so difficult when anybody trying to do anything for you. You well and know what I mean. Besides, if you had a nice house here then more of your children and grand-children would come and spend time with you. (*Summer Lightning*: 55)

Additionally, while everyone calls children, pickey, Patricia calls them 'children' and apart from the very minor difference in the first sentence, Patricia's entire attack on her father is in Standard Jamaican English. Senior's representation of social attitude is through allowing Patricia to accidentally slip back into her rural dialect on several occasions. This occurs for instance when she says: 'The children *shame* to come here' (54). In addition, Senior conveys the people's attitude through the tone of the narrative voice. For example, the first line of the story 'Is one name Patricia did start up bout Papa Sterling need a new house...' and, towards the bottom of the first page, 'But hear the one Patricia she - this one Sunday she did drive down with the pickney dem' (*Summer Lightning*: 54) are important. The use of the expression 'the one Patricia she' is clearly meant to convey the intense scorn with which Patricia's attitude is held. Even her own father, Papa Sterling, has turned her promise of a new house into a community joke:

> "Unno too fool. The house gwine have twenty room. One for each grand-child."...
> "Yea, Papa."
> "An stereogram to play mi record dem."
> "Eh-hm."
> "Gwine have kitchen with real real sink. Bathroom with real real bath. Bedroom with real real bed."
> "*An living room with real real living*", the boys dem all shout out.
> (56, emphasis in original)

It is important to note however that Senior is not limited by a commitment to the voice of one creole community. The later collections, additionally, explore the voices of other classes of Jamaican people. For example, Nolene and Philip, the protagonists of 'The Tenantry of Birds' are middle-class Jamaicans. This shift is continued in *Arrival of the Snake Woman* and *Discerner of Hearts*. Cissy and the traditional healer, Mister Burnham in 'Discerner of Hearts', come from the rural and mainly African community while the family Cissy works for are a middle-class Creole family. Throughout her work, Senior faithfully renders the speech patterns of the different classes of people. The sum total of Senior's fiction therefore is a seamless weaving of the different linguistic registers of Jamaica. It is a 'polyphonic' narrative drawing on the variety of Jamaican speech patterns and practices in a nation that is made up of racially, ethnically, culturally and linguistically different people. The language of her stories celebrates the people's difference and challenges the hegemony of colonial values.

Conclusion

Through her stories, Senior clearly calls for an integrated Jamaican society. In addition, she challenges the hegemonic dominance of colonial influence and calls for change in attitude amongst her own people. Her writing about cultures other than the received culture from the west demonstrates her questioning of the validity of colonial and post-colonial domination. By presenting the multiple cultures of Jamaican people she calls for their acceptance as valid and valuable traditions of the people. For Senior, traditional practices are not deficiency but rather express the richness of Jamaica's heritage and therefore deserve celebration and not silencing. Senior reinforces this call through her use of the

different registers of Jamaican speech in her stories. Through her stories, Senior agitates for change in attitude amongst Jamaicans who have been socialised to undervalue and undermine the traditional practices of their African ancestry.

In relation to women, a central concern of her writing, Senior's stories expose the social existence of women, especially poor black women whose race, economic value and gender allocate them a marginal position in Jamaica's society. By focusing on them, she demonstrates their value and worth as humans. But more significantly she demonstrates their resilience and positive attitude so that even though they might be poor and marginalized, they do not feel victimised but are engaged in a struggle to change their and their children's socio-cultural conditions. Her stories show the complex interlacing of motherhood as institution and as experience. She shows the women's negotiating with the institution but embracing the experience which, like their African counterparts, they find empowering and rewarding. As she demonstrates the women's resilience, Senior is however, not afraid to expose the dilemmas in their lives. The stories show the effects of socialization and how this impinges on the women's identities and sense of themselves.

Related to the issue of women is the question of the child. Like women, children are a marginalized community in Jamaican society. By focussing on them, Senior similarly moves them from the margins of the society to the centre and re-writes their worth as human beings. Her writing challenges their marginalization and reclaims them as worthwhile humans and members of society. Through her exposure of the children's confusions and alienation resulting from the imposition of adult authority and control, a

situation in which religion plays a significant role, Senior questions the use of such socially endorsed practices and points to the psychological damage misuse of authority can inflict. The children's resistance is used to articulate their subjectivity and humanity.

CONCLUSION

The importance of this study is the contribution it makes to the ongoing debate on black womanhood literature in both Africa and the diaspora. Although scholars such as Gay Wilentz in *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* (1992), Gina Wisker in *Black Women's Writing* (1993), Carole Boyce Davies and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie in *International Dimensions of Black Women's Writing* (1995), Carole Boyce Davies in *Black Women's Diasporas* (1995), Sushiela Nasta in *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* (1991) and Filomina Steady in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (1981) also explore the lives of black women from Africa and the black diaspora, only Wilentz's is a comparative study and her focus is on African and African-American women writers. Steady's text examines black women's lives from a sociological perspective. Nasta's, Wisker's and Boyce-Davies' texts on the other hand, are collections of essays on different black women writers from the African continent and its black diaspora, and South Asia. As far as I am aware there is no single book-length study that compares the four black female writers I have chosen in relation to constructions of black womanhood from an African woman's perspective.

Although the issues which the writers deal with are universal, the geographic location, experience, and the socio-cultural practices and traditions of the different societies the

writers come from, as well as the individual experiences of the authors, inform and determine how they portray black women's lives. Thus, while for Bessie Head, Erna Brodber and Olive Senior, the apartheid climate of South Africa and the racial climate of the Caribbean make race an issue in the women's text, because it has no social significance in Ghana, race is absent in Aidoo's texts. Rather, due to a gap in Africa's oral records of why there are people of African descent in the Caribbean and the USA, Aidoo's texts use history to explore the place of Africans in the dislocation of black people into the diaspora and to try to understand Africa's modern day socio-economic problems.

As a result of slavery and the colonizer's denigrating attitude and erasure of African practices and beliefs, the Caribbean writers reclaim their African culture and beliefs and use them to engender a sense of black pride in black diaspora people. Thus for Erna Brodber and Olive Senior, African-oriented traditional practices and beliefs such as root medicine or spiritual healing and possession are not heathen and evil, rather, they are alternative channels for knowledge and humanitarian acts in society and are therefore worthy recognition and sharing with the rest of the world. After Ella is afflicted with a phantom pregnancy in *Myal*, western medicines in both America and Jamaica, fail to heal her. It is only when she returns to Jamaica and is taken to Maas Cyrus, a spiritual healer, that she is cured of her affliction. Both Ama Ata Aidoo and Bessie Head similarly illustrate that dreams and spiritual possession are important sources of information and knowledge which inform the daily lives of black people. Through Head's younger Margaret Cadmore in *Maru,* whose prolific artistry is due to possession by an artistic muse, as well as through Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* who gains knowledge about the evil of power and of the

fine line that separates goodness from evil through dream experience and possession, Head illustrates the significance of African spiritual knowledge.

Contrary to the claims of some African male writers and critics who have accused African women writers and activists of aping western feminist values, or western feminist critics such as Florence Stratton (1994) or Katherine Frank (1987) who celebrate black women's spirit of resistance and suggest that black women subscribe to a brand of feminism which excludes men, my study reveals that although black women are concerned with their marginal social situation and recognise men's role in their border positioning, they do not advocate a society that excludes men. They all believe in the importance of community and in an integrated society that takes in everyone regardless of race, class or gender. Through the wide range of characters portrayed by all the writers it is clear that what the women seek are changed attitudes and a dismantling of those traditional practices and beliefs that oppress others on the basis of race, class and gender.

The finding of my study reveals that foremost to these women's writing is a commitment to portraying the complex reality of black women's lives. While this has meant challenging and correcting the misrepresentations of women in men's texts, the writers are also not afraid to illustrate how women contribute to their own and each other's oppression. Through situations which portray women reinforcing the values of the status quo, as do the Old Woman and Badua in *Anowa* or Miss Coolie in *Arrival of the Snake Woman*, the writers demonstrate women's compliance and participation in their situation of subjugation.

The main significance of these writers for me is their ability to subvert their marginalized roles and use them as tools for resistance. My exploration showed that the writers utilize the role of story-teller traditionally ascribed to women to teach the community of readers black social history and to instruct about traditional practices, cultures and beliefs of black people. In addition the women use their role to narrate the story of black womanhood. Through portraits of elderly women the writers instruct us in the art of negotiation, while through portraits of madness, they demonstrate not only the extent of the women's ostracization but also a method of resistance. The writers tell us about black women's oppressions and marginalizations, but more significantly, they demonstrate time and again, the methods of resistance and struggle employed by generations of black women in Africa and across the black diaspora to maintain their sense of self-worth and to improve their societies.

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