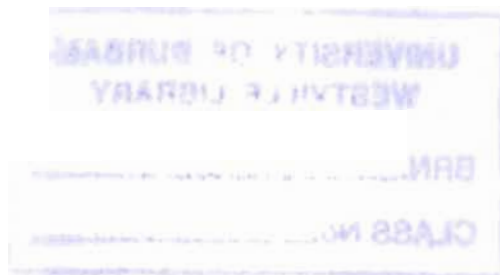


**A comparative analysis of selected works of Bessie head and Ellen Kuzwayo with  
the aim of ascertaining if there is a Black South African feminist perspective.**

Venetia N. Dlomo



Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in the department of English Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Durban Westville, 2002.

ANNEXURE F

DECLARATION

The Registrar (Academic)  
UNIVERSITY OF DURBAN-WESTVILLE

Dear Sir

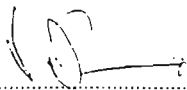
I, Veneta Mokubanya Dlomo  
(Full Name of Student)

REG. NO. 9508107

hereby declare that the dissertation/thesis entitled

A Comparative Analysis of Selected Works of Bessie Head and Ellen Kuzwayo with the aim of ascertaining if there is a Black South African feminist perspective

is the result of my own investigation and research and that it has not been submitted in part or in full for any other degree or to any other University.



(Signature)

31/01/03.

Date

## **Abstract**

My concern in this thesis is to assess if one can justifiably say that there is a unique black South African feminist perspective. I have chosen to focus on the feminist perspectives of two renowned black female African writers: Bessie Head (1937-1988) and Ellen Kuzwayo (1914-). I have several reasons for selecting these two writers for my investigation. Head and Kuzwayo, though obviously not exact contemporaries chronologically speaking, were contemporaries in the sense that they lived through, and wrote during, the time of apartheid rule in South Africa. Both can be considered as revolutionaries in their own right. Both used the traditional story telling literary device and the autobiographical genre differently but strikingly. They could both be called social feminists because they were both concerned with social justice, equality, racism, personal identity and upliftment of the community. I argue that the works of these writers have shown definable feminist perspectives that suggest that, indeed, there is a South African Black Women's feminist perspective.

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## Chapter 1

### **An outline of those feminist critics relevant to this study of**

#### **Bessie Head and Ellen Kuzwayo**

Feminist theory is a broad church with a number of co-operating and competing approaches; it is probably more appropriate to talk of feminist theories rather than feminist theory. For those who are looking for a consolidated political position, or a uniform feminist practice, or even simply for clarity, such diversity is distressing. For others, pluralism is an indication of feminism's creativity and flexibility.

(Eagleton 1991:2).

In this dissertation, feminism as manifested in various theories will be discussed. Key issues in the feminist perspectives of Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), Virginia Woolf (1929), Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Gayatri Spivak (1985), Miriam Tlali (1989), Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Ba (1992), amongst others will be reviewed together with their relevance to Bessie Head and Ellen Kuzwayo's own feminist perspectives. An indication of other pertinent feminist positions will be made. Reference will be made to Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiographical novel *Call Me Woman* (1985). In Head's works my focus will be on her trilogy, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1967), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973). Since Head uses an autobiographical narrative literary device in all of her works, I will refer to her other works as well as the need arises, to further clarify my position. The comparative examination will deal with similarities and differences in their styles, and their feminist perspectives will be focused on. My

conclusion should reveal whether Head and Kuzwayo are feminists or not in their selected works. The aim of this investigative study is to ascertain if there is conclusively a South African Black feminist perspective by comparative analysis of the feminist perspectives of the Black female writers, Bessie Head (1937-1988) and Ellen Kuzwayo (1914-). With the progress of history, the twentieth century has seen many different feminist points of view develop in America and Europe. For my investigation I will select various strands relevant to my thesis and constellate various issues integral to the variegated feminist tradition. The strands that will be referred to are liberal feminism, the first and second waves of Western feminism, radical, psychoanalytic, Afro-American (Black) feminism, African feminism and, finally, post-colonial feminism, with particular reference to Gayatri Spivak.

Feminism covers a range of ideologies and theories which pay special attention to women's rights and women's position in culture and society. The term 'feminism' is used to refer to the women's movement which began in the late eighteenth century. Feminism has a long political history: the American and French Revolutions inspired women to demand a larger share of human rights; in 1789 a French woman Olympe de Gauges, issued a Declaration of the Rights of Women, and in 1792 an English woman, Mary Wollstonecraft, published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Both works had a profound effect on women's perspectives of themselves. The result was the formation of the first movement for women's rights. In 1848 at a convention organised by Lucretia Mott, the first women's rights movement was formed and the Woman's Suffrage Organization of the United States and Europe was inaugurated. The Women's Rights Organization strove for social, legal, political powers and privileges for women, personal independence, a share in the custody of children, the

opportunity to get an education, free choice of profession, the right to own property, to vote and to hold public office. The term feminism, therefore, more than merely covering a range of ideologies and theories, is also used to refer to a women's movement which began in the eighteenth century. It was based on the notion that society did not treat women fairly. Men benefited from the gender inequality, socially, economically, and politically. Men were seen by society generally as superior and women always inferior and subservient.

As contemporary feminism has European origins, it is fitting to start the analysis with the discussion of the liberal feminist and eighteenth century fighter for women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft. Her relevance to South African black feminism is ideological, and bears similarity in the way her life experiences influenced and shaped her thinking. Further, her use of autobiographical fictional writing in her book *Maria* (1798) to dramatize and portray injustices suffered by women at the hands of society, the law, and their loved ones makes her relevance to the contemporary Black South African woman very significant and didactic. Liberal feminists traditionally believe that discrimination can be ended within the present system without having to make major structural changes to it, and it can come gradually with the government moving the process along (Magezis 1996:17). Liberal feminism dates back to the period of Mary Wollstonecraft, a view which can be confirmed by the following reading of her position:

Sure of the importance of environment, she gave nothing to heredity.

Repeatedly she asserted the common beliefs of the early 1790's that with a 'simple principle'-the perfectibility of human nature, the equality of individuals and the natural right of each to determine his or her own



cultural ways. This concept of womanism is a continuity of some of Mary Wollstonecraft's perceptions in *A Vindication of Rights of Woman* where she writes:

In short, in whatever light I view the subject, reason and experience convince me that the only method of leading women to fulfil their particular duties is to free them from all restraint by allowing them the inherent rights of mankind (1792: 261)

This freedom that Wollstonecraft is talking about is a kind of 'womanism' in a Western sense. The concept is developed when Alice Walker, the famous African American writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century suggests that womanism aims to combine both feminism and Black Nationalism. Womanism strives to subvert patriarchal oppression without necessarily removing the father as head in a family or as political leader striving for equal recognition of women's contribution, sense of responsibility and concern for cultural development. Womanism nevertheless seeks to create space for African women to represent themselves instead of being voiceless, hence the force of Kuzwayo's title *Call Me Woman*. The title is culturally subversive but it is a position taken by many Black South African women.

'Mothering' is another ideological construct that can be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century continuing through to 20<sup>th</sup> Century feminism, but adopting a particular dimension typical to Black South African feminist perspectives. In the works studied in this thesis, androgyny discussed earlier as a perspective originated from Wollstonecraft and adopted by Virginia Woolf, is useful to consider in relation to 'mothering': Ellen Kuzwayo's 'mothering' implies utilisation by a woman of masculine and feminist attributes in performing or handling any task. Desiree Lewis says: "mothering is represented as a pivotal and extensively supportive activity which

co-ordinates acquisitions of selfhood in a patriarchal system influenced by white-centred myths and hierarchical oppositions”(1992:36). Ellen Kuzwayo’s autobiography, by locating public and active space for mothering, appears to inscribe a contradictory gender identity whereby the private pursuit of mothering becomes necessarily public. Further, Lewis says Kuzwayo creates a space where contradictions can flourish, and the terms ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are tumbled about in disorder (Lewis 1992: 36-37). Isabel Allende, in her book *Eva Luna* (1995), confirms the potential matriarchal power in feminist struggle. The title of the book *Eva Luna* is symbolic of matriarchal power as Eva means ‘life’ and Luna is ‘moon,’ traditionally seen as feminine, in Spanish. She makes the protagonist’s name Eva Luna and makes her bring harmony through important symbols of feminine identity: that of women as givers of life and that of the moon as a symbol of matriarchal power. She shows that women have a quest to be men’s equals and, as givers of life, nurturers of male and female youth, women can restore balance and make life a triumph by maintaining the position of caring and nurturing in every sphere of life. The plot of her novel suggests that women should participate in life fully as men’s equals. Similarly, the South African Black women’s perspective as evidenced in Head and Kuzwayo’s work, is also about full participation in all public undertakings.

Both Head and Kuzwayo’s lives have illustrated hardships that women experience in relationships. Wollstonecraft in her book *Maria* (1798) demonstrates hardships and injustice suffered by women under patriarchy. For instance, in *Maria* the protagonist wants for the affection of her husband, she undergoes trial for adultery, and she suffers injustice as her property is procured by Darn Ford; she is divorced by her husband, her lover is unfaithful, she suffers a miscarriage and attempts suicide.

Wollstonecraft quotes Maria as saying: 'What have I not suffered... this cannot last long, and what is a little bodily pain to the pangs I have endured?' (Wollstonecraft 1798: 146-147). The suffering of women and children demonstrated in *Maria* (1798) is relevant today and continues to be the concern of 21<sup>st</sup> century South African Black and White women as it has been for Head and Kuzwayo. And the struggle against women's oppression will go on until it is minimised. Oppression of African women adds another dimension when African feminist writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Ba point out the collusion of black male authors in their oppression. In calling for a fight against this oppression, Aidoo and Ba support what they call 'partnership' with their brothers. The resolve to work shoulder to shoulder with their men is a continuation of Wollstonecraft's call for co-operation and equality between male and female in undertaking all national ventures. The difference is that Wollstonecraft did not have to struggle against colonial oppression as well. In defining a patriarchal dimension peculiar to Africa, and thus also relevant to South Africa, Ama Ata Aidoo says:

This shared oppression and the resulting national struggle, first for independence and then against the neo-colonial foreigner, have added complications and ambiguities to the woman's opposition to her exploitation at the hands of African men. There is, in other words, pressure on women to stand shoulder to shoulder with their men against the foreign oppressor and not to bring in divisive issues of gender to cut across and weaken the national struggle (1992: 77)

South African Black women do not necessarily fight outright against traditional patriarchal oppression. When this analysis dealt with the similarities and differences between Head and Kuzwayo, it was pointed out that Kuzwayo celebrates women but she side steps patriarchal oppression by being evasive about the pain and oppression she endured in her first marriage. Her acknowledgment of the power of patriarchy is oblique. She, however, is openly and aggressively opposed to apartheid oppression and goes to the extent of condoning crimes of the youth if the oppressive regime is indirectly the cause of criminal behaviour (see chapter 2 entitled "Hunger Knows No Laws"). For Head, the study has found that she plays on or uses the traditional support of masculine superiority for the benefit of society; for example, her use of Makhaya, depicting him as a man of great social consciousness who can rise above cultural groups. She admits that she hoped that by creating Makhaya's character, young Black men reading *When Rain Clouds Gather* would see him as a role model. The desire expressed by Head and Kuzwayo for partnership with their men in the cultural struggle is genuine. Creative use of traditional patriarchal influence - in other words, working creatively within the system - will continue to be employed by the writers as long as gender equality remains the objective of South African Black feminism. In order to achieve this gender equality, Head admits to deliberately creating and juggling with patriarchal positions in order to fight racial oppression and traditional patriarchy without visibly upsetting the traditional structures.

This position brings us to the concept of African feminism. African feminism is characterised by shying away from vocally condemning traditional patriarchy but instead creatively using it, or sometimes ignoring it, within progressive constructive structures. This attitude is obvious when Kuzwayo omits details pertaining to the

breakdown of her first marriage. Head, also takes no direct condemnatory stance towards patriarchy.

Clayton explains how African feminism has always seem reluctant to dissociate itself from the whole community's broader cultural and political struggle for basic rights and human recognition. "A woman's place is in the struggle" was the accepted slogan of the PAC/ANC. Oppression can be ignored within progressive political organisations, despite having established separate women's forums within them. Women's writing and orature within COSAW and COSATU reflects this complex affiliation to "Africanness" and "struggle" (Clayton1990: 27).

The South African black feminist perspective, as expressed by Head and Kuzwayo can be said to be characterised by its embrace of womanism, mothering and continuous national and racial liberation struggle. The objectives of South African black feminists despite their various groupings are: cultural reconstruction, transformation of society, development, moral regeneration in socio-political psychological, economic and ecological spheres of the new nation, especially post - 1994. One of the concerns of the South African black feminist perspective is the subject of the new nation, and its ability to adapt to the demands of the global economy; however the mammoth task of transformation of the subject is one with which many post colonial theorists and writers concern themselves. Clayton, on the issue of the uneven development and poor image of black African women to which she refers as the "cultural bomb," says:

But while Black women's writing explicitly declares its positive aims of self-affirmation and collective purpose, dedicating itself to a post-

apartheid future, and calling up heroic female figures from the history of resistance to strengthen resolve, it is undermined from within by the negative images and emotions inculcated by the 'cultural bomb' of colonial domination and white racism, as well as lack of confidence induced by the traditional inferior status of African women. As Ngugi argues, the most important area of colonial domination 'was the mental universe of the colonized, control through culture of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world.' (1990: 27)

The writings of Head and Kuzwayo serve a didactic purpose by empowering women with a sense of resilience and avoidance of victimhood. Self-pity and helplessness are not the emotions to indulge in but rather on courage, a sense of self-worth and commitment to relentless struggle to attain the objectives of a South African black feminist perspective is what is required. The postcolonial era does not come with solutions but with problems that may be debilitating. One of the post-colonial theorists who has come up with relevant theories in this regard is Gayatri Spivak. Her theories and recommendations have had an impact on writers and intellectuals of Third World countries. Spivak in her address delivered in Cape Town on the subject of academic freedom in 1995 voiced her concern on the plight of rural poor African women – the subaltern about whom she had spoken in her paper titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). She advocated working towards a change of mind and enlightenment of the rural poor from the bottom up, without undermining tradition, in order to avoid culture shock. The study understood culture to refer to day-to-day things that society does in order to survive. Cultural and community development are

two of the focal points of South African black feminism. Head and Kuzwayo both undertook to introduce self-help projects for the communities they focused on, and both worried about the lack of management and accounting skills to ensure sustainable development.

Education of the rural girl child and the reorientation of the teacher to rededicate himself or herself with the resolution to decolonise the child's mind and instil a sense of self worth, in addition to a transformed curriculum, is another concern of Spivak's. Empowering the section of the community that Gayati Spivak referred to as the subaltern becomes crucial to the survival and reconstruction of the excluded subject, who must now occupy the "new world". The Black South African perspective takes cognisance of this, hence its particular perspective regarding non-exclusion of any subject, education for sustainable development for all subjects equally and adopting skills and outcomes based education that starts with re-educating the teachers themselves. This approach aims to create a well-balanced subject who will feel adequate to undertake any job of socio / political and national reconstruction and also be equipped for global economic competition. Simone de Beauvoir, the French feminist in her renowned book *The Second Sex* (1949) points to how a woman seeking self-identity will start by saying "I am a woman," a self description which does not occur with men. This self-description resonates in Kuzwayo's title *Call Me Woman*. Further she believes that one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman. She believes in existential choice and is very much against female entrapment by patriarchy in all socially defined institutions and stages. She believes in making own choices, a view taken up by South African Black feminists. Freedom of choice with regard to feminist issues like lesbianism, abortion, homosexuality, adoption, celibacy,

single parenthood, owning of property, religion, freedom to choose one's lifestyle is part of a South African feminist perspective as confirmed by our constitution. Head's and Kuzwayo's work predates this position but sowed the seeds leading to a commitment to freedom of choice for men and women.

Social responsibility features strongly in a South African feminist perspective: provision for healthcare for people with HIV and Aids and those affected by it such as relatives, the orphaned and widowed is seen as important. Focusing on agriculture, the restoration of land and land conservation are seen as desirable ways for ensuring sustainable development which affects women and men.. Elimination of poverty, ignorance and unemployment are the urgent responsibility of South African black feminists in order to achieve gender equality and racial equality: these are strong messages that were sounded early on in Head and Kuzwayo's writings.

I would argue there is a South African Black feminist perspective that is unique to South Africa as our political circumstances are unique. Though some of its features are common to African feminist writers generally, the particular political circumstances in South Africa give a particular flavour to local feminist positions. But there are women who prefer the maintenance of the status quo and, to this end, Aidoo and Ba warn against assuming unity of perception and solidarity of action. When it comes to Third World women, as with First World women, this does not mean that all Third World African women can or should be depicted monolithically. Thus while one can talk about Third World women, the discussion should take place within a framework that recognises differences between them (Aidoo, Ba 1992: 78). In conclusion, then, one can say that while in general the broader Black African



women's feminist perspective is one of non-racism, rebuilding of society and subject to ensure self-worth, and reconciliation; in South African black feminism, as evidenced in this brief study of Head and Kuzwayo's selected writing, this will find a particularly South African expression.

notion of androgyny is progressive, suggesting the deconstruction of fixed concepts of masculinity and feminism (1991: 226).

The concept of androgyny brings us to the socialist feminists of the first wave of feminism: Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. There is continuity between Wollstonecraft and the first wave feminists in that first wave feminists also wanted no differentiation between male and female in acquiring education opportunities, and no gender differentiation in social, political, and economic opportunities. Firstly, Virginia Woolf was, and still is, recognized as a founding figure of feminism by contemporary feminists. Like Wollstonecraft she adopted the perspective of androgyny but for a different reason, that of wanting to escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness; she wanted to occupy a space of her own as a creative writer. This desire made her write the world renowned book *A Room of One's Own* (1929). She wanted to achieve a balance between male self-realization and female self-annihilation. (see Selden 1993:208). The other contributions of the first wave feminists are demanding equality in terms of property ownership, in terms of divorce laws, gender equality professionally and in educational opportunities. Woolf acknowledged that gender inequality was socially constructed and could be reformed. Importantly, like Simone de Beauvoir she felt entrapment in womanhood and in the taboo about restraints in expressing female passion (Selden 1993:209).

Simone de Beauvoir is regarded as the link between the first and the second waves of feminism because of her internationally acclaimed book *The Second Sex* (1949). While acknowledging all the first wave's perspectives, she moves to the domain of the second wave feminism when she points out the difference between the interests

of the sexes and focuses on men's biological, psychological and economic discrimination against women. De Beauvoir is totally against patriarchy. She refers to roles designated by society to a woman as entrapment she explains the woman's position in these terms: 'Shut up in the home, woman cannot herself establish her existence; she lacks the means requisite for self-affirmation as an individual' (de Beauvoir 1969:261). She feels self-definition of women is desired by them, a sentiment shared by Kuzwayo which resonates in the title of her book: *Call Me Woman* (1985). De Beauvoir rejects biological determinism when she writes: "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (1969:9). In this book she also introduces the existentialist idea-that people should be judged by their actions, a notion that cuts through racial prejudice. The second existentialist perception is the existential doctrine of choice which breaks through all social institutional entrapments – excessive domesticity, sexual politics, social choices, marital obligations and oppressive patriarchal relationships. This principle of choice subverts any enforced societal expectation. She argues cynically about society:

Enforced maternity brings into the world wretched infants, whom their parents will be unable to support and who will become the victims of public care or 'child martyrs.' It must be pointed out that our society, so concerned to defend the rights of the embryo, shows no interest in the children once they are born. (de Beauvoir 1969:221).

She rejects given social order. Her views border on radical feminist perspectives. Radical feminists believe that women's oppression is caused by patriarchy. Patriarchy is a social system which ensures male domination over women and the

subordination of women socially, politically, industrially and spiritually. It is a given social order. This inequality is a primary form of exploitation. Radical feminists therefore introduce the concept of woman-centeredness which requires feminists to concentrate on female experience and interpretations and overlook male definition - a position which can lead to male/female separatism. Revolutionary feminists take the idea of radical feminists even further by campaigning for revolution against men's power over women. Their focus is on male violence against women which is a contemporary social problem. An example of this ideological position is the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist grouping of Britain in 1981 (see Magezis 1996:15).

The next important strand for this thesis I will consider is psychoanalytic feminism which filters through the history of feminism. Psychoanalysis as therapy is based on the observation that individuals are often unaware of many of the factors that determine their emotions and behaviour. Freud's theories deal with human behaviour which, he says, is the result of desires and impulses and memories that have been repressed into an unconscious state, yet still influence actions. This theory can be used to determine the causes of suicidal tendencies, extreme emotions, failed love relationships, divorces and abuse of women. Further, psychoanalysis becomes a tool for analysing post colonial effects on human beings. Freud is believed to be the father of psychoanalysis. For the purposes of this dissertation I will focus on his ideas that I have referred to above, bearing in mind that psychoanalysis helps us understand the rationality behind patriarchy.

Black feminists, largely African American, question identity, race, sexuality and the experiences of working-class women. Selden and Widdowson (1993:231) say

'multiple' identities have caused black Americans, black British and women-of-colour writers to search for self-definition. Alice Walker, in her book *In Search Of Our Mothers Gardens* (1983) uses the term, *womanism* for black feminism. What is womanism? Kolawole, defines womanism as "the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval and self-assertion in positive cultural ways" (1997:24). Womanism implies inculcation of the concept of Black nationalism and struggles in the concept of feminism. Definition of Black feminism is appropriate at this point, Mary Eagleton defines Black feminism as exploring the specificity of Black women's experience, critiquing the racism it finds in the work of white feminists and deconstructing our understanding of racial terminology (1991:226). Black feminism brings together concepts or perceptions of identity, class, racism, and problem solving. Chikwenje Okonjo Ongunyemi has this to say about the discourse of womanism:

Womanism is compelling because of its focus on images of strong black women. But the frequent evidence of black women's strengths and central roles can be misinterpreted where women participate in public struggles, and assumptions about their passivity and inferiority appear to be subverted while an inferior and supportive status is prescribed for them and their independence is strictly policed (1985:63).

Some Black African writers have made valuable contributions to the discourse of Black feminism. For instance, Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Ba (1992) point out that Black female writers share privileged social and economic positions with their male counterparts but they have to work harder for recognition:

This shared oppression and the resulting national struggle, first for independence and then against the neo-colonial foreigner, has added

complications and ambiguities of the African woman's opposition to her exploitation at the hands of the African man. There is, in other words, pressure on women to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with their men against the foreign oppressor and not to bring in 'divisive' issues of gender to cut across and 'weaken' this national struggle (1992:8).

These black women have introduced solidarity with each other and with their male counterparts against imperialist patriarchal oppression and they have called feminism a national struggle.

Moving to South Africa, Miriam Tlali is a vocal feminist and political voice in the South African literary community. Tlali in her work *Footprints in the Quag* (1989) which is a collection of short stories which focuses on every day difficulties that South African Black women had to contend with during the apartheid era, brings a new concept of women's liberation being tied with national liberation when she writes: "Women's liberation is bound absolutely with the liberation of the whole nation, so I'll always combine the two" (Tlali 1989:85). Tlali combines Black feminism with political struggle so that nationalism becomes a focal issue in Black feminism and inextricably linked to national struggle and reconstruction. In the short story "The Point of No Return," Tlali highlights the sacrifice women make when they have to contend with parenthood without support from the father and be in the political struggle simultaneously. She points out the women's personal struggle caused by the man's lack of sense of responsibility to his child and partner, yet his commitment to the national struggle. Tlali's third concept is that of women causing oppression to other women as it is revealed in "Masechaba's Erring Child". Other 'women' issues like traditional dependence and subservience, the inferiority complex of women fall

under patriarchy so I shall use only these three issues for the purpose of this dissertation. It is important to point out that Tlali writes about the voices of the marginalized amongst the poor, who are the equivalent to the subaltern about whom Spivak is concerned. This concept of a voice for the marginalized brings us close to concepts that concern Spivak.

Gayatri Spivak is an Indian, postcolonial, Marxist, deconstructionist, feminist, postcolonial theorist. She makes useful contribution to postcolonial theory particularly because, whilst she was born in India, she has lived in the West and involved herself in Western feminism long enough to understand as a woman and feminist the difference between Western feminism and Third World feminism. In her analysis of Third World feminism she uses this dual focus continuously and compares all facets of Third World feminism with those of the West thus highlighting the points of difference. In her speech on "Academic Freedom in South Africa after 1994" delivered at the University of Cape Town in 1995, she defines the subaltern as: "the bottom layer that is cut off from mobility within both foreign and domestic dominant structures" (1995:121). She is very concerned about the gap between the elite and the subaltern of the same racial group caused by the unevenness of development by what she calls a postcolonial predicament. Like many feminists she advocates the importance of education. She stresses the education of the rural poor especially the poor Black woman, and the girl child. She maintains the rural community forms the largest percentage of the electorate in a postcolonial new nation. She recommends enlightenment to be introduced from the bottom up and to stress reason and responsibility so that the new nation can manage economic development and social renewal. She maintains that preservation of culture is essential for the maintenance of

the new world order. Exclusion of certain classes must be avoided in the creation of a new free subject (see Spivak 1995:121-125). The new nation must be freed from poverty. She emphasizes that the teacher must be trained to shake off all oppressive patriarchy in order to be able to develop people who will fit in the neo-liberal world economic system (see 1995:135). She stresses the radical change of mind and attitude necessary in order to be able to form alliances between South Africa and other developed countries. Socio-economic restructuring accompanied by development is essential for the constitution of a new subject for a democratic South Africa and the guiding principles are workers' rights, equality of opportunity and environmental protection (see 1995:137). Development must be sustainable and disease, poverty and ignorance must be eradicated. These are her concerns for the Third World which she felt were not accommodated in Western feminism - Western feminists assumed homogeneity of feminist expectations and circumstances, yet this was not the case for poor Black women.

I have up to now very briefly reviewed some feminist points of view relevant to the writers under discussion in this thesis. The ideas briefly summarised here will be used in the following chapters. However, before starting with the comparative analysis of Head and Kuzwayo, it will be advisable to give background information on Bessie Head and Ellen Kuzwayo, and also to examine their emergent motivations and aspirations in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 2

### **Historical Context: Bessie Head and Ellen Kuzwayo.**

It is important to understand the historical context of both Head and Kuzwayo seeing that the nature, content and style of the books Head and Kuzwayo wrote were a direct reaction to the social conditions caused by the Apartheid policy of the then ruling Afrikaner Nationalist Party (1948-1994). Apartheid policy segregated on racial lines all social activities and amenities. It enforced racially discriminatory laws in social, educational and commercial fields. This meant social segregation affected sports, schools and curriculum, restaurants, hotels, cinemas, theatres, suburban transport, public toilets, beaches, parks, museums and libraries. Segregation in industry meant Africans could not be trained even for semi-skilled work in white areas. Black business was restricted, as black entrepreneurs were confined to townships. Racial restrictions on property ownership ensured that Africans did not own property in white designated areas. The Group Areas Act (1974) further re-enforced residential segregation. Influx control laws limited the number of Africans moving through White designated areas. The Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immortality Act of (1957) forbade relationships and marriage across the colour-line. Education was segregated in content of curriculum, location of institutions, administration and money spent by the government per child. Everything favoured the white population. Race, therefore, was the great deciding issue. It is these legislated inequalities that affected South African society, resulting in poverty, unskilled citizens, undeveloped people, and poorly educated members of society. This situation motivated many

writers to seek redress of the social inequalities by conscientising people through literature. Resistance movements led by women e.g. Sophiatown and Alexandra branches of the Women's League (see Lodge, 1983:146) and the June 1976 uprisings led by the black youth resulted. Lodge has this to say about black women during the apartheid years:

The indignation of urban women was infectious, and it found fertile ground in rural worries and distress. Because of the removal of large numbers of economically active men through the migrant labour system, those who were left to confront the everyday difficulties for material existence were more often than not female.....

Thus apartheid was not just racial segregation but a repressive system that left the majority of the black population illiterate, poor, misplaced and culturally disturbed. It was a form of psychological colonisation (see Lodge 1983:143;149).

It was against this background that Head and Kuzwayo wrote their novels.

Kuzwayo was born on 19 June 1914 of a middle class family which owned a 60 000 acre farm in Thaba 'Nchu, a farm which they had to forfeit after the area was designated a white area. She was an only child. Her lower primary education was done at St Paul's School in Thaba 'Nchu and her further education was undertaken at St Francis College, Marianhill, and Adams College (both in Natal), and Lovedale College in the Cape. After qualifying as a teacher, she taught at a girls only school, Inanda Seminary in Natal. She later left teaching and trained as a social worker, first at Jan Hofmeyr School of Social Work and then she did community work with the Johannesburg City Council. At the age of 63 she obtained higher qualifications in social work at the University of the Witwatersrand. In 1976, after the Soweto unrest,

she accepted a post in the School of Social Work at Wits University. She was a political activist, ardent supporter and speaker for the Black Consciousness (BC) Movement. The title of her book *Call Me Woman* has a feminist ring as it advocates for separate space and voice for women, yet the ideology for the BC movement is patriarchal and traditional, females are by and large voiceless. Black Consciousness principles would therefore render the feminist position that she takes in this book as problematic (see Driver 1990: 234). She became actively involved in protest movements against the apartheid regime, particularly after the 1976 massacre of innocent students in Soweto. In 1977, under the Terrorism Act, she was arrested by the South African authorities and was detained for five months without trial.

Her personal and emotional life has been very challenging. Being the only child, at the death of her mother she inherited her family's farm only to lose it when the region was declared a white area. Her parents divorced when she was two years old in 1916. She grew up under a stepfather, Abel Tsimatsima, and with a half sister, Maria. She last saw her mother in 1930. Her own family life was even more challenging and tense. She moved from her parental Aunt Blanche to live with her natural father with whom she was unfamiliar. She married Abraham Moloto, gave birth to two sons, and miscarried the third child. As if that was not enough, the marriage broke down because of the abuse she endured. She does not give any details of the reasons for the break up as witnessed by her remarks: "It is a great hardship to have your trust shaken in someone so very close to you. Even now, I find I cannot write in detail about it" (Kuzwayo 1985: 124). After the break up of her first marriage she found herself fleeing without her sons back to her natural father in Johannesburg. This incident was followed by divorce from Abraham Moloto. In those days divorce was

still most unacceptable. Two years later she married her second husband, Godfrey R. Kuzwayo. They were blessed with a son Godfrey. Her second husband died in 1965 after 18 years of marriage. Single handedly, she had to face the challenge of the political life of her son who was twice expelled from Fort Hare University and banned to Mafikeng. To crown her woes, in 1974 she was completely dispossessed of her parental farm under the Group Areas Act. However, it seems that the series of challenges and hardships left her stronger and more determined to write books, which would give strength to other women.

The history of Bessie Head was comparably even more tragic. She was born on July 6, 1937 in Fort Napier, a psychiatric hospital, in Pietermaritzburg, Natal. Her mother was a White woman, institutionalised because she was considered insane, as Bessie's father was a Black South African stable 'boy'. Bessie was adopted by a White family who were later to return her on account of her skin colour being too dark. A coloured family brought her up until she was thirteen years old. Thereafter she was placed in a coloured mission school for girls where she was jolted by the principal with the judgement that "your mother was insane, if you're not careful you'll get insane like your mother" (Eilersen 1995:21). Her life and environment were harsh and hostile but she survived. In Greyling Street Coloured School, she received what she called a repressive church education. This is confirmed by Eilersen when she described Bessie's day:

The whole day was partitioned into strictly organised time modules. It began with a cold shower, summer and winter. Before breakfast, the girls had to clean the dormitories and ablution block, the older girls taking on the heavier work. Then came breakfast,

consisting of porridge, some fruit and a cup of tea. Further cleaning followed then morning prayer prior to starting lessons (1995: 52).

She qualified as a primary school teacher at an Anglican mission school, St Monica's in Hillary a suburb of Durban. She later gave up this profession for journalism. Head's mother died when she was six years old and the identity of her father remained obscured for many years. She later left teaching in Durban and went to Cape Town in District Six, living at Stakesby Lewis Hostel. She worked for *Drum*, and then *Golden City Post* at the offices in Hanover Street. Being the only woman reporter on these papers in those days, she was always given stories connected with women and children. In 1960, she met, through her advances, journalist Harold Head. She apparently stripped naked before him in the darkness of the local community centre at which he was caretaker. Eilersen writes:

For some weeks the two young people were often bumping into each other. Then one evening as Harold was locking up the community centre Bessie arrived to see him, she accompanied him on his rounds and in the main activity room, with the windows closed and the lights extinguished, she suddenly took off all her clothes and confronted him, naked. Harold surprised, and moved by the beauty of her naked body bathed in the moonlight coming through the windows told her she was beautiful and she better get dressed again. Later that evening they made love for the first time. This marked the beginning of an intense love affair (1995:52).

On the 15<sup>th</sup> May 1962, Howard, their son was born. The marriage fell apart in 1964. The reasons cited for her divorce were her tempestuous nature, suicidal tendencies and extreme independence. Also Harold had not revealed his jail history, and she sums up her marriage in very negative terms:

My husband Harold Head came along at a time when there was nobody else. I had begun to think that I would never marry or have children. I think he came at a time when I wanted to lose things. He appeared to like books – “The Life of the Mind”. So I agreed to marry him and have regretted it ever since (Eilersen 1995: 54).

When her marriage fell apart she accepted a teaching job in 1964 in Botswana. Owing to her political affiliations with the Pan Africanist Congress and friendship with left wing activists, she was denied a South African passport so she left on an exit permit that prohibited re-entry into the Republic of South Africa, the country of her birth. Eilersen reveals Bessie’s political affiliations in this statement:

She was there to witness Sobukwe’s arrest when it finally occurred. The confused station captain had sent out a call for help. At about eleven o’clock, three security policemen arrived and went into the police station, to emerge shortly afterwards read out a list of ten names. It was the entire PAC leadership with Sobukwe’s name leading (Eilersen 1995: 47).

Head went on in Botswana to write a number of books from which I will extract supporting views that justify my arguments for her feminist perspectives. At the time of her death in April 1986, it was believed she was in the process of writing her autobiography, but it was later discovered that this was not the case. In her biography by Eilersen, she is described as strongly built and slightly plump giving a general

impression of wholesome well being, however this was obviously not so. She was a good natured, lively young woman and very musical. Later she displayed a personality of extremes as seen in her tempestuous temperament. She was raised and educated in a mission school but later expressed reservations about Christianity, however, she admired Paul in the Christian doctrine, strongly believing in reincarnation particularly after her own vision (Eilersen 1995:84-85). She claimed to be apolitical but she was attracted to Pan Africanism through Matthew Nkoana (44). She was a warm person but experienced loneliness, rejection and depression that led her to the world of the literature which helped her reveal her reverence for humanity, her talent for observation and story telling and her determination to use literature as a tool for cultural reconstruction.

In discussing Kuzwayo's and Head's motivations and aspirations to write, it is worth mentioning that they were both aware of each other. The foreword to Kuzwayo's autobiographical book *Call Me Woman* (1985), was written by Bessie Head and she summarises this book as being about "Amazing Love" that can be provided by the people for the people (Kuzwayo 1985: xv). And Kuzwayo, during the National English Literary Museum (NELM) interviews in Johannesburg, when asked by the interviewer (Adler et al) about Bessie Head's recent death (April 1986) expressed her shock by its suddenness (MacKenzie 1989: 59).

Kuzwayo and Head were motivated by the stresses, obstacles, challenging life experiences, and concern for the people around them to organise and reconstruct society during apartheid and in preparation for the day when there would be no apartheid any longer. They aimed at a literate, disciplined and receptive community and youth because they communicated the history of their people and urgent messages

to them practically and symbolically through characters in their novels. They themselves were ardent readers and were motivated to write even though they had in a background of oral tradition and story telling. Kuzwayo for her inspiration cites Mary O'Reilly, who used to write fiction. This is what she says:

I had read a lot here. Very early in my life I read Mary O'Reilly who used to write fiction. She wrote a lot of books and I read a lot of that stuff at a very early age. Then later I started reading for reading's sake and I enjoyed it.... (Kuzwayo 1985: 67).

Head on the other hand cites her voluptuous love for reading to her reading the biography of the German playwright, Bertolt Brecht, particularly when he changed to Marxism and then used the principles of his didactic plays based on social problems and social research to create a new order in Germany (Head 1990: 98).

I would say that had I not been influenced by Brecht I would never have produced novels in which you see facts and figures the basic outline of the co-operatives and things like that. I found eventually that I could do anything with the novel form. And courage to write books like that was definitely inspired by Bertolt Brecht (Head 1983: 9).

Secondly, she cites the British writer, D.H Lawrence and his working class view of life as important.

Religion played a part in the motivation of both these writers. Kuzwayo talks of Christian values, a disciplined upbringing and being taught to serve a community rather than a family. Her grandfather, Jeremiah Makgothi, contributed to her Christian upbringing. As Clayton writes of Makgothi: [he] was a "trained teacher, a



devout Christian, and secretary of the Native National Congress (later the ANC). Ellen Kuzwayo followed in his footsteps as a politically committed Christian” (1989: 57-58). Kuzwayo’s focus is on the community, particularly women and later the youth. So her inspiration to write is based on the desire to communicate in writing the plight of Black women whom she calls the ‘underdogs’, in other words, “people who have been the underdogs of this country, who have been suppressed and looked down upon. And I felt people did not know who they were and the contribution they’ve made in this country” (Kuzwayo 1985: 59). Head, while claiming to have no time for Christianity (see Eilersen 1995: 232), clearly had a spiritual vision once seeing a gigantic light descend from the sky after which she became convinced that something like the equivalent of God was around Southern Africa. She said this because of the strangest revelations she had been seeing (84). The only character she truly admired in the scriptures was Paul, the writer of letters to the Gentiles and the greatest Christian missionary and theologian. Her aspiration was to communicate urgent messages to mankind through her characters.

There is similarity then in Head’s and Kuzwayo’s aspirations, the difference lies in the practical directness of Kuzwayo in her perception of her intervention as being directly linked to her professional responsibility to share her experiences:

The idea was to share my experiences in my practice as a social worker with as many people as possible – the experiences of Black women I worked with during the period of 12 years from 1963 – 1976. This was the real motive for writing the book  
(Kuzwayo 1985: 59).

Ironically, she writes that the audience she was targeting was the White South African audience to tell them what a Black woman thinks and how she lived (Kuzwayo 1985: 88). Head on the other hand focuses on a wider human community and uses a more symbolic turn of phrase. There is universality in her approach and there is a kind of limitlessness in the application of her 'messages'. Further, though her inspiration is Brecht, there is nothing simply Marxist or Socialist in her approach. She has a unique approach to solving problems of humanity that is a combination of Marxism and Socialism because she speaks of co-operatives of equality amongst people of shared purpose. Her approach is influenced by the fact that her place of writing is in Botswana; South Africa is a remote place where she grew up, but the racial oppression she experienced there colours her vision. Her concerns and solutions are therefore for both South Africa and Botswana:

I should, as a Black person be concerned with three things and they are always with me suggestions, solutions the co-operatives are too simple. But still, they are to show how real those concerns are and how they are going to be more important to Black people than anything else if there is any kind of liberation, especially in South Africa. What is going to be of major importance is the tremendous poverty and suffering of the urban person. That I am very familiar with. (Head 1990: 9).

She aspires for the development a means of production that will be managed and afforded by the poor for their own benefit in order to transform the value of life. Her plan is applicable to both urban and rural societies.

Head found gender and racial oppression to be urgent issues and she used her language to communicate this to her audience in the book *Maru* (1971). The central theme in this book is gender and racial oppression; in fact, some critics have said the book is a “novel on the hideousness of racial prejudice” (Ibrahim 1996: 88). Added to Head’s experience of South African racial prejudice is the Black on Black racial prejudice of Botswana. The Batswana are a privileged group while the Marsawa are treated as inferior. The basis of South African prejudice, she said, was the skin colour.

It was to be a history of skin colour; skins were constantly legislated for, the White being a passport to paradise and many privileges; the Black skin being a kind of rhinoceros hide skin at which are hurled tear gas, batons, bullets, and ferocious police dogs.

(Head 1990: xiii).

Racial appearance in Botswana seems also to be the basis for racial prejudice because the Marsawa hardly looked African but Chinese and because of this difference they could be enslaved by the Batswana. Messages she aspires to send to mankind, here, become fourfold: firstly, children must get to know the story of racism. Secondly, racism is not confined to White against Black, but Black against Black prejudice is also in existence, and is just as hideous. Thirdly the offspring of these differing races suffer endless insecurities and psychological trauma due to harassment by the stereotype. And, fourthly, they become alienated against their parents of, at times different races and classes. She brings forth another form of alienation which she refers to as internal and external exile which affects the mind as well: “[Head’s] novels reflect an increasing interiority of perspective that each novel returns to the central issue of personal contentment and political power and that each tries to resolve

these issues in different ways (Mackenzie 1993: 111-112). Head, was a victim of racial prejudice and identity crisis because of being categorised 'Coloured' in South Africa, then 'stateless' in Botswana for fifteen years (see Eilersen 1995: 62). She is, therefore, well equipped to write and educate others about the humiliating and depersonalising effects of prejudice that should be eliminated.

Kuzwayo's experiences which she also uses in her writing were also due to racial prejudice in South Africa; these experiences included imprisonment, detention without trial and, in the case of her son, even banishment to Mafikeng. The well being of her children limited her movements from Rustenburg at a crucial time of her life (see Kuzwayo 1985: 136). Further, rejection by her Aunt Blanche and stepfather put her in a personal crisis characterised by puzzlement, shock and bewilderment. She expressed her feelings in no uncertain terms:

I lost all sense of personal direction and identity. I felt so rejected by the people and surroundings I had once cherished as part of my very being I was in a state of shock but I had no one to share my hurt and shock with I now drew only on my Christian teaching and life beliefs this teaching had instilled in me.... Christ loves us all  
(Kuzwayo 1985: 107)

Rejection, as all must know, from any quarter makes the victim question his/her identity, worth and sanity. This is Kuzwayo's message.

To be celebrated is Head's and Kuzwayo's motivation to undertake creative writing as a successful project, while having very few models in the immediate environment to emulate. Through their courage and resolve, they have made an impact nationally and

internationally in the literary world. Head, particularly, was influenced by European Romanticism to include in her autobiographical /fictional novels beautiful, visionary, and real landscapes; in her fairy tale love stories to reflect the present socio-political problem:

I had a strange experience, she said slowly. Each time I closed my eyes those pictures used to fill the space inside my head. One picture was of a house. Everything around it and the house itself was black, but out of the windows shone a queer light. It did not look like lamplight and it revolved gently. While I concentrated on this picture, it slowly faded and another took its place. There was a wide-open sky and field I saw the pitch-black clouds envelop the sky, but when I looked at my feet the whole field was filled with yellow daisies. They stirred a little as though they were dancing their movement also created this effect of gently revolving light. The next moment I was surprised to find myself walking along a footpath between the lovely daisies (Head 1971: 103).

Such a passage in which Head allegorically describes the difficult path that leads to a better world could only have been inspired and motivated by Romanticism. She wrote tales that linked symbolically to real political problems: Kuzwayo by way of contrast frankly says: "I didn't think I would do well in fiction. I would want to write about aspects of my own community" (Kuzwayo 1985: 68).

Indeed, she has written very realistically about the plight of women, their oppression by the government and by traditional customs. She followed a pattern of the time by writing of autobiography while preoccupied by social and cultural aspects, yet also simultaneously giving a chronological narrative of personal and public events without

subverting her particular focus on the plight of women and the underlining theme of national struggle. As she once said, her real motivation to write was to share information with other women and raise women's awareness of their subjugated position : a motive that makes her a feminist.

The following chapter will adopt a comparative approach and focus more fully on the similarities and differences in their style of writing and their feminist perspectives. The works to be discussed are: Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1985) and Head's trilogy: *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1970), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973).

### CHAPTER 3

#### **Kuzwayo's *Call me Woman* (1985) and Head's Trilogy: *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973) –similarities and differences in approach.**

In this chapter I will focus on Kuzwayo's book: *Call Me Woman* (1985) and Head's Trilogy: *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973) with the intention of undertaking a comparative analysis of their approaches to feminism and racial oppression.

Head and Kuzwayo have been well viewed in the literary world and in the international civil community. Head has been awarded by the *Sunday Times* the Alan Paton Fiction Award and she has been honoured further, by the *Sunday Times* by the establishment of a R100 000 Fellowship for Non-Fiction writing that has been named after her to stimulate non-fiction writing in Southern Africa. Kuzwayo in 1979 was awarded by the *Star* newspaper, the Woman of the Year Award. The University of Witwatersrand has recognised her with an Honorary Degree in Literature and from the University of Natal she has accepted the award of an honorary Doctorate in Literature. The South African Women for Women awarded her with the Ubuntu Award. She became the first Black writer to be awarded the CNA Literary Prize, South Africa's premier literary prize, for her 1985 autobiography, *Call Me Woman*.

*Call Me Woman* is both an autobiography and a celebration of the black community, particularly the youth and women. Structurally, the book has a preface written by

Nadine Gordimer and a foreword by Bessie Head. It is divided into three sections. The first section, titled "Soweto," commences with a letter from a friend, Debra Nikiwe Matshoba, in prison who relates the awful conditions of being denied basic human needs. The rest of the section focuses on life in Soweto – the hardships suffered by the Black people under the apartheid government. Poverty, hunger, crime and violence take prominence in the narration. The second section is titled, "My Road to Soweto". It deals with personal history, her children and how the state sees her. It ends with a dramatic change in her life when she becomes fully committed to the struggle against the apartheid regime after the 1976 Youth uprising. Section Three, entitled "Patterns Behind the Struggle," ends with a positive view of the future, having viewed trends of the past and the present. It is an appraisal of the struggle and herself and she concludes that minors (women and the youth) are heroines and heroes of the struggle. She celebrates the women and youth of Africa. The narrative structure shows movement from personal to political spheres as she recalls:

I have shared a platform with this son of Africa [Biko] at a number of SASO (South African Students Organisation) workshops when an aspect of Black consciousness was made serious. Then, I saw another side of Steve. I saw in him a clear thinking researcher, a hardliner in language, and in action a planner, and above all a leader and soldier of great courage. Sometimes, I felt that he and his colleagues put Black consciousness before idealism, but at the end of the workshop, without any effort or discussion, we assumed our roles of adult and youth, of mother and son or daughter Kuzwayo (1985: 46-47).

In the course of her struggle she moves from the personal to the political, striving to portray herself as both a private and a political person.



Head, in her fiction which is heavily autobiographical also moves from personal to political. *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a book that focuses on a development project that Head undertook in a village called Golema Mmidi in Botswana in which particular reference is made to traditional family patterns of crop production and modern co-operative methods of production both of which involve women. The chief is against the project yet the people are seeking a better life so are keen to adopt the agricultural co-operative project. The chief fails to stop the application of modern techniques. Frustrated by the failure of his political tactics, he commits suicide. This liberates the people of the village. The second work *Maru* focuses on the “hideousness of racism”, gender inequality and the existence of class division in Botswana. It deals with a woman, Margaret, of mixed race who encounters racism and challenges in her teaching work because of her race and gender. She marries into a royal class of Botswana against the wishes of the community because of her lowly status as a Marsawa. She is alienated and goes into exile with her prince, abandoning her community who then decide to consider Prince Maru dead. The last book of the trilogy is *A Question of Power*. This book, through the protagonist Elizabeth, describes in detail Head’s experiences that led to her mental breakdown, institutionalisation, recovery and triumphant happiness which led her to tell her story for the benefit of mankind. The book introduces us to the psychic arena of Elizabeth. Elizabeth, who is an expatriate and a coloured from South Africa, is overcome by loneliness in her new home and she eventually loses her mind. The first part of the novel deals with her relationship with a man in the village named Sello. The relationship is entirely imaginary. In her imagination she sees Sello take on different forms, verbally tormenting her, in contrast to her experience with her other imaginary

lover, Dan. Dan also tortures her psychologically by forcing her to watch sexual acts he performs on a series of fantastic women, and by taunting her and threatening her:

Sello kept on saying something. His voice sounded like the brooding insects because he talked so softly. It came to her in snatches:

‘Don’t hate me Elizabeth .....’ then he seemed to say very carefully, ‘I like you’. Then he said: ‘all I told you about the times of darkness was true. It affected everything, children and animals. Yes, they misused animals too. But it isn’t true that I am a pervert. Dan cooked it up....’

Just near dawn she dozed off. Instantly Dan arose before her. He said, ‘I have the power to take the life of your son. He will be dead in two days’ (Head 1974: 195).

These mental tortures affect Elizabeth’s sanity. They are a demonstration of patriarchal brutality and abuse. After a period in a mental hospital Elizabeth returns to her co-op farm and son and finds peace. This work is filled with references to the Bible and classical works, as well as to the works of twentieth century writers such as D.H. Lawrence. These three books form a trilogy in that they share the persistent motif of a refugee from South Africa, a protagonist that struggles to find self-identification and sense of belonging either in the country of birth or in the country of adoption. Cherry Wilhelm writes:

The three novels *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973) share a basic pattern that moves in a suggestive direction. The protagonist struggles to find a self and a home, to ‘belong’ in both the geographical and existential sense. The

quest is one that must steer between unacceptable political ideologies  
(1983: 2).

Each of the novels has struck a different balance between inner and outer life: stylistically while *When Rain Clouds Gather* uses realism, *Maru* and especially *A Question of Power* tend to be allegorical and psychological in that much of the content in her books is autobiographical. Head also moves from the personal to the political and the function of her work can be representative and didactic. Both writers have utilised the autobiographical genre and a protest mode in their writing, but they have opted for different narrative styles.

Both writers have experienced challenges in their lives. They have used their family and political experiences as data for writing books with a political ideological purpose of giving information or a message, to the youth and community at large. Head is struggling for racial, sexual and gender equality from a dehumanising position of being a South African 'Coloured' and from a space – Botswana – she cannot call home. She left South Africa on an exit permit to Botswana where she was denied citizenship for fifteen years. Her son was assaulted by older children for claiming to be a Motswana. It is understandable why her themes in the trilogy are on “the hideousness of racism” and a desire to belong because of her homelessness, exile and alienation. Politically she could not be fully accepted by either Black Consciousness or Pan Africanism. She took an exit permit from South Africa to Botswana in order to remove herself from South African white racism only to find herself confronted by Black against Black racism between the Marsawa and Batswana. In Botswana she was overcome by loneliness and rejection and was thereby inspired to write to help mankind become aware of these social ills and thus hopefully, institute change. This

is the answer she gave to one question during the National English Literary Museum interviews:

The book *Maru* definitely tackles the question of racialism because the language used to exploit Marsawa people, the methods used to exploit them, the juxtaposition between White and Black in South African and Black and Marsawa in Botswana is so exact. When I am here, people said things to me about the Batsawa that I knew were done to Black people in South Africa. I first asked what does 'Marsawa' mean? 'Oh that means low, filthy nation.' They said: 'Oh don't worry about these people. They don't think. They don't know anything.' But exactly the same language is used to justify the fact that anything can be done to Black people in South Africa. (MacKenzie 1989: 17).

Both writers have thus experienced racism. Kuzwayo has experienced the South African version of institutionalised racism. The theme in her book relies squarely on the effects of racism. All the suffering she writes about is hers and her fellow Black countrymen. Kuzwayo's active struggle against apartheid began after the June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1976 Black youth uprising. The root of Head's struggle was in South Africa but she found herself in a struggle against Black on Black racial prejudice in Botswana. Kuzwayo speaks only of South African racism whilst Head speaks of South African racism as well as Botswanan racism. To give an example, Kuzwayo tells the story of her struggle to get custody of her two sons:

In addition to my father's ability as a civic leader, I was also counting on the Children's Act legislation which in general provided that children of a certain age be placed in their mother's care. Using my father, I set the ball rolling in applying for my sons to come and live with me. They

were aged four and two years, respectively. All efforts with my father on my side failed for the two year old. I appealed in vain. The reality then came home to me: that Children's Act was intended for White children only. Further, Black children are not children in the eyes of the government (Kuzwayo 1985: 18).

Kuzwayo was detained under Section 10 of the Terrorism Act for five months without being charged. This is what Nadine Gordimer says about Kuzwayo's experience:

That this conflict, in her case, was rawly exacerbated by racist laws in South Africa is self-evident. Yet Ellen Kuzwayo's evolution as a politically active woman, all the way to the final commitment to the Black struggle that brought her to prison is shown to stem from the same instinct to turn toward freedom-and pay the price - that enabled her to become a whole and independent being as a woman (Gordimer in Kuzwayo, 1985: xii).

Both Kuzwayo and Head in their literary ventures seek to devise new political ideologies for the future of their countries: non-racialism and reconciliation are their objectives because they both, despite their hardships, have very positive outlooks for the future of Africa. They both seek to liberate women. Both writers have referred to the triple political oppression that African women have had to endure. Their feminist agenda therefore, focuses on upliftment of women from poverty. Both initiated self-help projects, for example, Kuzwayo with the Soweto Women's Self-Help Organisation, the Black Housewives' League. Head based *When Rain Clouds Gather* on a co-operative agricultural and project cattle farming project which ensured the political and practical involvement of women of the village of Golema Mmidi and which promoted gender equality, coupled with a desire to belong and develop

personal relationships. In *Maru*, Margaret the Marsawa as earlier mentioned faces challenges in her teaching work because of her race and gender. She marries into a royal class of Botswana against the wishes of the community because of her lowly class. However, after the marriage Margaret and Maru go into exile. She abandons her liberated community and the prince his kingdom. Head has made Margaret's identity very problematic: she seems passive but talented and artistic, she's deprived of dialogue and everything is decided for her. Head's feminist agenda seems to be one of portraying women as stoic and resilient characters who persevere, suffer pain but persist to the end. Through Margaret's persistence, hate and prejudice are completely shaken:

People like the Batswana, who did not know that the wind of freedom had also reached people of the Marsawa tribe, were in for an unpleasant surprise because it would be no longer possible to treat Marsawa people in an inhuman way without getting killed yourself. This racism goes underground much as Maru and Margaret have done. (Head 1971: 37)

Head's feminist agenda in her treatment of the character of Maru is complex, well thought out and reveals many aspects of feminism. She reveals tyrannical manipulation, and patriarchal superiority in Maru. The unpredictability of the masculine mind in relation to cultural responsibility is shown. The demonstration of the manipulating technique in the love triangle saga between Moleka, Margaret and Maru works for Maru's benefit. Head shows deep understanding of the patriarchal mind. The uneasy tension between reality and magic realism in the God-like Maru also works for Maru as he experiences telepathic connection with Margaret, the Marsawa. Telepathy subjugates the partner as all Margaret's thoughts and moves are intuited by Maru. Head has made her book superficially male oriented having been

titled after Maru, a man. In one of her interviews she said she likes her male characters big and inept (Head 1990:17). George Cadmore, the missionary, Morofi, supervisor Seth and Pet the teacher are all physically huge but not much intelligence is given to them. She describes George and Morofi as stupid and insensitive and says these traits are inborn. This portrayal of men finally subverts any supposition of male superiority on her part but her literary creativity makes her create and place Maru central in the plot and he seems in control of the earthly and the spiritual domains. He is a schemer who manipulates Moleka and ends up marrying Margaret, who in fact is in love with Moleka and not him. Maru planned the marriage to the lowly Margaret against all existing prejudice as he clearly states in the opening statements in the book.

Bessie Head's feminist perspective is intriguing in its creativity. Her own attitude seems to be one of belief in female superiority as, for example, Margaret Cadmore senior is more assertive than her husband George Cadmore. Male characters are made fat and inefficient; take as an example Dikeledi as principal of the school. Driver confirms this handling of patriarchy when she writes:

Head castigates men for their irresponsibility and their maltreatment of women, characteristics that have flourished under the disruption of traditional life, and her solution to anti-female patriarchal tendencies is to correct or 'feminize' patriarchy (to use the terms used by feminist criticism of the 1970s). The new African community becomes one marked by gentle, loving, responsible men, with the standard gendered role divisions otherwise unchanged (1990: 246).

Head admits in one of her interviews that she does create male characters that she hopes young men who read her books could emulate in their more positive aspects.

This stance shows a feminist belief in the power of literature to influence actual change in gender roles and perceptions.

However, despite the similarities between Head and Kuzwayo outlined above, differences between the two great South African writers are found firstly in the space they occupy as they write. Head is writing from outside South Africa – in Botswana even though she is writing in part about South African ideological politics. She is using her amazing memory of her own experience in South Africa. She indicates her space of writing when she writes: “With all my South African experience, I long to write an enduring novel on the hideousness of racial prejudice. But I also wanted the novel to be so beautiful that I as the writer would long to read and reread it”(1971:9 ). In *When Rain Clouds Gather* and in *A Question of Power* she highlights her refugee status by making her main characters Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* and Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather* expatriates from South Africa in search of a place to belong to. The protagonist in her three novels comes as an agent of change from the outside. The structural plot shows motion from one unacceptable political ideology to another equally unacceptable political ideology. Wilhelm declares the three novels share a basic quest pattern, which moves in a suggestive direction. The protagonist struggles to find self and a home to ‘belong’ to in both the geographical and existential sense. The quest is one which must steer between unacceptable political ideologies. Although the starting point, (geographically the country left behind South Africa) is one of race, oppression and anger, the quest moves beyond race oppression and anger encountered in its new inter-tribal form in the new space. (1983:2).



Head's space is outside South Africa and she effectively uses the refugee and quest modes basing her books on her own experiences. The style she adopts in writing *Maru* is significant because of the allegorical, symbolic and metaphysical elements. An example of the allegory in the trilogy is in the motif of contention between inner and outer forces. The symbolic representation of evil forces in the form of nightmarish dreams is particularly found in *A Question of Power* as is the metaphysical dimension of Head's style generally. The story of Maru and Margaret reveals the metaphorical elements with sociological implications. Wilhelm contends that:

The growing stress in the three novels is on the psychic arena, on the struggle for the human soul by contending forces. Each of these novels has struck a different balance between inner and outer life: *When Rain Clouds Gather* has a primarily realistic texture; *Maru* is felt as an allegorical struggle with sociological resonance, and *A Question of Power* locates the struggle squarely in the psychic terrain, though there are obvious implications for the broader African struggle (1983: 2).

The cyclic structure of *Maru* reinforces the continuity and universality of the sociological problems highlighted: racism, gender inequality, class, identity crisis, exilic consciousness and alienation. The cyclic structure is made obvious by the similarity of the opening and closing statements:

A day had come when he had decided that he did not need any kingship other than the kind of wife everybody would loathe from the bottom of their hearts. He had planned for that loathing in secret. They had absorbed the shock in secret. When everything was exposed they had

only one alternative: to keep their prejudice and pretend Maru had died.

But did it end there? Was that not only a beginning? (Head 1971: 6-7).

At the close of the book the above statement is reiterated in this form: "When people of Dilepe Village heard about the marriage of Maru they began to talk about him as if he had died" (Head 1971: 126).

Head's trilogy is all written in third person, omniscient narration in episodic form. The characters are of different ages, classes, races and ethnic groups; a stance that makes her books relevant to any socio-political structure. The approach is not linear; it juxtaposes realism when describing traditional life to modernist, impressionistic, fragmentary techniques when describing its alienating effects on the protagonists. The style Head uses in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is more realistic than in the other two in the trilogy as she juxtaposes her characters - some fairly good, others fairly evil, fearful of venturing into modernity, as this would disrupt the status quo. Chief Matenge interferes with change represented by modern agricultural and cattle farming methods but he is also protecting his position of power. Failure to prevent change leads to his tragic suicide. This can be read as symbolic of the futility of traditional patriarchal oppression, also an indication of how much society stands to benefit from the change. *A Question of Power*, however, focuses on the psychic arena. It makes characters out of nightmarish dreams whose effect is manifested in the real physical insanity of Elizabeth. This is a style new to South African feminist writing but it is in line with the psychoanalytic feminists like Sarah Koffman and Julia Kristeva. These psychoanalysts share similar themes with Head, i.e. the relationship between madness, fitness and the challenge and the relationship between sexuality and its expression. (see Koffman 1978). Head's approach introduces a whole new South African

feminist aesthetic. Her style closes the gap between fiction and reality as all her books are fiction based on her autobiographical data. And all move from personal to political.

It is the autobiographical genre that these two writers, Head and Kuzwayo, use so differently. Briefly, what is understood by autobiography? Conventionally autobiography is the writing of a story of one's own life by oneself, an own history. Daymond, (1987) has given the following reading of the function of black South African women's autobiography: both to record, through a personal focus, a people's history and customs and to guide the present generation of readers in ways of coping with the world (11). McClintock has this to say about women's autobiography:

They do not as a rule genuflect to the theology of the centred individual nor to the idea of a chronological whole, tending rather to be irregular, anecdotal, fissured and polyphonous. Mary Mason has shown how in many female autobiographies, the single identity of the speaking self splinters into multiple fluidity of identification female autobiographies typically present self as identity through relation. This relation is not one of depending or mastery but rather recognition, whereby disclosure of the self emerges through identification with some other, who may be a person, family or community. Identity is thereby represented as coming to being through community rather than as the individual heroics of the self-unfolding in solitude (1995: 314).

Head, following McClintock's reading of women's autobiographical approach, does not 'unfold in solitude' but moves from personal to political. Huma Ibrahim argues that Head's autobiographical approach shows movement from personal to political:

“For Head the question of autobiography is not just an issue of identity as the cultural feminists understood it but a query into micro-political practices.” (1996:4). In all three books of hers that this study is focusing on, she has used her autobiographical data to create fiction that is for the benefit of youth and community for generations to come. Her fiction goes beyond being a record and serving a commemorative function but strikes an unusual balance between fact and fiction, individual and community, absences and communality. This approach guarantees her writing individuality and yet also a representative quality, raising broader social concerns. Within this complex autobiographical fictional framework social problems are raised: patriarchy, racial oppression and prejudice, cultural and individual identity, personal relationships, gender and feminism. She employs symbolic and allegorical elements in her literary intervention in order to present the complexity of social problems with often an idealistic solution and a hope that her suggestion will have resonance. A good example of this is the whole plot of the story of Maru. Head, obviously invests much of herself in the young Margaret Cadmore. The embodied narrative technique in this character can all be traced back to her autobiographical data. The experience of identity crisis is demonstrated in her rejection as a person. Like Margaret Cadmore junior, her mother died at birth. She got taken over by an individual, then the missionary school. Her identity, like Margaret’s, was problematic every time and everywhere. She always felt the need to belong and not be judged by her appearance. Also, like Margaret, she felt she was used as an experiment. Head describes Margaret in this manner:

Her mind and heart were composed of a little bit of everything she had absorbed from Margaret Cadmore. It was hardly African but something

new and universal, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as tribe or race or nation.

(Head 1971: 19)

Colonial patriarchy is demonstrated when Margaret, the colonial mother, charges Margaret junior: 'One day, you will help your people'. Charge was never said as though it were a purpose and burden in the child's mind" (Head 1971: 20).

Head's complex feminist perspective is revealed when she successfully portrays Margaret as a passive and non-dialogic female character in the whole plot. Her depriving Margaret of a voice causes the reader to focus on Margaret's enduring and significant actions. She overcomes challenges that confront her in the teaching profession. She changes the course of history when she marries, as a Marsawa, into Batswana royalty. Her paintings show a peaceful beautiful landscape that she telepathically shares with her prince. Presumably, they lived happily ever after. But she is so manipulated and quiet - contrary to feminist expectation that she marries the man she loves less than Moleka. Margaret's role becomes increasingly a symbolic, political one. Head's feminist perspective can in fact be seen as taking the form of 'mothering' as she uses her autobiographical data as foundation for fictional stories that are told for didactic purposes by using the literary devices of symbolism and allegory.

As I have indicated earlier, in Head's dealing with racism one finds another perspective of racism, that of Black against Black - Batswana against Marsawa, profoundly found in *Maru*. But this theme began in *When Rain Clouds Gather* when she remarks on ethnic intolerance she witnessed while she was living at Bomangwato Development Farm in Botswana. The story emphasises traditional patriarchy as

represented through the rural chief named Matenga in Golema Mmidi (which means to grow crops), a name which becomes ironic when he, the chief ruthlessly opposes the agricultural project, Head highlights the ethnic hatred when she quotes the Barolongs as saying: "We Barolongs are neighbours of the Batswanas, but we cannot get along with them" (1969:10). The theme of the "hideousness of racism" is dealt with in *A Question of Power* when she angrily declares: "all 'questions of power' reduce human beings to units and must be resisted including the power attributed to an invisible God. Since man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed" (1973. 205).

Throughout Head's fiction, she has succeeded in a complex but effective way to communicate through her characters, who are all ages and of different classes, her objectives and remedies. These objectives, revealed throughout her fiction in a manner to make her work accessible to a wide readership that covers all races and ages multinationally, are to highlight: the need for development which is problematised by lack of skills, the psychological effects of racism, bad patriarchal relationships between men and women and gender inequality.

Her final vision is idealistic. Her use of the romantic pastoral mode and fairytale ending in *Maru* reveals a reformist attitude. This reformist attitude is evident in the way she deals with problems like racism, exploitation, corruption, class division, gender issues, black and white co-operation for a common cause, mysticism, exile and alienation, and the pain of abuse in her books. Despite its reformist potential, Christianity and its principles are also problematised by Head's alleging that

Christianity was used to condone white brutality against blacks and the oppressive policies of the White government:

It meant that a White man could forever go on slaughtering Black men simply because Jesus Christ would save him from his sins. Africa could do without a religion like that (Head 1969: 134).

*When Rainclouds Gather* yields this ambivalent statement from Makhaya: "The slaves were always there.... they were all the conviction he had that some quiet and good creator controlled and owned the earth" (Head 1969: 169). This novel also reveals idealism as the end, through the happiness and kindness the village people display, a mood that augurs well for the transition from a traditional way of life to a modern way of doing things that is one of the major themes of this novel. In the book *A Question of Power*, the ending is also idealistic. Elizabeth is rejoined with her son and resumes her duties on the development project. Further, she overcomes victimhood. Head tests Elizabeth's power of resilience. She quotes from religion critically when she says: "There is only one God and his name is man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (Head 1973:205-206). Though ambivalent about Christianity, Head valued her missionary education, quoting extensively from the Bible in her books. She claimed not to be a Christian yet was an admirer of St Paul, as previously mentioned, the great writer of letters in the New Testament. In the final chapter of her book *A Question of Power*, she shows reverence for God mixed with fear when she writes:

There was a chorus of very feminine voices singing: Glory be to God on high, on earth peace, goodwill towards men: She shook her head. It was impossible she could not be hearing things. She crawled out of bed, opened the door and walked out. There was not a sight. It was

Christmas Day. The chorus in the air directly over the house. The unseen female choir repeated the words over and over: Glory be to God on high, on earth peace, goodwill towards men. Elizabeth listened, appalled. Nothing Sello had even said in the beginning frightened her as much as this did. It implied that there was still something up there, unseen, unknown to account for (1973: 109).

Wilhelm affirms that Head is both philosophically sceptical, and yet a believer in God, when she writes:

In *When Rain Clouds Gather* God is affirmed as a loving centre; in *Maru* the inner gods are discovered; *A Question of Power* confronts the inner devils. Its epigraph from D.H. Lawrence suggests the thematic resonance of a fall (the original expulsion from gardening duties). Only man can fall from God only man. (1983: 11)

Head's abiding drive was towards a classless society in Africa to which she could belong, as is evident in this hopeful passage:

It was quite the opposite in Africa. There was no direct push against the rigid, false social systems of class and caste. She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying men love men. As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging.

(Head 1974: 206)

Present are the themes of belonging, and love of humankind. What she calls the gesture of belonging - the placing of the soft hand over her land - is a sign of triumph



and success in attaining what she longed for. Head, after fifteen years of landlessness was finally given citizenship in Botswana. For the most part of her life she did not truly belong to any particular community. She therefore, turned to the land, the rural community, which is reflected in her use of the Romantic Pastoral mode at times.

By way of contrast, Kuzwayo's style comes across differently. Kuzwayo, unlike Head wrote from within South Africa in the early 1980's at a time when the political ideology of the apartheid regime was very strong, and political confrontation was at its worst in the country. Her style of writing is inevitably different from Head's. It takes the form of direct resistance, in first person narration. Her writing is non-fiction and she adopts a linear approach. She refers to the past, the present and looks into the future. When describing social change that resulted from African men being employed in the mines she writes:

Overnight, the values of the past become legend to the point of being ridiculed as old-fashioned and out-dated...The drastic changes in the way of life of their communities, brought about by the complex foreign legislation in their land of birth, left black people without direction or a pattern to follow: a tragic state of affairs for any people.

(Kuzwayo 1985: 13)

The present she focuses on in *Call Me Woman* is bleak. The protest mode of writing stems from dissatisfaction with social injustices to Black communities. In her book she celebrates women for surviving the onslaught on the society.

Kuzwayo was the first black woman in South Africa to use the autobiographical genre in the manner she did. Daymond, describing Kuzwayo's use of autobiography says:

As a starting point, her title, *Call Me Woman* recognises what autobiography involves. Its claim is both personal ('me') and representative ('woman'), and its imperative mode of address to the reader is confident in its assumptions of a common experience that will form the basis of her appeals. The organisation of her narrative confirms the dual note of her title. (1987: 13).

Her style, therefore, sees the book progressively moving from repressed "Soweto" to "Patterns behind the struggle", when she makes hopeful remarks with regard to future developments. She makes a plea-cum-demand to be called 'woman', given the power that word holds for her. McClintock explains how Kuzwayo writes of self but thinks of public; how she writes of her experiences and simultaneously explains national historical events; and how she aligns her chronological history with the communities' chronological developments (1995:314). In her title she raises feminist questions. The title therefore serves a personal and yet representative function like Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*; she demands space and voice for women and herself. The title sounds an appeal for women's recognition of their achievements and demands an audience for women's voices to be heard, via the author's personal voice. The stance of focusing on personal history yet considering her story as a story of thousands of untold stories of other women makes her position one of authentic authority for the celebration of black women. She confirms this representivity when she acknowledges all black women's share in the struggle. Their contribution in the struggle had thus far not been acknowledged:

These are some of the examples of the sufferings and endless struggles borne by some of these great mothers of South Africa who brought up

and nurtured children of all communities, sometimes at the sacrifice of their own children. (Kuzwayo 1985: 23)

Her demand for the voices of women to be heard is, however, subverted by her political association with Black Consciousness ideology that renders women mute in the face of the broader national struggle. The main narration in her book is a first person narration, a device that makes Kuzwayo speak more personally; yet she uses her personal history to tell not only her own story but that of the community generally. Her autobiographical approach, as Gordimer says in the preface to *Call Me Woman*, is a fairly straightforward documentation of her life history. Further, Gordimer asserts: “Ellen Kuzwayo is not Westernised, she is one of those who have Africanised the Western concept of woman who in herself achieve a synthesis with meaning for all who experienced cultural conflict” (Gordimer 1985: xi-xii). Kuzwayo’s approach, whilst it is an accurate account of her life, it is also a celebration of women. Nationalism is the prevailing emotion as is typical of a BC position. She empowers women by praising their part in the struggle and then sets out to teach them skills through her professional know how as a social worker.

Most probably the synthesis that comes is one that Alice Walker calls ‘womanism’ discussed earlier - a concept that has emerged because of African women feeling marginalized by the western feminist discourse. Nationalism, the struggle for self-redefinition and involvement in cultural development are the cornerstones of this Afro-centred feminist theory. Womanism then is “the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural ways” (Kolawole, 1997: 24). Kuzwayo, in her use of autobiography, aims to combine both feminism and Black Nationalism. Womanism strives to address the various forms of oppression

common to African women: the triple alliance of colonialism, racism and gender issues. Womanism creates a space for African women to represent themselves instead of being voiceless and subjugated to western feminist concepts. Third World feminism focuses on the relationship between feminism and the struggle against other forms of domination, and is against assumed homogeneity which is implied in western feminism's concentration on the individual's rights. Third World feminism is engaged in the struggle to attain equal citizenship in the post independence era, it is still in the anti-colonial struggle therefore still needs its literary greats and theorists to show the way to cultural liberation.

The second concept that Kuzwayo brings forth in her use of autobiography is that of 'motherhood'. She makes a cry for freedom from the conventional stereotype of mother whose position is that of subjugation and silence. She is asserting the strength of motherhood because:

The figure of the mother,... signifies both the woman from whom the male separates in order to define himself as masculine, and the woman whom the male possesses in order to define himself as masculine (Driver 1990: 237).

It is through the assertion of the strength of motherhood that African women writers are addressing their worth and recognising it and therefore seeking to emerge out of the entrapment by traditional patriarchy. This change of outlook now sees the emergence of an African feminism (Driver 1990: 237). Of importance is acknowledgement of the fact that Kuzwayo ignores the figure of masculinity, as she evades the oppressive details that led to her divorce. She gives to motherhood not just the spiritual power of imminent being but an intelligent active and angry political role

(p.238). In Kuzwayo's text, marriage and traditional motherhood appear problematically as natural, and as a means of getting into a higher class - the women she talks about at the end all married prominent men - women like Winnie Nomzamo Mandela, Mrs Albertina Sisulu, Mrs Adelaide Tambo. Prestigious marriages or alliances are seen as achievements in themselves. Even her sister gets married to a prestigious man, and Kuzwayo worries about her sister's lower educational standard to her husband's. Problems here are her own middle class obsession with upward social mobility throwing into question her real concern with the lowly and homeless.

Kuzwayo deals with the question of homelessness differently from Head. The study has shown how Head dwelt on themes of expatriation, movement from metropolitan space to rural space, and also of exile and alienation. The refugee in Head's fictional autobiography becomes an agent for change. Kuzwayo, who appears to be torn between individual and community, personal history and family history, modernity and tradition, expresses praises for extended family life as a source of stability and security. Her personal experience was at odds with this - witness her unhappiness about the homelessness she experienced as a child, rejected by Aunt Blanche. She hated being stripped of the security of the home as a young adult by the Group Areas Act that saw her inherited farm confiscated. She experienced trauma from having her roots severed by those she regarded as family. The problem of homelessness is kept very immediate and personal by Kuzwayo.

Her autobiographical approach is socio-historical. She stresses the autobiographical quality of her work, and in fact she is very vocal about not being able to write fiction. When doing the National English Literary Museum interview she responded, as

previously quoted, to a question about fiction writing by saying she did not think she had the capability to write fiction. Her autobiography *Call Me Woman*, judging from the title and vocalised intent - to celebrate women, is personal and general at once, whilst not neglecting the youth and community at large. Patriarchy in her case, and in her feminist perspective, becomes an issue of major concern because of her evasive attitude in matters pertaining to the title of her book, and her position of spokesperson for the Black Consciousness Movement. This study has found Head very creative in handling the patriarchal problem in that whilst she, like Kuzwayo acknowledges the existence of the triple patriarchal oppression of Black women (viz. traditional patriarchy, public patriarchy and racial patriarchy), she creates characters to play an at times subversive patriarchal role necessary for her objective e.g. Maru for prince, manipulator, post colonialist, and an abandoner of kingdom for forbidden love. There is also Makhaya acting as an agent of change against all odds who co-operates with White Gilbert for the benefit of the community. Kuzwayo, however, sees men by and large in a negative light. By her own admission her first marriage ended because of abuse. Further, she believes that Black men have done everything to stifle and blot out all the contributions women have made. She stands firm in commending women; she declares women somehow seem to cope with pressure more successfully than men (Kuzwayo 1985: 51) and pays tribute to them because of their resilience. Black women have also suffered from apartheid patriarchy. In her direct attack on apartheid patriarchy she cites the discriminatory system of education that excluded Blacks from better funded White schools and the inadequacies of Bantu education which led to the youth unrest of 1976. Further she cites the hideous Native Land Act of 1913 for uprooting communities, corrupting the values and morals of the Black people thus damaging the whole culture of Black people (11); and influx control of labourers to

the industrial urban areas, a situation which necessitated influx control legislation on the part of the then government. The result was the breaking up of families. Influx Control legislation, together with the Native Land Act of 1913, ensured homelessness.

Kuzwayo's autobiography, focuses on self and to the political all at once, but bias towards women is uppermost in her mind. She continually celebrates women as she writes:

I shall pay my tribute to the many, many black women old and young who emerged uncorrupted regardless of the obstacles which blocked their way in an effort to make ends meet; the women who have made both humble and outstanding marks in education, industry, commerce, social commitments, trade, sport and in day-to-day family life.

(Kuzwayo 1985: 38)

Kuzwayo, contrary to her professed Black Consciousness affiliation disrupts traditional patriarchal expectations. She admires women undertaking jobs traditionally done by men, like taxi ownership, as she marvels at Mrs Eseokelo who demonstrates job and gender equality, fearlessness in handling crisis, characteristics that put Eseokelo in a powerful position. (Kuzwayo 1985:51-52).

Her book ends on a strong triumphant note. She lists all qualified South African Black women lawyers and medical doctors to prove women's achievements. The onus to achieve is still placed on the woman as she uses the Setswana proverb: "Mmangoana otshwara thipa ka far bogaleng" which translates as: "The child's mother grabs the sharp end of the knife." Then she quotes the first sentence of the National Anthem: "God Bless Africa" (263-266). In other words, women must turn disadvantage to their favour for the country to progress.

Using these points of similarity and difference between Head and Kuzwayo discussed here, chapter Four will incorporate the various strands of feminism cited in Chapter One from the perspectives of feminists from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, through the First and Second Wave feminists, Black American and African feminists, to the post colonial feminist Gayatri Spivak to discuss whether we can say there is conclusively a South African black feminist perspective.



## CHAPTER 4

### **Is there a Black South African Women's Perspective?**

This comparative analysis set out to investigate if there is something which one could call a Black South African women's perspective with special reference to 18<sup>th</sup> Century, First and Second wave, African American, African and post-colonialist feminists. The study has used the selected works of two renowned South African women, together with a summary of their historical contexts and personal backgrounds, as examples of potentially feminist writing. Chapter 3 attempted a comparative analysis highlighting similarities and differences in their styles and feminist perspectives. This final chapter will make some remarks about the possibility of a definitively Black South African feminist perspective.

Since feminism is a discourse of cultural politics started in the West, I shall highlight continuities with and, implications for the resulting South African Black feminist perspectives. Feminism is cultural politics and feminist rights are human rights. Fighters for women's rights have been referred to as activists: they have worked as individuals, lobbying groups or social movements to fight for equality and for recognition as responsible members of the community who can be trusted. I have already stated that the writings of Kuzwayo and Head are in protest mode. They aim to liberate women and thereby the whole nation. Tlali in similar vein writes: "our liberation is bound with the liberation of the whole nation, so I will always combine the two" (Tlali 1989:85). Tlali is a Black South African writer who has opted to be called a 'womanist'. I have previously given the definition of womanism as the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval and self-assertion in positive

cultural ways. This concept of womanism is a continuity of some of Mary Wollstonecraft's perceptions in *A Vindication of Rights of Woman* where she writes:

In short, in whatever light I view the subject, reason and experience convince me that the only method of leading women to fulfil their particular duties is to free them from all restraint by allowing them the inherent rights of mankind (1792: 261)

This freedom that Wollstonecraft is talking about is a kind of 'womanism' in a Western sense. The concept is developed when Alice Walker, the famous African American writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century suggests that womanism aims to combine both feminism and Black Nationalism. Womanism strives to subvert patriarchal oppression without necessarily removing the father as head in a family or as political leader striving for equal recognition of women's contribution, sense of responsibility and concern for cultural development. Womanism nevertheless seeks to create space for African women to represent themselves instead of being voiceless, hence the force of Kuzwayo's title *Call Me Woman*. The title is culturally subversive but it is a position taken by many Black South African women.

'Mothering' is another ideological construct that can be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century continuing through to 20<sup>th</sup> Century feminism, but adopting a particular dimension typical to Black South African feminist perspectives. In the works studied in this thesis, androgyny discussed earlier as a perspective originated from Wollstonecraft and adopted by Virginia Woolf, is useful to consider in relation to 'mothering': Ellen Kuzwayo's 'mothering' implies utilisation by a woman of masculine and feminist attributes in performing or handling any task. Desiree Lewis says: "mothering is represented as a pivotal and extensively supportive activity which

co-ordinates acquisitions of selfhood in a patriarchal system influenced by white-centred myths and hierarchical oppositions”(1992:36). Ellen Kuzwayo’s autobiography, by locating public and active space for mothering, appears to inscribe a contradictory gender identity whereby the private pursuit of mothering becomes necessarily public. Further, Lewis says Kuzwayo creates a space where contradictions can flourish, and the terms ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are tumbled about in disorder (Lewis 1992: 36-37). Isabel Allende, in her book *Eva Luna* (1995), confirms the potential matriarchal power in feminist struggle. The title of the book *Eva Luna* is symbolic of matriarchal power as Eva means ‘life’ and Luna is ‘moon,’ traditionally seen as feminine, in Spanish. She makes the protagonist’s name Eva Luna and makes her bring harmony through important symbols of feminine identity: that of women as givers of life and that of the moon as a symbol of matriarchal power. She shows that women have a quest to be men’s equals and, as givers of life, nurturers of male and female youth, women can restore balance and make life a triumph by maintaining the position of caring and nurturing in every sphere of life. The plot of her novel suggests that women should participate in life fully as men’s equals. Similarly, the South African Black women’s perspective as evidenced in Head and Kuzwayo’s work, is also about full participation in all public undertakings.

Both Head and Kuzwayo’s lives have illustrated hardships that women experience in relationships. Wollstonecraft in her book *Maria* (1798) demonstrates hardships and injustice suffered by women under patriarchy. For instance, in *Maria* the protagonist wants for the affection of her husband, she undergoes trial for adultery, and she suffers injustice as her property is procured by Darn Ford; she is divorced by her husband, her lover is unfaithful, she suffers a miscarriage and attempts suicide.

Wollstonecraft quotes Maria as saying: 'What have I not suffered... this cannot last long, and what is a little bodily pain to the pangs I have endured?' (Wollstonecraft 1798: 146-147). The suffering of women and children demonstrated in *Maria* (1798) is relevant today and continues to be the concern of 21<sup>st</sup> century South African Black and White women as it has been for Head and Kuzwayo. And the struggle against women's oppression will go on until it is minimised. Oppression of African women adds another dimension when African feminist writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Ba point out the collusion of black male authors in their oppression. In calling for a fight against this oppression, Aidoo and Ba support what they call 'partnership' with their brothers. The resolve to work shoulder to shoulder with their men is a continuation of Wollstonecraft's call for co-operation and equality between male and female in undertaking all national ventures. The difference is that Wollstonecraft did not have to struggle against colonial oppression as well. In defining a patriarchal dimension peculiar to Africa, and thus also relevant to South Africa, Ama Ata Aidoo says:

This shared oppression and the resulting national struggle, first for independence and then against the neo-colonial foreigner, have added complications and ambiguities to the woman's opposition to her exploitation at the hands of African men. There is, in other words, pressure on women to stand shoulder to shoulder with their men against the foreign oppressor and not to bring in divisive issues of gender to cut across and weaken the national struggle (1992: 77)

South African Black women do not necessarily fight outright against traditional patriarchal oppression. When this analysis dealt with the similarities and differences between Head and Kuzwayo, it was pointed out that Kuzwayo celebrates women but she side steps patriarchal oppression by being evasive about the pain and oppression she endured in her first marriage. Her acknowledgment of the power of patriarchy is oblique. She, however, is openly and aggressively opposed to apartheid oppression and goes to the extent of condoning crimes of the youth if the oppressive regime is indirectly the cause of criminal behaviour (see chapter 2 entitled "Hunger Knows No Laws"). For Head, the study has found that she plays on or uses the traditional support of masculine superiority for the benefit of society; for example, her use of Makhaya, depicting him as a man of great social consciousness who can rise above cultural groups. She admits that she hoped that by creating Makhaya's character, young Black men reading *When Rain Clouds Gather* would see him as a role model. The desire expressed by Head and Kuzwayo for partnership with their men in the cultural struggle is genuine. Creative use of traditional patriarchal influence - in other words, working creatively within the system - will continue to be employed by the writers as long as gender equality remains the objective of South African Black feminism. In order to achieve this gender equality, Head admits to deliberately creating and juggling with patriarchal positions in order to fight racial oppression and traditional patriarchy without visibly upsetting the traditional structures.

This position brings us to the concept of African feminism. African feminism is characterised by shying away from vocally condemning traditional patriarchy but instead creatively using it, or sometimes ignoring it, within progressive constructive structures. This attitude is obvious when Kuzwayo omits details pertaining to the

breakdown of her first marriage. Head, also takes no direct condemnatory stance towards patriarchy.

Clayton explains how African feminism has always seem reluctant to dissociate itself from the whole community's broader cultural and political struggle for basic rights and human recognition. "A woman's place is in the struggle" was the accepted slogan of the PAC/ANC. Oppression can be ignored within progressive political organisations, despite having established separate women's forums within them. Women's writing and orature within COSAW and COSATU reflects this complex affiliation to "Africanness" and "struggle" (Clayton1990: 27).

The South African black feminist perspective, as expressed by Head and Kuzwayo can be said to be characterised by its embrace of womanism, mothering and continuous national and racial liberation struggle. The objectives of South African black feminists despite their various groupings are: cultural reconstruction, transformation of society, development, moral regeneration in socio-political psychological, economic and ecological spheres of the new nation, especially post - 1994. One of the concerns of the South African black feminist perspective is the subject of the new nation, and its ability to adapt to the demands of the global economy; however the mammoth task of transformation of the subject is one with which many post colonial theorists and writers concern themselves. Clayton, on the issue of the uneven development and poor image of black African women to which she refers as the "cultural bomb," says:

But while Black women's writing explicitly declares its positive aims of self-affirmation and collective purpose, dedicating itself to a post-

apartheid future, and calling up heroic female figures from the history of resistance to strengthen resolve, it is undermined from within by the negative images and emotions inculcated by the 'cultural bomb' of colonial domination and white racism, as well as lack of confidence induced by the traditional inferior status of African women. As Ngugi argues, the most important area of colonial domination 'was the mental universe of the colonized, control through culture of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world.' (1990: 27)

The writings of Head and Kuzwayo serve a didactic purpose by empowering women with a sense of resilience and avoidance of victimhood. Self-pity and helplessness are not the emotions to indulge in but rather on courage, a sense of self-worth and commitment to relentless struggle to attain the objectives of a South African black feminist perspective is what is required. The postcolonial era does not come with solutions but with problems that may be debilitating. One of the post-colonial theorists who has come up with relevant theories in this regard is Gayatri Spivak. Her theories and recommendations have had an impact on writers and intellectuals of Third World countries. Spivak in her address delivered in Cape Town on the subject of academic freedom in 1995 voiced her concern on the plight of rural poor African women – the subaltern about whom she had spoken in her paper titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). She advocated working towards a change of mind and enlightenment of the rural poor from the bottom up, without undermining tradition, in order to avoid culture shock. The study understood culture to refer to day-to-day things that society does in order to survive. Cultural and community development are

two of the focal points of South African black feminism. Head and Kuzwayo both undertook to introduce self-help projects for the communities they focused on, and both worried about the lack of management and accounting skills to ensure sustainable development.

Education of the rural girl child and the reorientation of the teacher to rededicate himself or herself with the resolution to decolonise the child's mind and instil a sense of self worth, in addition to a transformed curriculum, is another concern of Spivak's. Empowering the section of the community that Gayati Spivak referred to as the subaltern becomes crucial to the survival and reconstruction of the excluded subject, who must now occupy the "new world". The Black South African perspective takes cognisance of this, hence its particular perspective regarding non-exclusion of any subject, education for sustainable development for all subjects equally and adopting skills and outcomes based education that starts with re-educating the teachers themselves. This approach aims to create a well-balanced subject who will feel adequate to undertake any job of socio / political and national reconstruction and also be equipped for global economic competition. Simone de Beauvoir, the French feminist in her renowned book *The Second Sex* (1949) points to how a woman seeking self-identity will start by saying "I am a woman;" a self description which does not occur with men. This self-description resonates in Kuzwayo's title *Call Me Woman*. Further she believes that one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman. She believes in existential choice and is very much against female entrapment by patriarchy in all socially defined institutions and stages. She believes in making own choices, a view taken up by South African Black feminists. Freedom of choice with regard to feminist issues like lesbianism, abortion, homosexuality, adoption, celibacy,



single parenthood, owning of property, religion, freedom to choose one's lifestyle is part of a South African feminist perspective as confirmed by our constitution. Head's and Kuzwayo's work predates this position but sowed the seeds leading to a commitment to freedom of choice for men and women.

Social responsibility features strongly in a South African feminist perspective: provision for healthcare for people with HIV and Aids and those affected by it such as relatives, the orphaned and widowed is seen as important. Focusing on agriculture, the restoration of land and land conservation are seen as desirable ways for ensuring sustainable development which affects women and men. Elimination of poverty, ignorance and unemployment are the urgent responsibility of South African black feminists in order to achieve gender equality and racial equality: these are strong messages that were sounded early on in Head and Kuzwayo's writings.

I would argue there is a South African Black feminist perspective that is unique to South Africa as our political circumstances are unique. Though some of its features are common to African feminist writers generally, the particular political circumstances in South Africa give a particular flavour to local feminist positions. But there are women who prefer the maintenance of the status quo and, to this end, Aidoo and Ba warn against assuming unity of perception and solidarity of action. When it comes to Third World women, as with First World women, this does not mean that all Third World African women can or should be depicted monolithically. Thus while one can talk about Third World women, the discussion should take place within a framework that recognises differences between them (Aidoo, Ba 1992: 78). In conclusion, then, one can say that while in general the broader Black African

women's feminist perspective is one of non-racism, rebuilding of society and subject to ensure self-worth, and reconciliation; in South African black feminism, as evidenced in this brief study of Head and Kuzwayo's selected writing, this will find a particularly South African expression.

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