Re-Membering madness in Africana Women's Literature

Jennifer D. Williams
Clark Atlanta University

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ABSTRACT
AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

WILLIAMS, JENNIFER D. B.S. HOWARD UNIVERSITY, 1993
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RE-MEMBERING MADNESS IN AFRICANA WOMEN’S LITERATURE

Advisor: Dr. Daniel Black

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This thesis examined the motif of madness in four literary works by Africana women: Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Myriam Warner-Vieyra’s *Juletane*, Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, and Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*. The study was based on the premise that Africana women’s literature serves a receptive purpose. The primary goal was to demonstrate fictionalized madness as a social metaphor and to show how it relates to the existential realities of black women. A deconstructionist approach was used to analyze the four novels, and, a convergence of feminist and Afrocentric theories was used to unearth the diverse realities of black women.

This writer found that in each novel female protagonists were driven mad due to the oppressive forces in their societies. In their journeys through madness, they attempted to redefine their self-identities. The outcomes of these journeys ranged from fatal to successful. The conclusions drawn from this study suggests that there are universal truths in the lives of black women, evidenced by the common themes in Africana women’s literature.
Re-Membering Madness IN AFRICANA WOMEN'S LITERATURE

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
JENNIFER D. WILLIAMS

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

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Asé
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

i can’t hear anything
but maddening screams
& the soft strains of death...
somebody/anybody
sing a black girl’s song...
sing her song of life
she’s been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn’t know the sound of her own voice

Ntozake Shange
For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide
When the Rainbow is Enuf (1975)

“Yeah. Damn. That woman is crazy. Crazy.”
“Yeah, well, ain’t we all?”

Toni Morrison
Beloved (1987)

Background

Ntozake Shange’s For Colored Girls... and Toni Morrison’s Beloved add to the
Africana women’s literary tradition that challenges the silencing of and external definitions
imposed upon black women. Moreover, this deconstructionist canon of Africana
women’s literature voices the trauma and triumphs experienced by black women, while
refuting prevailing assumptions of superordinary strength. Morrison affirms in New York
Times Magazine, that “out of the profound desolation of [the black woman’s] reality she
may very well have invented herself” (Morrison 1971, 14). The motif of madness in
Africana women’s literature bespeaks a need for re-invention and re-membering of
identities that have been fragmented due to the multiple systems in society that oppress
black women. The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how fictionalized madness acts as a
social metaphor for the actual traumas experienced by black women and to illustrate that
the motif of madness in Africana women’s literature announces the need for individual and
collective healing and reintegration in black communities.

Black women are impacted by multiple interlocking oppressive systems. Racism,
colonialism, classism, sexism, and colorism—all impact our existence in various ways, yet
we are seldom evaluated in terms of the conglomeration of these systems. Because
racism has been viewed as the greatest impediment to people of African descent, black
women across the Diaspora have often been forced to choose “race” as the prevailing
source of our oppression. Fighting for the cause of race and community, black
communities often neglect gender oppression and other forms of abuse. For instance,
when black women speak out against sexism in communal spaces, we are often judged as
being under the influence of white feminism or of emasculating black men. Our personal
identities are only valid inasmuch as they relate to our service to others.

Black women have traditionally been defined in relation to others. As wives,
mothers, nurturers, workers, and caregivers, black women’s personal identities become
nonexistent and we are simply deemed “other”. For continental African women and those
of us in the Diaspora, this othering has overwhelmingly taken on the persona of

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1 By using the subjective pronoun, this writer is making an individual attempt to suggest there is not
always a need for distance between critic and subject. For a fuller justification of the stylistic use of first
person, see p. 8.
“superwoman”. Consequently, black women are often the least supported when voicing pain and seeking nurturing. Alice Walker points out in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* that black women writers have been consistently “hacking away” at the stereotype of the black “superwoman” (Walker 1967, 324). In place of the “superwoman,” Africana women writers have created characters who are multidimensional—they love, laugh, bleed, cry, suffer, and go “mad”. In “Strangers and Double Self-consciousness,” Pattynama proclaims:

> The black heroines who populate [these] texts are complex and rebellious. They bear the traces of branded words, stereotypical images, white and black myths. They stand at a crossroads where the Western writing tradition and black oral traditions mix and where lines of gender, race, class, and sexuality affect each other (Pattynama 1993, 144).

These characterizations demonstrate black women’s ability to gather the various aspects of self in order to recreate identity conceptualizations by virtue of multiple experiences. Further, the authors of these texts also act as literary healers, offering readers alternatives to fragmentation and disorder.

> Fragmentation acts as a predecessor to disorder. In “Power, Gender, and Organizational Change,” Rao and Keller appropriately describe fragmentation as “the tendency to see things as separate bits” (Rao and Keller 1997, 1). This schizoid perception bears consequences on both personal and conceptual levels. At a personal level, fragmentation results “in seeing individuals and groups as ‘other,’ ” a perception which leads to “isolation, selfishness, and conflict” (Rao and Keller 1997, 1). At the conceptual level, “fragmentation keeps us from seeing the whole system and the pattern that connects seemingly disparate events” (Rao and Keller 1997, 1). Re-membering a fragmented
identity connotes connecting and reintegrating the fragmented bits and pieces, thereby creating a wholistic framework of being.

Madness, as presented in the selected works of Africana women authors, signifies a dis-ordering and de-construction of externally imposed identities and realities. Ideally, the journey through madness will aid in the re-construction of fragmented identities. In this sense, madness will be curative. However, the cure is not possible without a prior process of de-construction. To deconstruct is “to look for what is hidden, de-valued or absent in the text” (Rao & Keller 1997, 1). In terms of black women, our personal herstories have been absent from the text of both black people and women. In the explored texts, the course of introspection that leads to or sometimes functions as madness allows the explored characters to formulate and re-member self, codifying alternative definitions of self rather than embracing conventional ones created by those that seek to dominate and subordinate. This re-membering brings the black female protagonists from the margins to the center. Seeing themselves as central to their own experience, the protagonists explored in this thesis (“Pecola,” “Nyasha,” “Juletane,” and “Elizabeth”) seek to create identities by virtue of their experiences instead of conforming to essentialist notions of womanhood and blackness. Failure to re-member may result in a perpetual state of madness as illustrated by two of the selected novels. By de-constructing without re-constructing, the madwoman remains in a permanent state of destruction and is incapable of formulating a wholistic self-identity.

A wholistic self-identity is attained when different facets of one’s existence are able to merge and formulate an integrated self. Unitary conceptions of black women’s
identities are insufficient. Identity, like culture, is multifaceted, ever changing, and all inclusive. A wholistic framework for black women's identity formation, then, must value all aspects of who we are. Madness in the novels of Africana women writers implies a refusal for female protagonists to conform to external definitions of self and their attempt to invent their own realities.

Statement of the Problem

Multiple oppressive systems impact the real lives of black women in Africa and across the Diaspora. These oppressive systems inform the silencing and imposition of faulty constructs upon black women, thus hindering healthy identity formation. This silencing and external defining of black women fragments our identities—breaking our existence into bits and pieces. This real fragmentation is mirrored in Africana women's literature. If madness in Africana women's literature acts as a metaphor for the social realities of black women, it may be plausible that our literature can also act as a healing mechanism.

Questions to be explored

The reoccurring theme of madness in Africana women's literature led this researcher to formulate the following questions:

1. Upon the theoretical assumption that Africana women's literature serves a receptive purpose, what does the motif of madness in Africana women's texts imply in terms of the existential realities of black women?
2. Why is the motif of madness a recurring theme in Africana women’s literature in spite of the protagonists’ geographic, economic, and social differences?

3. Are the protagonists in the texts “mad” in the orthodox sense of the term or is “madness” double-voiced, thereby a signification on common presumptions of normal behavior?

4. How does madness in Africana women’s literature differ from madness in Africana male literature and white women’s literature?

5. If the texts imply that fragmentation is cause and madness is result, is there also an intertextually suggested solution?

**Objectives**

The objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the causative factors behind the identity fragmentation and subsequent madness of female protagonists in *The Bluest Eye, Nervous Conditions, Juletane,* and *A Question of Power*; (2) to explore how “madness” is manifested and constructed in the aforementioned texts; (3) to determine the implications that fictionalized madness has for the existential realities of black women; and (4) through these implications, to create a framework for reconstructing fragmented identities.

**Importance of this Study**

Black women writers make immeasurable contributions to literature, yet our work is often undervalued. As women who speak in many tongues, black women utilize the written word to deconstruct misconceptions of our realities and to retell those stories from
the voices of experience. This thesis is a contribution to the field of literature in general but also to feminist literature, black literature, and black women's literature specifically.

A comparative analysis of Africana women's literature demonstrates the similarities and differences in our existence as members of an oppressed "race" and gender. The acknowledgment of the multifaceted experiences of women, in general, and of black women, in particular, is a repudiation of unitary conceptions of womanhood and of Africanness and, albeit indirectly, advances the struggle of women and of black people.

Methodology

Literature is selected from Africa and different areas of the Diaspora to affirm a cultural unity among people of African descent, in general, and black women, in particular. Literature throughout the Diaspora demonstrates ways in which colonialism and racism have had a universal affect on identity formation in black people. Thus, one of the assumptions of this study is that in spite of the dispersion and changes that have occurred among Africana people, there are still historical experiences that bind people of African descent.

Based on the presumption that Africana women's literature serves a receptive purpose, Myriam Warner Vieyra's Juletane, Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions, and Bessie Head’s A Question of Power are read and analyzed in relation to the existential realities of black women. A deconstructionist approach uncovers the potential rationale for black women writers' illustrations of behaviors that are commonly construed as psychotic disorders. The literature is examined
from both a psychological and a literary perspective, and race and gender are also taken into consideration. This writer contends that in order to examine Aficana women's literature effectively, a race-conscious (and often a class- and color-conscious) and gender-conscious theoretical framework must be applied. Accordingly, both feminist theories and Africentric theories are taken into account in the reading and analysis of the selected works. Yet, a convergence of the prevalent Africentric and feminist theories is necessary in order to realize the unique situations and multilevel oppressions that impact the black women characters.

Some feminist critics have appropriated deconstructionist theory as a method of textual analysis. These critics find a deconstructionist approach subverts the kind of thinking which reduces reality to binary oppositions [ex. man/woman, black/white, etc.] and autonomous subjectivity. “Deconstructive feminists see reality first of all as a discursive reality” (Buikema 1993, 11). In light of this theoretical framework, this thesis acknowledges that the writer's ethnicity and gender (African American and woman) add to the analysis and that the writer is not separate from the subject about which she is writing. Feminist theory, particularly black feminism, stresses that the separation of subject and object does not necessarily speak to the collective experiences of women (Collins 1991, xiv). For this reason, this black female writer uses terminology such as "we" and "us" in order to include herself in her references to black women.

The construction of this thesis is as follows: Chapter I, the Introduction, presents the background of the thesis, statement of the problem, questions to be explored, objectives of the study, methodology, definition of terms, and the literature review and
conceptual framework. Chapter II explores madness in two coming of age novels: Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*. Chapter III focuses on Myriam Warner-Vieira’s *Juletane* and Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*. This chapter shifts emphasis from “coming of age” to adult female development. Chapter IV presents summaries and conclusions derived from the study as well as primary sources and the bibliography.

**Definition of Terms**

**Race and Ethnicity**

“Africana” describes those of us who are either from Africa or are descendants thereof throughout the Diaspora. More than a biological description, “race” is an ideological construct. Therefore, the terms “black” and “white” carry with them a plethora of meaning—beyond their biological references. One of the shortcomings of race categorizations lies in their failure to recognize ethnicity and class. Race in this thesis is utilized as an expression of power differentials in white supremacist societies where black is set up in opposition to white by virtue of power and privilege and is not simply a matter of color difference.

**Identity Fragmentation**

In precolonial African societies, structured rituals guided young girls and boys into the community’s perception of womanhood and manhood. In *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community*, Malidoma Patrice Somé suggests:

From the spiritual viewpoint, ritual is inevitable and necessary if one is to live... The young ones are the future of the old ones. To allow this future to happen, the old ones must work with the Otherworld. When an elder fails to
perform his work with respect to the spiritual, the future of the elder is threatened, not the present. Where ritual is absent, the young ones are restless or violent, there are no real elders, and the grown-ups are bewildered. The future is dim (Somé 1993, 28).

Ancient African rituals had biological, practical, and spiritual implications. With the imposition of colonialism, enslavement, religious imperialism and the consequent destruction of many traditional African rituals, the transition from childhood to adulthood—a critical time for identity development—ceases to be clearly defined.

On new world plantations, black families (extended or otherwise) had to maintain the raising of children under the harshest conditions. African cultures and identities adjusted and changed to withstand the heinous institution. Moreover, the size, location, and geography of plantations (i.e. differences in Caribbean and North American plantations), the types of colonization, and a host of other considerations affected cultural and ritual retention. More often than not, womanhood and manhood in plantation environments were reconstructed to fit demands of production and reproduction. Structured coming-of-age rituals were either adjusted or lost altogether.

As indigenous African societies continued to change, so did a collective sense of identity. Neocolonialism in Africa and the move toward assimilation in post-enslavement societies further weakened the cohesion of black communities and destroyed many coming-of-age rituals that had once aided in identity development. Without sufficient guidance and a clear sense of communally-affirmed values, black communities suffered identity crises.
Identity crises and fragmentation have been prevalent subjects in the literature of Africana people. Many scholars suggest that the attempt for African descendants to fit into two contrasting cultures results in a divided identity. One of the most famous explications was that of W.E.B. Du Bois:

It is a peculiar situation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 1903, 3).

According to Du Bois, the biculturality of African Americans informed severe identity crises. Contemporary Africanist scholars, such as Marimba Ani, tend to agree that African and European worldviews are not compatible, and the attempt to merge the two cultures will only end in the destruction of the subordinate by the dominant. Other scholars, such as Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, go even further to suggest that it is only through the destruction of the colonizing culture that the reconstruction of the colonized can be realized.

In the examined literature, colonialism is a primary contributor to identity fragmentation in Africana people. In The Colonial Legacy in Caribbean Literature, Saakana defines a colonial society as “a society which educates its people away from its own history and environment” (Saakana 1987, 102). In this context, African, American, and Caribbean societies may be deemed colonial. In the Preface to Saakana’s text, Ngugi wa Thiong’o maintains that the “cultural engineering” that transpires in colonial societies, has two aspects: “the destruction of Africa’s cultures, and the construction, in their place,
of foreign cultures of the colonizer” (Saakana 1987, 9). In contention with Du Bois, wa
Thiong’o affirms that “the colonial plantation system tried to impose on the Afro-
Caribbean man and woman, a double alienation: from Africa and from the Caribbean
environment” (Saakana 1987, 10). Saakana goes further to state that “psychological
programming was responsible for the schizophrenic attitudes, neurosis, mental trauma, and
double consciousness of the Caribbean writer” (Saakana 1987, 102). According to
Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth, the madness that results from identity fragmentation
would be categorized as a “reactionary psychosis” (Fanon 1963, 251). Fanon’s contention
is that the colonized develop pathologies as a response to persecution and imperial
domination. In the Preface to Wretched of the Earth, Jean-Paul Sartre maintains that “the
status of ‘native’ is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among
the colonized people with their consent” (Fanon 1963, 20). Sartre’s argument suggests a
learned helplessness develops in the psyche of the colonized.

Both in fictional and non-fictional accounts, Africana writers suggest that some
identity crises can be attributed to colonialism. However, most depictions focus on black
men. Black feminist scholars contend that black women are not only colonized by the
larger society but by black men as well. Hence, one could argue that the fragmentation
which occurs in black women is even more exacerbated than in their black male and white
female counterparts. This thesis attests to the previously stated assumption that black
women’s identity fragmentation occurs in relation to the particular space that we occupy
in the center of multiple oppressive systems.
From Fragmentation to Madness

Madness in this study is defined in psychological terms as behaviors that do not conform to societal mandates and norms. At the same time, understanding that madness in Africana women’s literature is deconstructionist, the connotations of madness have been deconstructed as well. In the works covered in this thesis, identity fragmentation—which results from alienation from self and community—acts as a predecessor to madness. Madness, medically defined, is a mental illness or psychiatric disorder characterized by irrational behavior, the incapacity to reason, disintegration of consciousness, disassociation and varying other socially deviant behaviors. Noticably absent from medical definitions is the sense of communal involvement in illnesses of the individual.

The modern tool used for diagnosing mental illness is The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Mental illnesses are categorized as either functional/affective disorders or organic disorders (McCulloch 1995, 10). Affective disorders have no organic or physical cause and are evidenced by an individual’s inability to function in society. In essence, people who are labeled with having affective disorders do not fit the dominant society’s mandate for normality. Organic disorders, on the other hand, pinpoint a physical or neurological basis for mental disturbance (i.e. birth defects, mental retardation, etc.). Benjamin Rush, the founder of American Psychiatry “medicalized social problems” by making no distinction between mental and physical diseases (Szasz 1971, 139). His inability to link biological antecedents to mental disorders led to misdiagnoses and institutionalization of individuals without justifiable cause. The
American anti-psychiatry movement of the sixties prompted the psychiatric community to codify agreed upon diagnoses for mental illnesses (Loring et al. 1988, 1). Thereafter, a categorical manual was created that is supposed to serve as an objective way to diagnose the mentally ill. Scholars who uphold traditional views of madness subscribe to this manual and understand that treatment of the mentally ill connotes institutionalization or some form of therapy. Scholars with alternative views have been in the forefront of deconstructing orthodox views of madness.

Deconstructionist views of madness shift the attention from the individual to the society. This madness, according to Ussher, “may take many forms, have many roots, be manifested through a myriad of assumptions, be given different names: hysteria, mania, neurasthenia, schizophrenia... they all share a common history, common effects, even if they differ in manifestation of ‘symptoms’” (Ussher 1992, 246). Alternative views of madness and mental illness suggest that mental illness labeling has been used as an attempt to control and suppress certain members of society (particularly women, the poor, and people of color). One of the most radical perspectives is that of Szasz who suggests that there is no such thing as mental illness if there is no identifiable brain deficiency. Szasz further contends that, “What is called ‘mental illness’ (or ‘psychopathology’) emerges as the name of the product of a particular kind of relationship between oppressor and oppressed” (Szasz 1971, 81). Utilizing the rubric of mental illness to describe personality deficiencies implies the existence of some objective norm. Alternative views have also been useful in analyzing the effects of race and gender on the diagnoses of mental illness.
In feminist literature, there has been a revived interest in hysteria. Feminist scholars have been successful in deconstructing the historical connection between women and hysteria. Ussher notes, “hysteria is being reinterpreted by feminists as an expression of women’s anger, women’s oppression, and the power of a misogynistic discourse to define what ‘woman’ means, and to exert control over women’s lives” (Ussher 1992, 75). Madness in this light is perceived as a response to and rebellion against oppression. It connotes women defining their own realities. In *Meeting the Madwoman*, Leonard suggests there is a madwoman inside of all women, “she can entice us to destructive actions against ourselves and others; she can entrap us in negative behavior patterns and experiences of victimization; or she can lead us to use her energy—our energy—creatively to change our lives for the better” (Leonard 1993, 2). Madness then in feminist literature has been refashioned as something that is a reaction to oppression and that is necessary for reconstructing fragmented identities.

Madness as a “reactionary psychosis” has been historically the accepted theory among black mental health professionals and scholars as well. Fanon’s contention in *The Wretched of the Earth* is that colonialism produced mental illness in the native African, “colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’” (Fanon 1963, 250). Grier and Cobbs maintain that the African American male must develop a “cultural paranoia” in order to function in American society (Grier and Cobbs 1968, 135). Though Africana scholars have given prominence to the societal causes of mental disorders, they have often failed to come up with a definition of mental illness that takes into consideration both race and gender. Naim Akbar, a
A contemporary African American psychologist, defines mental illness in more general terms, “the presence of ideas or forces within the mind that threaten awareness and mental growth” (Akbar 1991, 342). For black women, these threatening “ideas” are usually rooted in racism, sexism, classism, and colorism. In a society that is oppressive to certain groups of people, any behavior exhibited by those groups that challenges the control of the dominant society is typically labeled deviant or unacceptable. Madness then takes on a revolutionary connotation for “those whom society labels as insane are only responding to the craziness that surrounds them by creatively reworking it” (Gilman 1985, 217).

Literary portrayals of madness creatively expel the insanity of oppressive societies and imply that madness is a “normal” response to abnormal situations.

The manifestations of madness in this thesis support medical criterion for abnormal behavior: delusions, hallucinations, anorexia nervosa, suicidal tendencies and other destructive behaviors. At the same time, the environment and circumstances surrounding the fictional madwomen is mentally destructive. So while the female protagonists in the text are deemed “mad,” their madness is construed as being necessary to adequately express the extent of their oppression and the fragmentation and dis-order it has wreaked in their lives. Moreover, the texts suggest that a program of dis-order has to occur before the re-ordering and re-membering of fragmented identities. In this sense, madness can either be a breakdown or a breakthrough depending on the outcome of the protagonist’s journey (O’Callaghan 1993,104). The outcomes in this thesis range from fatal to healing and re-membering.
Re-Membering Identities

A fragmented identity reflects the ways in which one is perceived as pieces and bits of a person. Re-membering a fragmented identity connotes integrating the multiple facets into a wholistic existence. Leornard argues:

*A woman’s psychological development requires integration of many facets of her self in order for her to become a whole and healthy human being. When a woman is limited to only one or two roles, she can feel or act mad because the unactualized parts of her self are struggling to express themselves (Leornard 1993, 4).*

Multiple identities and personalities usually connote a mental disorder. However, they are only in dis-order when they fail to be integrated. One of the primary struggles for black women has been integrating collective identity with individual identity. In “Gender as an Ethno-Marker...,” Hanna Papanek defines identity as “socially defined and often visible characteristics as race, gender, and ethnicity as well as other aspects of groups and individuals, such as belief systems, ‘worldviews,’ ideologies, and religions” (Papanek 1994, 42). For black women, identity in the collective sense aligns us with both black people and with other women. Unfortunately, in both of these groups, black women have been marginalized. Black women’s re-creation of our identities when faced with a collective sense of identity that has been exclusive illuminates the importance of individual identity. Papanek asserts:

*The extent to which individuals can choose their identity—perhaps by deciding on a particular kind of life or by giving or withholding their loyalty to a particular group—is also a measure of the freedom of action that people have within the larger society. By contrast, when states or other powerful institutions (such as political movements, social groups like castes or clans or domestic groups) can effectively*
limit identity choices by enforcing conformity to norms or ideals, individual freedom of action declines (Papanek 1994, 42).

Embracing one notion of identity over another results in fragmentation. More often than not, black women have yielded to the collective (race) identity and have sacrificed other equally important facets of our existence (gender, class, sexuality, etc.). Africana women’s literature and particularly this writer’s exploration of madness suggests that these sacrifices have had a deleterious effect on black women’s identities. Re-membering the fragments requires a merging of our diverse realities and a repudiation of essentialist notions.

Collective Identity

Collective identity in the investigated works is conceptualized in terms of race and gender. In terms of collective gender identity, the protagonist in each novel seeks communion and bonding with other women. Frustrated in their search, they are forced to look within and so begin that process of introspection that often leads to the threshold of madness—and sometimes beyond.

That these characters are often frustrated in their attempt to find a model of womanhood that allows them to function as whole healthy beings is not surprising: these Africana women writers know that conceptions of black womanhood have undergone many changes as Africana people have dispersed and as political and cultural agendas have evolved. They also know that in light of narrow conceptualizations of feminism during the early stages of the movement, poor women and women of color throughout the world have reconceptualized “feminism” to fit various political and social agendas. In the sixties,
for example, Alice Walker coined the phrase “womanism” as a construct which is more encompassing of women of color and which seeks a more humanist and more inclusive agenda than the anti-male agenda of some feminists. In *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Walker describes a womanist as:

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior... Responsible. In charge. *Serious.*

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s strength... Committed to survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female (Walker 1967, xi.).

The reconceptualization of feminism does not diminish the importance of collective struggle among women; rather, it calls into question essentialist notions of womanhood.

Given this conceptual background, each analyzed work can be placed under the rubric of feminist literature. By incorporating gender, race, class, culture, mental health, and a host of other societal issues as literary tropes, these Africana women authors deconstruct the ways in which “women’s issues” are viewed.

These texts address identity fragmentation not only in the protagonists but also within communities of people. These female authors dramatize how the failure to acknowledge problems among the collective adversely affects individuals within communities. *hooks* expresses the consequences of the “collective failure” by black people to address our trauma:

Collective failure to address adequately the psychic wounds inflicted by racist aggression is the breeding ground for a psychology of victimhood wherein learned helplessness, uncontrollable rage, and/or feelings of overwhelming powerless and
despair abound in the psyches of black folks yet are not attended to in ways that empower and promote wholistic states of well-being (hooks 1995, 137).

The significance of collective identity is apparent throughout each text as is the announcement of the need for collective healing.

Cultural mores and identity are dictated by communities. Collective identity formulation begins in childhood and further develops during periods of socialization, “But a sense of identity can also be shaped and reshaped—often very powerfully—by external forces bent on their own agendas of building new solidarities, new group boundaries, and new political alliances” (Papanek 1994, 44). As Africana communities continue to change and evolve, so do the dictates of culture and the means by which individuals conceptualize their identities. Moreover, collective spaces are being created wherein individual identity can also be expressed.

Individual Identity

Collective identity is capable of aiding black women’s identity formulation and/or hindering it. Papanek asserts the means by which collective identity can assist in women’s oppression:

I am more concerned with the pressures exerted by organized groups...on individuals to conform to prescriptive norms for a collective identity that is seen as advancing the goals of the group. In this sense, movements promising to “restore order” to a world perceived as chaotic often restrict themselves to imposing more stringent controls on women, redefining their collective identity, rather than addressing the problems that have led to disorder (Papanek 1994, 47).

It is apparent that the “organized groups” of which Papanek speaks attempts to impose essentialist notions of collective identity on others. This phenomenon is also evidenced in
black nationalist movements that have addressed power politics in white supremacist societies but have failed to reckon with sexism, classism and colorism within black communities. Papanek further states that, “Heightened pressures for conformity usually exist in groups seeking to present a united front to others yet doubtful of their cohesion” (Papanek 1994, 45). Possibly the greatest shortcoming of movements and organizations that subscribe to essentialist notions of blackness is that they tend to define black identity in reference to whiteness. bell hooks affirms that black communities need “insist on theorizing black identity from multiple locations, not simply in relation to white supremacy” (hooks 1995, 248). Black identity can then and become something that is framed around common experiences and political agendas and in that way transcend its “same-race” associations.

Individuality, from a philosophical perspective, is indicative of a Western cultural framework or worldview. Due to the conformity that has been dictated by skewed collective identity conceptualizations, it is essential for women, people of color, homosexuals, and other marginalized groups to assert their individuality. In so doing, we may repudiate the fragmentation that results from allowing others to define and confine our identities. The selected texts confirm the historical necessity that black women have had to re-create ourselves. This re-creation acknowledges that the formulation of an integrated identity is essential to the healing of a fragmented one.
Towards Wholism

The explored texts show how conceptualizing identity in unitary terms leads to identity fragmentation. A wholistic framework of identity connotes merging collective conceptions with individual freedoms of expression. Collective identity serves a critical role in Africana political and social spaces. A sense of “we-ness” that was bred in indigenous African societies made its way across the Atlantic and sustained Africa’s descendants. Yet, depending on who is dictating the collective agenda, collective identity has the potential to stifle individual identity development.

Many texts of Africana women call for the reconceptualization of collective identity in terms of race, class, and gender. “Race” has too long feigned as the sole basis of solidarity among black people. As an ideological construct, “race” has been based on physical characteristics and essentialist notions. The works in this thesis suggest that even in communities of same-“race” people, distinctions are made in terms of class, gender, and/or skin color. For black women, a sense of collective identity must incorporate the diversity of our experiences.

In feminist communities, a sense of collective identity has also failed to be inclusive. Only in recent years have white women acknowledged their power by virtue of their “race” and have begun to reconceptualize “woman” to include women of different ethnic backgrounds, social classes, and sexual preferences. Black women often reconceptualize ourselves collectively in race and gender circles, but the most important aspect of re-membering is defining an identity that allows self-actualization.
The motif of madness in the selected works of literature suggests that societal oppressive systems and skewed politics of collective identity fragment black women's individual identities. Historically, black women have recognized the need to erect our personal identities. In collective Africana spaces, black women's needs have often been secondary to those of our male counterparts. Also, in collective women spaces, the needs of black women have been subordinate to those of white women. Black women writers throughout the world have stood in the forefront of acknowledging that we have an experience that is multifaceted and that has not been given sufficient credence. Black women writers have affirmed through "the word" that the imposition of external definitions and historical marginalization has made us "mad" and that it is only through re-creating ourselves that we can be re-membered.

**Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

Madness as a literary motif is most commonly associated with the works of European women. Yalom, a white feminist scholar who has explored literature and madness, asserts that "it is now possible to speak of a subgenre of fiction devoted to the topos of madness and created, to a large extent, by female authors" (Yalom 1985, 1). Yet, Yalom (like the majority of white feminist scholars who have dealt with madness) uses an *eurofemcentric* frame of reference—a framework that is feminist, but centered in the European reality. The theme of madness in the works of white women developed out of a tradition of resistance to white male political, social, religious, and economic hegemony. Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* (1985) explores how mental illness
labeling was used to control women in Victorian England. She further explains how a
tradition of women writing about madness came out of the brutal oppression of women in
English society. In *Madness in Literature*, Feder asserts:

...literary interpretations of madness both reflect and question medical, cultural,
political, religious, and psychological assumptions of their time... they explore the
very processes of symbolic transformation of these influences and disclose their
psychic consequences in the minds of individual characters or personae (Feder
1980, 4).

White women writing about madness was and is an act of resistance to their particular
societal constraints; therefore, race and social class are seldom factored into their
equations. The basic contention of white women writers who have explored madness in
their literature is that women who challenge patriarchy are often deemed socially deviant,
hysterical, or mad. Feder suggests, "few, if any, societies have had a consistent attitude
toward madness" (Feder 1980, 5). Moreover, "the varieties of madness created in
literature are in most respects no different from those to be discovered throughout human
society" (Feder 1980, 7). It is reasonable, then, that the presentation of madness in black
women's literature would diverge from that of white women's literature and from black
men's literature as well.

Madness as a theme in black male literature expresses a similar need for black male
protagonists to recreate their identities in white male dominated societies. Lupack
maintains in *Insanity as Redemption in Contemporary American Fiction*, "From Richard
Wright to James Baldwin and beyond, black fiction expressed the individual's need to
withdraw from a history that silenced or made invisible those out of the mainstream, and
that was beyond their capacity to master or control" (Lupack 1995, 9). In much Africana
male literature, madness is construed as a symptom of white male hegemony, its subsequent affront to black male patriarchy and perceived destruction of black masculinity. Supriya Nair, in reference to the relationship between black male novels and madness, contends that “The melancholic condition of postcolonial intellectuals has been totalized and masculinized in much fiction” (Nair 1995, 130). He continues to assert, “Conversely, when madness was identified as a female malady, as the Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff suggests in *The Land of Look Behind*, women were branded mad while the men were marked as idiots and drunks, ‘higher’ up on the scale of social deviance” (Nair 1995, 132). Even in fictional representations of madness, there are hierarchical distinctions made between black women and men. Black women writing about madness inculcate our experience as members of black communities and our sequential battle with racism. Also factored in is black women’s struggle against patriarchy within black communities. Because Africana people are oppressed as a racial group, the power of black men, by virtue of their gender, has not been widely acknowledged. Africana women’s literature has been in the forefront of deconstructing power relations in terms of race, class, and gender.

Madness takes on a melange of meaning in Africana women’s literature. The framework of this thesis is built on the assumption that the representation of madness in Africana women’s literature is connected to the black women’s writing tradition. From Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859)—the first novel written by a African American woman—through to contemporary black women writers, a writing tradition of announcing our struggles with identity formation in racist and sexist societies was the breeding ground for
the motif of madness. The liberated black woman's clash with traditional social structures is a general matrix for madness. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), Alice Walker, African American author, drew from her research with African women to create the voice of Tashi. Tashi, who out of respect for her community upholds the tradition of female circumcision, suffers a lifetime battle with madness as she tries to reconstruct her identity as a woman. The tradition of polygamy provides an additional context for madness. Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* (1982) exposes the madness of a Caribbean woman who in search of her African roots marries an African man and moves to the continent. Muslim society and an unexpected polygamous marriage drives Juletane to emotional and physical breakdown.

Madness in Africana women's literature also deals with the impact of the counterculture on black women's psyches and on black communities in general. Merle Hodge, Caribbean author, explores the impact of colonial education on the mentality and self-esteem of a Caribbean girl coming of age in *Crick-Crack Monkey* (1987). In “The Dead Erect,” North African poet, Malaika O'Lahsen ascribes insanity to the impact of colonialism on North African culture and society as a whole:

> My country is an asylum where madmen
> Speak with their eyes
> Because they are tongueless...
> The madwomen talk to the rocks
> And tell stories to the mountains (Chipasula 1995, 9).

Africana women authors often use fiction to communicate the real life struggles and pain of black women in white/male-supremacist societies. Velma, protagonist in Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980) grasps for power over her existence by
attempting to take her life. It takes a community of women to aid in her re-membering.

Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976) explores a female Civil Rights activist who, although strong and self-determined, suffers a mental breakdown in the face of hopelessness. In response to the trauma induced by racism, rape, emotional and physical abuse, Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf* (1977) exceeds boundaries that had been placed on earlier black American women writers. Shange’s work presents madness as a shared experience among African American women:

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don’t tell nobody don’t tell a soul
are we animals? have we gone crazy? (Shange 1975, 2).
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She also maintains that part of healing a fragmented self is through collective and individual healing—“a layin on of hands” (Shange 1975, 66).

Colorism and the struggle with identity formation in biracial people has also served as a backdrop for madness. Berzon maintains, “The widespread preoccupation by black writers with the question of identity...is given special significance in the case of the mixed-blood individual” (Berzon 1978, 4). Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* (1974) speaks of the tragic existence of one who is Coloured in apartheid South Africa. In the United States, early African American female authors used the phrase, “tragic mulatto,” to describe the identity crises in biracial Americans. Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) stand at the cornerstone of black women’s literature that told tales of the tragedy and confusion of living a biracial existence in a racist society. Caribbean women authors created a similar tradition of announcing the tragic existence of biracial people in a colonial environment. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Caribbean author, Jean Rhys,
configures madness in relation to racism, colorism, and classism. Antionette, the protagonist and a Creole of elite class, occupies a space amid a multiplicity of power relations and identity fragments that finally drive her to madness.

The madwoman is a representative figure in Africana women’s literature. This character acts as a voice for black women’s grief, anger, and rebellion in oppressive societies. It breaks the silencing of black women’s pain and trauma and, accordingly, aids in the destruction of the “superwoman” myth.

Deconstructionist canons of Africana women’s literature explore the impact of race, class, color, and gender on black women’s well-being. They also recognize that as black women, we do not have to conceive of ourselves in unitary terms. Although Africa is the starting point of the cultural identity formation for Africana people, dispersion (via enslavement and migration) and colonialism throughout the African continent have changed (most often in a deleterious manner) identity formation in black people. This writer is promoting the fluidity of culture and identity in that only by challenging unitary assumptions of identity and by purporting wholism as an alternative to dichotomous thinking can we re-member fragmented identities.

The evolutionary quality of culture has necessitated that black people throughout the world have needed to recreate and reformulate who we were at different points in time. The political, social, and emotional states of black people are constantly reflected in our literature. The black literary tradition serves as an evolution of the African oral tradition of story telling and is oftentimes closer to historical truth than to “fiction”.

Africana women's literature then serves as a crucial component for reformulating epistemological assumptions about the existential realities of black women.
COMING OF AGE INTO MADNESS:

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*

A young girl’s rite of passage into womanhood is a common theme in Africana women’s literature. Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* contribute to black women’s tales of coming of age and identity development—a period that is stereotypically categorized by innocence and unconditional love. Far too often, however, the black woman’s coming of age story is tarnished by fractured communities, sexual abuse, and dysfunctional families. Yalom contends, “The perilous gates of madness may be seen as periods of transition between one life stage and another - transitions which, in former times and different cultures, might have been more easily achieved with the aid of established *rites de passages*” (Yalom 1985, 84). Madness, then, may be attributed, at least in part, to the absence of these structured rituals that assisted children’s psychological, emotional, and spiritual development. Given the well-known African proverb which attests that it takes an entire village to raise a child, Morrison and Dangarembga’s novels affirm that if the “village” is unhealthy so will be the child.
The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is a gothic portrayal of a young Pecola coming of age into a society and community of fragmented beings. As Turner describes, “...the setting of the novel is a world of grotesque individuals whose psyches have been deformed by their efforts to assume false identities, their failures to achieve meaningful identities, or simply their inability to retain and communicate love” (Turner 1984, 362). Morrison’s adaptation of the name Pecola for the main character in this fictionalized community of impersonators is almost too obvious an allusion to the film “Imitation of Life”. The film’s Pecola typified the “tragic mulatto” caught in a quandary of her biculturality. Like Morrison’s fictionalized community, the film’s Pecola rejected her blackness and sought to assimilate into white American culture.

Pecola Breedlove’s story is configured like a rite of passage. The seasons that denote each chapter demarcate Pecola’s passage from one stage of consciousness to the next. Claudia, the voice of the novel, foretells the destination of Pecola’s journey when she describes Pecola as “a case...who had no place to go” (17). Pecola’s passage into a fragmented community is certain to render her fragmented as well. Lee describes Pecola’s journey as “a failed quest culminating in madness” (Lee 1984, 346). Though she is already born into a dysfunctional family, each subsequent stage in her journey further fragments her identity. Madness, assisted by society, community, and family, becomes a part of Pecola’s initiation into womanhood.
Autumn - “How do you get Somebody to Love You?”

The winds of autumn blow in change in Morrison’s novel. The leaves begin to make their transition from green to gold—straddling that place between life and death. Autumn serves as a time of shedding and for Pecola, that which she sheds is a part of herself. But the seeds had already been planted before Pecola began to shed. Even before her birth, it is inevitable that she who is the harvest of bad seeds would herself blossom into fragmentation and madness.

Pecola’s madness is not inbred; she is the progeny of madness itself. Her progenitors are Cholly Breedlove and Pauline Williams. Lee states, “Her parents’ problems forecast defeat for Pecola’s quest before her birth, and the coming of children only gives them a target for their frustrations” (Lee 1984, 347). Pauline’s fragmentation is illustrated by her infirmity (a crooked foot) and decaying teeth: “Her general feeling of separateness or unworthiness she blamed on her foot” (88). Saving her from “total anonymity,” her dis-junction is the thing to which she clings. When Cholly’s attention falls upon that which she uses to define herself, she knows she has met her savior.

Pauline’s fragmentation is attributed to her dislocation both literally and figuratively. The loss of her front tooth when she relocates to the North is symbolic evidence of the continuing dislocation of her psyche (92). The decay of the North eats away at her “roots”. In Black Feminist Criticism, Barbara Christian analyzes Pauline: “...separated from her rural South, which allowed her privacy and freedom of imagination, and cut off from the traditions of her maternal ancestors, she falls prey to the destructive
ideals of physical beauty and romantic love as measures of self-worth” (Christian 1985, 48). Pauline is introduced to physical beauty and romance through the fantasy world of the movie screen: “In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap” (97). With her new ideals of beauty, she “knows” Pecola is ugly (100)—given the aesthetic standards which Pauline has internalized, the ugliness of a black baby is a “fait accompli”. Consumed by fantastical ideas, Pauline loses yet another tooth, further proof of her progressive disconnection from her roots.

Pauline’s love for Cholly also severs as she finds strength in the arms of other saviors. Lee maintains, “Pauline’s love for Cholly decays as insistently as specks appear in her untreated teeth and in proportion to his ability to fill the spaces of loneliness within her” (Lee 1984, 347). Like many women who are socialized to become future wives and mothers, Pauline seeks self-definition from a man. When Cholly is unable to complete her, she finds order in religion and in her job as a servant. Her husband becomes a cross she must bear, and the house of her white employers is where she finds “beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise” (101). She is renamed, Polly, the name signifying her taking on a new persona. Pauline’s lack of self-esteem is a natural attraction for Cholly’s misogyny.

Cholly Breedlove’s rite of passage entails a futile search for manhood. In lieu of manhood, he is initiated into misogyny. Cholly is also the progeny of madness, his mother reputed as not being right in the head (105). Cholly’s fragmentation and isolation stems from a childhood framed by abandonment and shame. Lee maintains, “The father’s life is a study in rejection and humiliation caused and intensified by poverty and Blackness” (Lee
Raised in a community of women, he is unclear about the definition and meaning of manhood. He seeks for it in “Blue,” the neighborhood ruffian and infamous woman killer. Later he looks for it in sexual intercourse and experiences complete dehumanization when white bigots brandish shotguns at him while he is having sex. His final quest leads him to his father. In finding the “man” who is his father, perhaps he can find the man in himself. Instead, he reverts back to childhood, soiling himself and assuming the fetal position (124). He is reborn a free man, but his freedom is dangerous for it is a freedom void of love.

Cholly sacrifices his newfound freedom for marriage. He hopes in the sameness of marriage he will find order from a life that has been riddled with disorder. Mating himself with someone who is fragmented as well only leads to more dysfunction, “But the aspect of married life that dumfounded him and rendered him totally disfunctional [sic] was the appearance of children. Having no idea how to raise children and never having been raised himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be” (126). The above statement, a preface to Cholly’s rape of his daughter, almost sounds like an excuse for his barbaric act. In *Race, Gender, and Desire*, Butler-Evans argues that, “Each detail of (Cholly’s) life invites the reader to sympathize with Cholly and forgive his rape of Pecola” (Butler-Evans 1989, 77). If this in truth is Morrison’s intent, it sounds similar to the antiquated arguments that because black men are so horrifically emasculated, their debasement of black women can be forgiven or even excused. A more cogent argument, however, is that Morrison may be appealing to the reader’s ability to understand the forces
that led Cholly to this incestuous and destructive place. Cholly's "violence born of total helplessness" presumes that he has no control over his actions (117).

A similar progression to fragmentation is used to describe Soaphead Church and to frame his propensity for molesting young girls. Also shaping Pecola's madness is Soaphead Church. He is a misanthropic child molester posing as a minister and seer. Soaphead is "a study of alienation, loss of identity and self-respect, and once more, the futile search for order" (Lee 1984, 349). His past is described by Morrison in order to expose better why he is the one to grant Pecola's desire for blue eyes. As the neighborhood "faith healer," he seems the ideal candidate to work the miracle of transforming Pecola's brown eyes to blue. The irony in the name "Church" is that it plays upon the role of the church in perpetuating the same white supremacist images as other forms of media—white skin and blue eyes. Soaphead Church, having mastered the art of self-deception, is the perfect person to teach Pecola how to deceive herself into believing she has blue eyes. After all, the "church" deceives black people into the belief that they can only be saved by a white savior with blue eyes. When Soaphead grants Pecola's wish, he prevails in playing God. He is the pseudo-spiritual component necessary for Pecola's completion of her initiation into madness.

The most important elements for Pecola's rite of passage—her mother, her father, a spiritual leader, and the community—are all fragmented and dispossessed of themselves. The soil is rootless and the seeds bad, thereby nothing good can be reaped from them. Claudia prefaces the tale by stating that nobody's seeds sprouted during the year when Pecola gets impregnated by her father (9). She forecasts the destination of Pecola's
journey then continues narrating the details that frame a young girl’s passage into madness and Claudia’s own passage into self-awareness.

The crucial question during the autumnal stage of Pecola’s passage is the meaning of love. With no one to teach her the meaning of love, she affiliates it with pubescent change, one of the most critical transitions for children. The onset of Pecola’s menstrual cycle marks the “little-girl-gone-to-woman” (28). In a society whose values, rituals, and ideals are fragmented, a young girl’s menstrual cycle simply illustrates that she can physically conceive a child. In “Lady No Longer Sings the Blues...,” Miner illuminates how Morrison’s attention to rites of passage is further pronounced in her description of Pecola’s first menstruation and the bond it creates between her and her “sisters” (Miner 1985, 183). Claudia and Freida recognize menstruation as a “sacred” act (28). Without guidance through this critical stage, Pecola is left with an unclear idea of conception and an even more ambiguous notion of love. The community that is responsible for teaching Pecola what it means to love is sullied with self-hatred. Further, Pecola’s family, the Breedloves, are successful in breeding everything but that which their nomenclature demands.

Instead of love, Pecola is schooled in the process of internalizing self-hatred. The first lesson is imparted by her family. Even their storefront apartment is a hovel of depression and despair, but they remain in an environment of ugliness because they believe themselves to be ugly (34). Morrison describes their collective embracing of the white aesthetic as Fanon depicts the way in which the colonized accepted their oppression: “It was though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to
wear, and they had accepted it without question” (34). Each member of the Breedlove clan “is in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality—collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there” (31). Theirs is a house where nothing lives but the stove and where violence serves as entertainment. The lack of love and the propensity for violence contribute to Pecola’s attempts to disappear and feed her prayers for blue eyes. For as long as she is ugly, she will have to stay with “(those) people” (39). Blue eyes will grant her a new identity and a new family. Blue eyes will make her like the little girls in the “Dick and Jane” books and on the silver screen who all the world perceives as beautiful.

The second principle of self-hatred is communicated by mainstream society’s promotion of and black people’s consumption of white-supremacist imagery. Morrison sets up a dichotomy in the beginning of the tale by contrasting the white American “Dick and Jane” reality with that of Claudia’s working class family:

Our house is old, cold, and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room. The others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice. Adults do not talk to us - they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut and bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy (12).

By satirizing “Dick and Jane” stories, Morrison reveals that Pecola’s fragmentation and her ultimate madness are “socially and linguistically constructed by the dominant discourse” (Wallace 1990, 64). Morrison illustrates how black Americans are constantly bombarded with images that do not reflect them. These images dominate in American literature, media, and the way in which Christianity is purported. Morrison’s novel suggests that part of the challenge for black American children who are coming of age is
learning how not to consume the white American aesthetic. The novel further indicates that fighting consumption requires the strength to dis-member.

Pecola’s consumption of the white American aesthetic is contrasted with Claudia’s desire to dis-member it. Claudia describes her hatred for Shirley Temples of the world and her contempt for white dolls: “I had only one desire: to dismember it...I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable” (20). In order to re-member herself, Claudia thrives in dis-membering those things that determine she is ugly and not worthy of being loved. Yet, her hatred for whiteness fails to foster love of self. She eventually joins the rest of world’s worship of whiteness, but her love is fraudulent. Thus, the possibility for change is present.

Pecola’s consumption is more easily accomplished than Claudia’s, for Pecola lacks the anger required to resist. The voice of Claudia maintains, “Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging” (43). Instead, Pecola drinks from the cup of self-effacement—“a silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face” allows her to consume the blond-hair and blue eyes of the icon (19). For Pecola, to consume images like “Mary Jane candies” is to “eat Mary Jane...Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (43). Incapable of purging herself of images that fragment her identity, Pecola becomes further consumed in a world/view of fantasy.

Winter - “The Thing to Fear”

Winter is typically a season of coldness and death. In Pecola’s rite of passage it is the time of dissolution. Her internalization of self-hatred threatens to render her invisible.
Pecola’s “sense of being is literally in danger” (Lee 1984, 348). The thing to fear is that which not only suggests Pecola and blackness itself are ugly, but which also deems them valueless and hence dispensable.

The third principle of self-hatred is imparted to Pecola by the black community in the story. The collective internalization of self-hatred manifested by the community as colorism comes in the dead of winter. Skin color politics kill the essence of blackness itself by suggesting that blackness (unless it is diluted by whiteness) is unworthy of appreciation and of existence. Colorism, like sexism and classism, is an oppressive system operating within real black communities that does not receive enough dialogue and criticism. hooks maintains, “The resurgence of deeply rooted internalized racism, most overtly manifested in contemporary black life by skin-color politics, is just one indication of our collective failure to heal psychological wounds” (hooks 1995, 142-3). In The Bluest Eye, the politics of white supremacy, coupled with colorism and classism in the black community, gravely impact Pecola’s identity formation and self-esteem. Morrison’s story implies that black people’s eagerness to fit into mainstream society translates into their perception that all aspects of that society are more beautiful and desirable. Thus, the perceived wealth of white people, the manners and cultural mores of whites, and the aesthetic values dictated by white people are the goals of the black community in Morrison’s novel.

The “thing to fear” is represented by Maureen Peal. Maureen Peal acts as a “disrupter of seasons” (52). She does not belong in Winter, for it is not she whom the community wants dead. Maureen is a “high-yellow dream child with long brown hair
braided into two *lynch* [my emphasis] ropes that [hang] down her back” (52). She is praised and adored for her diluted blackness. In “contempt of their own blackness,” Morrison’s fictionalized community is comfortable loving the Maureen Peals while hating and despising the Pecolas, Friedas, and Claudias (55). It is Maureen who calls attention to Pecola’s name—the same as the main character in “Imitation of Life”. Ironically, the mulatto protagonist in the film who deems her mother’s blackness ugly is praised by Maureen as being beautiful (57). Pecola’s internalized contempt for her own blackness matches the film’s Pecola’s contempt for her mother’s. Maureen Peal and all that she represents act as a “lynch rope” for Pecola’s self-esteem—strangled of worthiness once more, Pecola folds herself inward.

Classism is the fourth principle assaulting Pecola’s character. For according to the bourgeoisie middle-class black standards presented in Morrison’s novel, not only is Pecola ugly, she’s poor and ugly. hooks contends, “ultimately it was racial integration, and the new class divisions among black folks which it created, that led to the formulation of a radically different cultural context so disruptive it created a black identity crisis” (hooks 1995, 241). Appropriately, the middle-class blacks’ debasement of working-class blacks is portrayed by Geraldine. Geraldine is one of many upstanding colored women who migrate from the South to the North, lose their accent, mores, and roots. In describing these women, Morrison comments, “Their roots are deep, their stalks are firm, and only the top blossom nods in the wind”. These women, like Geraldine, “from Mobile, Aiken, Newport News,” yearn for respectability (67). They emulate the “cult of true womanhood” and copy the “refinement” of their white employers. They seek to rid
themselves of their “funkiness... the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions... The laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous” (68). Butler-Evans maintains that *funkiness* “signifies not merely some primal Afro-American essence but the feminine (‘nature,’ ‘passion,’ and ‘human emotions’)” (Butler-Evans 1989, 71). For funkiness they substitute chastity, sexual repression, and immaculate order. These women are different from *those* women. *Those* women are “three whores [who live] in the apartment above the Breedloves’ storefront”—China, Poland, and Miss Marie (43). *Those* women sing the blues, laugh loudly, and play the dozens. Their sexuality for sale, they are a stark contrast to proper women who are taught to practice chastity until marriage and restraint thereafter. China, Poland, and Miss Marie formulate a female trinity of hatred for men and are poor elders to teach Pecola how to love.

There is also a large faction of women who lie somewhere between the raucous whores and the forced purity of the Geraldines. These working class women are always “edging into life from the back door” (109). They take abuse and maltreatment and “(re-create) it in their own image” (109). Pecola could not find women secure enough in themselves to teach her how to be a woman. Her mother re-creates herself into “Polly,” an image that feeds on fantasy. The whores cannot teach Pecola how to love, for they are far too familiar with the emotion of hate. Middle-class women look down upon those of Pecola’s background with scorn and rejoice that she is not their problem. For Geraldine, Pecola is represents exactly that which “she had been advised to struggle against” (Butler-Evans 1989, 72). Pecola represents disorder for Geraldine’s immaculately ordered life.
So once more then, Pecola is assaulted by someone who cannot accept blackness. The “snowflakes falling and dying on the pavement” signal that akin to everything else in the cold dead Winter; the soul of blackness is dying (76).

Spring - “Severed Roots”

Spring is a time of new beginnings, rebirth, and regeneration. It is when mating occurs and sexual drives are high. In Spring, things that have been rooted deeply enough during harvest grow into fruition. Roots, a reoccurring motif in Morrison’s novel, symbolize grounding and are an impetus for growth: “...ironically Pecola’s growth is increasingly stunted as she draws nearer to her personal abyss” (Lee 1984, 349). Out of the roots that have been heretofore planted in Pecola’s development, her madness springs.

The Breedloves’ rootless past most directly influence Pecola’s fragmentation. Pauline instills a contempt for blackness in Pecola by making her feel that she is ugly. She further instills fear in place of love. Ironically, she implants in her children a “fear of madness” while, at the same time, she ensures that madness will be a welcome refuge to their familial reality (102). Pecola is continually rejected and degraded by her mother, a routine which ensures that the roots of self-hatred are firmly planted. Pecola’s adversity becomes clearest when “Mrs. Breedlove” rejects Pecola’s pain and tears for immaculately ordered space and a “little pink-and-yellow” girl’s tears (87). But the ultimate lesson comes from the other root in the Breedlove tree—Pecola’s father. Cholly is ignorant of what seeds to plant for the growth of healthy children. Thus, he simply learns to react to situations according to his base feelings and drives. When he encounters his daughter in
the kitchen, “the clear statement of her misery (is) an accusation” that he is not a good father (127). So he reacts by “loving” her in the way he had once loved Pauline.

Spring is a time of mating. In Morrison’s novel, sexual dysfunction replaces the life-sustaining mating of Spring. Men’s hands touch fruit not yet ripened. Frieda confesses to her sister that she has been “picked at” (79). Yet, she is believed and defended by her parents. When the person who is to protect is doing the picking, there is nowhere to turn. Cholly’s rape of Pecola “pushes her into final withdrawal” (Lee 1984, 349). Rejected by her mother and raped by her father, she has nowhere to turn but within. Having retreated within, Pecola goes on an active search for blue eyes. When Soaphead Church fulfills her prayers, she takes refuge in her madness. The seeds planted by Pecola’s mother, father, the community, and religion are not merely instrumental in Pecola’s journey to self-awareness. Instead, the community assists and even guarantees her initiation into madness.

Pecola’s ultimate withdrawal occurs when she is given an unfathomable demonstration of “love”. Miner maintains, “Quavering and shaking, Pecola does maintain a hold on her world and herself—until Cholly smashes her illusions about the possibility of unambivalent love in this world” (Miner 1985, 188). In Autumn, Pecola had begun her search for love. Frieda had advised Pecola that love is what makes babies (29). Pecola had learned from Miss Marie that when something is missing, you can attribute its disappearance to “something in the house that (loves) it” (44). The community’s love of whiteness and lack of self-love had taught Pecola to love and consume white imagery. Further, there had been no women available to teach Pecola how to love: her mother’s
love had been wasted on orderliness, cleanliness, and thereby “whiteness,” the “whores” had become accustomed to using people, not loving them; Maureen had taken retreat in the community’s love for her perceived beauty; and the “Geraldines” only had love to spare for their cats. In light of these experiences, then, Cholly’s warped demonstration of “love” by raping and impregnating Pecola, leads expectedly to her disappearance. The question posed in Autumn [How do you get someone to love you?] is still left unanswered in Spring.

Summer - “Now Who’s Crazy?”

In Summer, usually a time of retreat and vacation, things get hot. The retreat Pecola takes is one from herself. Total retreat signals the culmination of her madness. Lee states, “folding inward is the direction her quest takes” (Lee 1984, 348). On several occasions, Pecola attempts to “fold into herself, like a pleated wing” (61). Once she almost succeeds in her disappearance, with the exception of her eyes. Her eyes, the signature of her ugliness, are always left. Since the eyes are the window to the soul, not losing her eyes, Pecola can still maintain the essence of herself. For her eyes are everything: “everything (is) there in them” (39). Attaining the blue eyes she desires, she accomplishes the loss of herself. Or does she?

Claudia recalls summer as a time of storms, violent and sudden (146)—storms like the one that had suddenly tortured Pecola’s life and that of a Midwestern town. Claudia’s rite of passage has reached fruition, and she recalls the tumultuous talk that frames Pecola’s pregnancy: “the baby that everybody wanted dead” (148). The community’s
hatred for Pecola’s unborn baby mirrors their hatred of Pecola and ultimately their hatred of self. At the height of her development, Claudia wants “the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals” (148). Though Pecola passes into madness, her madness is a healing agent for Claudia’s self-awareness. Seeing how the community has assaulted blackness, Claudia re-members the beauty of it.

Toward the end of Summer, Pecola gets a voice of her own. “We see Pecola, fragmented, engaged in a dialogue with self, i.e. the imaginary friend she has created” (Lee 1984, 349). Pecola’s other self manifested “right after” her eyes (152). Real incest victims often create other selves to cope with the pain and residue of sexual abuse. Lee states, “Toni Morrison has a preoccupation with the effect of the community on the individual’s achievement and retention of an integrated, acceptable self” (Lee 1984, 346). Pecola’s community causes her to fragment instead of integrating into a healthy being. Pecola’s madness, then, is a form of protection from another form of madness exhibited by her family and community (159).

It is apparent in Morrison’s novel that the madness of the community is tied to their loss of ancestral memory. In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison maintains that “When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself” (Morrison 1984, 344). It is clear, however, that Pecola in spite of her insanity has not totally killed her ancestor. In fact, it is her peculiar form of madness which removes the stone from the tomb where the ancestor lay buried within her. Thus, in one of the final scenes of the
novel, after Pecola is convinced that she has blue eyes, Morrison depicts a conversation between Pecola’s divided self—the ancestral and the socialized self:

...Why didn’t I know you before?
You didn’t need me before.
Didn’t need you?
I mean you were so unhappy before. I guess you didn’t know me before.
I guess you’re right. And I was so lonely for friends. And you were right here. Right before my eyes.
No, honey. Right after your eyes (152).

The ancestral part of Pecola tries to get the socialized part to confront the painful events that culminate in her madness. In that sense, her other self is a healing mechanism if she uses it to re-member who she is. In Morrison’s novel, madness functions in paradoxical ways—it destroys as well as creates an opportunity for rebirth. The process begun by the ancestral voice may require the assistance of someone who is rooted enough to play the role of healer or shaman in Pecola’s life (as in Toni Cade Bambara’s The Salt Eaters). Still, when the totality of Morrison’s novel is contemplated, it becomes evident that internalized racism in black communities fragments the collective self and buries the ancestral voice.

**Nervous Conditions**

*Nervous Conditions* exposes patriarchy and colonialism as co-conspirators in the oppression of Zimbabwean girls and women. Set in post-war Zimbabwe, Dangaremngä’s novel traces the development of two female protagonists, Tambu and Nyasha, whose maturation process portends self-determination in a society that silences women. The novel also illustrates the “escapes” and “entrapments” of women who most directly affect
Tambu and Nyasha’s transitions into womanhood: their mothers and aunts. As the voice of the story, Tambu recounts the conditions that lead to Nyasha’s rebellion and Tambu’s own self-awareness.

Similar to Claudia and Pecola, Nyasha and Tambu are symbiotic—that is, they represent two sides of one whole person. Tambu is appropriately the orator of the tale because she is grounded in indigenous Shona culture and is schooled in the oral tradition imparted by her grandmother (17). Nyasha, on the other hand, has loose connections (107). Educated in England, she is estranged from her native language and traditions. Still, Nyasha’s education presents a paradox. African women’s access to education means gaining a certain amount of power while at the same time it suggests “a transformation of traditional cultures and a threat to existing structures of power within the family, clan, and community” (Nair 1995, 133). Nyasha’s education offers added tools of analysis with which she deconstructs and rebels against colonial and patriarchal structures. Her education also makes her a hybrid—not English, but not a “traditional” Shona woman either. She needs the rootedness possessed by Tambu for her journey to be successful. Like Pecola, Nyasha needs to re-member herself by re-membering the ancestor within herself. Tambu requires Nyasha’s rebellious nature. Comparable to Claudia, Tambu must successfully deconstruct the agents of her oppression in order to reach self-awareness. As Pecola’s battle with madness provokes Claudia's healing, so does Nyasha’s “rebellion” aid in Tambu’s journey to self-awareness.
Bad Nerves

The framework that breeds Nyasha’s madness is already present before her birth. Analogous to Pecola’s, Nyasha’s madness does not simply spring into existence: it is shaped and nurtured by the forces of patriarchal and colonial domination. Dangarembga’s novel suggests that European culture and education estrange Africans from their culture. Each character in *Nervous Conditions* who has been touched by English education at one time or another is described as having “bad nerves”. Dangarembga’s use of Jean Paul-Sartre’s observation, “the condition of the native is a nervous condition,” supports the indictment of English education that is intrinsic to the story plot. Although several thousand miles away, the “Dick and Jane” educational system spoken of in Morrison’s novel sounds quite similar to the “Ben and Betty” stories imparted by white missionaries in Zimbabwe’s colonial school system (27). The death of Tambu’s brother, Nhamo, shows most drastically how colonialism can alienate one so completely from self that it eventually ends up destroying the self. His death serves as symbol of the destruction of traditional native culture by European imperialism. Loss of language and loss of dance are both illustrated in Dangarembga’s tale as consequences of a colonial education. Tambu also shows how Christianity and imperialism act as twin evils in estranging the native African from herself: “So it was good to see the healthy young missionaries and discover that some Whites were as beautiful as we were. After that it did not take me long for me to learn that they were in fact more beautiful and then I was able to love them” (104). This process of learned inferiority sounds similar to the process of internalized self-hatred so
disturbingly implied in Morrison’s novel. In her analysis of *Nervous Conditions*, Uwakweh maintains:

Colonial domination in Tambu’s world manifests itself in all aspects of social life, such as defining the age at which African children should start school, maintaining a racist agenda against the indigenes in educational institutions...and using the selective nature of its educational system to limit the educated indigenous population (Uwakweh 1995, 78).

This selective education process creates a class division in Dangarembga’s fictionalized Zimbabwe as it does in real Zimbabwean society. Babamukuru emerges as the patriarch of the entire family for he is revered as a “good African” (107). However, the masses, represented by Tambu’s family, suffer the “poverty of blackness” (16). Both Morrison and Dangarembga’s novels suggest that classism in black communities evidences the manner in which the oppressed inculcate the attitude of their oppressors and elevate themselves above less privileged blacks. Dangarembga successfully demonstrates the intricacies of class, race, and male domination as sources of nervous conditions for the women in her novel.

Patriarchal constructs have a deleterious effect on each female character in Dangarembga’s text. Patriarchy configures the level of education allowed women and the roles women play in society. The education of young girls is secondary to that of their male counterparts, for they cannot “cook books and feed them to [their] husbands” (15). Thus, Tambu shows little sympathy when her brother’s death signals that she will access an education. Even the educated females are silenced, however. Nyasha’s mother Maiguru’s education does not afford her the freedom to make family or financial decisions. Uwakweh illumines further, “[Maiguru] later negotiates her position within
patriarchy by temporarily walking out of her marriage and arrives at a compromise that allows her a measure of independence from her husband” (Uwakweh 1995, 80). Despite her mini-rebellion, she remains trapped in the confines of tradition and whatever resistance she offers is passive. Through her mother’s situation, Nyasha fast realizes that in spite of an education, her value will still be measured in relation to her subservience to men. By acquiescing to male domination, both Tambu’s and Nyasha’s mothers aid in female subordination.

Tambu narrates at the beginning of the tale that hers is a story about women, “about my escape and Lucia’s; about my mother’s and Maiguru’s entrapment; and about Nyasha’s rebellion...” (1). Each woman suffers a condition that is brought about by male domination. The customary expectation for women to be “superwomen” is taught to young girls in the early stages of their development. Tambu’s mother, Mainini, affirms:

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden...How could it not be? Aren’t we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can’t just decided [sic] today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them...[Y]ou have to start learning them early, from a very early age...(16).

Witnessing her mother being “crushed by the weight of womanhood” sparks Tambu’s commitment to attaining an education by whatever means necessary (16). Mainini discourages Tambu in order to prepare her for future disappointment (20). Tambu acknowledges that her mother is in a “bad way” after the death of her son and the perceived theft of her daughter. Mainini’s mad tirade, at Maiguru’s expense, is a culmination of things that have been “germinating and taking root in her mind for a long time” (140). Tambu’s mother “seethes with an inner rage at her social condition, [but] her
fatalistic acceptance of the female condition and status places her in the category of the trapped” (Uwakweh 1995, 80). Like Pauline Breedlove, Tambu’s mother bears her condition like a cross. Tambu, in turn, looks to another role model.

In spite of having attained a higher education, Maiguru is trapped as well. Throughout the novel, she steadily progresses from a woman who treats her husband as “daddy” to one who gains the courage to voice her discontent. Uwakweh argues that Maiguru, “neither attempts to transcend her status nor stands up to her daughter’s quest for individuality” (1995, 80). This writer tends to disagree. Even something as small as Maiguru’s refusal to cater the family Christmas dinner marks some modicum of transcendence (182). Further, she seems to applaud silently Nyasha’s rebelliousness. Uwakweh asserts that both Tambu and Nyasha’s mother, “would prefer that their daughters bear the fate as the all-sacrificing, voiceless female rather than to be assertive and rebellious” (Uwakweh 1995, 80). On the contrary, Tambu’s mother passively supports Tambu’s venture to earn school fees by using a sort of reverse psychology on her husband (17). Maiguru supports Tambu as well by politely offering her opinion regarding Tambu’s education (181). Maiguru makes small allowances by buying the girls tampons and defending her daughter’s short dresses. Her passive protestations fail to shift Babamukuru’s stronghold, but she does succeed in improving her situation. Nyasha wishes that her mother would have completed her escape.

Tambu and Lucia, the “escaped” females, seek to redefine female roles in their Shona community. Aunt Lucia represents one of “those women”. Though she is
perceived as a loose woman, she defies societal expectations by refusing to marry (even after she becomes pregnant). She is considered "mad," for her behavior which threatens the status quo is abnormal (148). Disrupting a meeting in which the patriarchy is to decide her destiny is her signature act of rebellion. At the same time, as Uwakweh points out that, "Her 'escape' from male control and her attainment of independence and financial security lie in her pragmatism. She identifies the line of weakness in the patriarchy and utilizes it to achieve her goals" (Uwakweh 1995, 81). Lucia succeeds in securing sexual and financial fulfillment through manipulating the male ego. At the same time, she maintains her autonomy. Babamukuru applauds Lucia for being "like a man herself" (171). Like Tambu, Lucia hopes education will advance her escape from the bounds of poverty and patriarchy.

Tambu’s escape is evidenced by her narration of the events that influence Nyasha’s rebellion. Tambu perceives her opportunity for advancing her education as an escape from her impoverished homestead. Her true emancipation lies in her journey toward awareness of the evils of colonialism and patriarchy. At the end/beginning of the story, Tambu explicates, "something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed" (204). Like in *The Bluest Eye*, the voice in *Nervous Conditions* gains a level of clarity towards the end of the story that is brought about by the madness of her co-protagonist. The success of Nyasha’s journey resides in the liberation of Tambu. Further, Nyasha’s recovery is necessary for her cousin’s emancipation. Nyasha represents the "greatest symbolic challenge to male authority. She is the iconoclast and demystifier
[sic] of patriarchal power” (Uwakweh 1995, 80). Symbolically, the existence of a new generation of Zimbabwean females will be influenced by the success or failure of Nyasha’s decolonization.

Hybridity and Fragmentation

Upon Nyasha’s return from England, Tambu notices a marked difference in her cousin—at a family gathering, Nyasha is not dressed like the other Shona women. Tambu proclaims that it is obvious her cousin has been to England: “There was no other explanation for the tiny little dress she wore, hardly enough to cover her thighs. She was self-conscious though, constantly clasping her hands behind her buttocks to prevent her dress from riding up, and observing everybody through veiled vigilant eyes to see what we were thinking” (37). Although mini-dresses were probably in fashion in England, they hold other sexual and cultural connotations when Nyasha arrives home. Already self-conscious about her native home, Nyasha has become estranged from her native tongue, forgets or ignores traditional greetings, and is very withdrawn. Tambu recounts:

She did not talk beyond a quick stuttered greeting. Nor did she smile anymore at all...I missed the bold ebullient companion I had had who had gone to England but not returned from there. Yet, each time she came I could see that she had grown a little duller and dimmer, the expression in her eyes a little more complex, as though she were directing more and more of her energy inwards to commune with herself about the issues she alone had seen (51-52).

Nyasha’s inner withdrawal seals her attempt to deconstruct what she has learned in the English educational system. Having an “egalitarian” nature, she has “taken seriously the lessons about oppression and discrimination that she had learnt first-hand in England”
At the same time, she grapples with not fitting into her old Shona community and not being allowed to apply the tenets she has acquired. She is gluing all the facts together. In her final analysis, she realizes, “‘We shouldn’t have gone,’... ‘The parents ought to have packed us off home...Maybe that would have been best. For them at least, because now they’re stuck with hybrids for children. And they don’t like it... It offends them’” (78). Nyasha is a textbook definition of “double-consciousness”. For Tambu, Nyasha represents dis-order. Tambu says, “Everything about her spoke of alternatives and possibilities that if considered too deeply would wreak havoc with the neat plan I had laid out for my life” (76). Nyasha, who has acquired the tools to dissect the agents of her oppression must complete a program of dis-order in order to completely re-member herself.

Decolonizing Madness

Nyasha’s madness manifests itself as a rebellion. She consumes colonialism and patriarchy until she is sickened from it. She enacts her rebellion through her voice and her body. Both oral consumption and oral expulsion are critical metaphors in Nyasha’s rebellion. Nyasha is colonized orally as she is continually silenced. Uwakweh maintains, “Silencing comprises all imposed restrictions on women’s social being, thinking and expressions that are religiously or culturally sanctioned. As a patriarchal weapon of control, it is used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or ‘muted’ female structure” (Uwakweh 1995, 75). Not only are Nyasha’s speech and opinion silenced, but also the expression of her sexuality. Each explosive oral exchange between Nyasha and
her father occurs when he calls into question her sexuality. Nyasha’s copy of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is confiscated because of its sexual content. When Nyasha questions the whereabouts of her novel, the dinner table—an another site of oral consumption—emerges as a battleground for her and her father:

‘I expect you to do as I say. Now sit down and eat your food.’

Sulkily Nyasha sat down and took a couple of mouthfuls.

‘Excuse me,’ she said. She rose from the table, her food unfinished.

‘Now where are you going?’ Babamukuru demanded.

‘To my bedroom,’ replied Nyasha.

‘What did you say?’ cried Babamukuru, his voice cracking in disbelief.

‘Didn’t you hear me tell you I don’t want to hear you answer back? Didn’t you hear me tell you that just now. Now sit down and eat that food. All of it. I want to see you eat all of it.’

‘I’ve had enough,’ explained Nyasha. ‘Really, I’m full.’ (84).

Nyasha’s insistence of fullness expresses that she’s had enough of her father’s domination. In “Purging a Plate Full of Colonial History...,” Hill analyzes the exchange at the dinner table: “Nyasha is told that speech is inappropriate behavior and that her refusal to be silent and obedient is disrespectful. When Babamukuru connects obedience to the eating of food, the effect on Nyasha is loss of appetite...”(Hill 1995, 82). This episode marks a point in which Nyasha shifts her rebellion from her voice to her body. When Babamukuru calls Nyasha’s decency into question a second time, there is a marked shift from verbal to physical altercation. Condemning Nyasha to “whoredom” for her inappropriate dress and behavior with boys, Babamukuru makes her a “victim of femaleness” (115). Further, Babamukuru’s physical assault—his assertion of control over her body—brings Nyasha’s restrained anger to the surface: “‘I told you not to hit me,’ said Nyasha, punching him in the eye” (115). By Fanon’s definition, Nyasha is embarking
upon a plan of decolonization: “Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature...Their first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together—that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler—was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons” (Fanon 1963, 36). This violent brawl between Nyasha and her father suggests that it is not safe for Nyasha to accomplish rebellion through using her voice. Hill maintains, “Because Nyasha disregards rank, her speech disrupts and threatens the authority of gender- and race-determined status in colonial society” (Hill 1995, 79). Nyasha’s father represents the combination of patriarchy and colonialism. Nyasha’s rebelliousness challenges both those hierarchies and threatens Babamukuru’s perception of masculinity. Physical defeat leaves Nyasha in need of an alternate method to decolonize herself.

Purging Consumption

Physically forced into being subdued, Nyasha retreats into herself. Like Pecola, Nyasha folds inward into a “private world” that no one can reach (118). Nyasha’s site of rebellion becomes her body as she consumes the plateful of patriarchy her father insists upon at the dinner table, then purges it in the solace of her bathroom. Nyasha identifies the battle with her father as “more than just food...it’s all the things about boys and men and being decent and indecent and good and bad. He goes on and on with the accusations and the threats, and I’m just not coping very well” (190). It is clear that Nyasha’s bulimic act is related to her father’s attempt to imprison her sexuality. Dangarembga is possibly the first African female writer to explore this particular disorder, in the consciousness of a
black protagonist, which is commonly associated with European women. Thus, Nyasha’s purging lends affirmation to Mainini’s continuous warnings that one cannot expect the ancestors to stomach so much Englishness (203). Dangarembga could very well be suggesting through Mainini a correlation between bulimia and colonizations. This writer would add to Mainini’s heeding that women cannot stomach so much patriarchy either. The consumption of patriarchy, coupled with the binging of colonial education and values, sickens Nyasha both mentally and physically. Fanon maintains, “In the period of decolonization, the colonized masses mock at these very values, insult them, and vomit them up” (Fanon 1963, 43). Both Nyasha and Pecola consume white thought and ideology. A critical distinction between the two protagonists is that Nyasha eventually regurgitates the sources of her fragmentation, whereas Pecola becomes consumed by them. Tambu describes Nyasha’s conflict as “self versus surrender” (118). Pecola is faced with a similar conflict as her ancestral voice attempts to guide her back to self. As Nyasha’s binging and purging becomes a “horribly weird and sinister drama” (198), her self is at stake. Hill maintains, “Both figuratively and literally, her attempt to be silent and obedient is killing her” (Hill 1995, 88). Her pain is reenacted through a display of rage.

Rage and Healing

The pinnacle of Nyasha’s madness is a fit of rage. Similar to Pecola, there is a climactic episode that signals Nyasha’s madness. Keeping her emotions contained only makes her more nervous and agitated. Her bulimic episodes cause such physical deterioration that she passes out into her plate at the dinner table one night (200).
Executing rebellion through her body is destroying her. She finds her voice again and warns Tambu of her impending rage: “I don’t want to do it, Tambu, really I don’t, but it’s coming.’ Her eyes dilated. ‘They’ve done it to me,’ she accused, whispering still. ‘Really, they have’ ” (200). The infamous ‘they’ are the colonialists. Nyasha charges that colonialism separates Africans from themselves and leaves them to grovel for the crumbs from the ‘master’s’ table. Her refusal to grovel and her inability to consume colonial education any longer are acted out in rage: “I won’t grovel, I won’t die,’ she raged and crouched like a cat ready to spring” (200). Nyasha is “beside herself with fury. She rampaged, shredding her history books between her teeth (‘Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies.’)” (201). She confesses, “I’ve tried to keep it in but it’s powerful. It ought to be. There’s nearly a century of it’ ”(201). As she jabs fragments of broken glass into her flesh, she acknowledges that hers is a fragmented existence. She concedes to her parents, “I’m not one of them but I’m not one of you” (201). Nyasha’s madness is necessary to purge herself of English education and the trappings of patriarchy. Yet, the outcome of Nyasha’s journey through madness remains “in the balance” (202). Like Pecola, there still exists the possibility of integration, but first her “roots” must be re-membered.

Nyasha’s madness has therapeutic properties. Pecola, on the other hand, suffers in silence—the only communication being inside her head. Nyasha rejects silencing. Seeking a safe place where she can express her anger, she may be able to purge herself of the oppressive systems that have driven her mad. Yet, like Pecola, Nyasha requires support for her healing.
Rootedness and Female Collectivity

Nyasha’s one true anchor to sanity is Tambu. Tambu, the rooted one, is the voice of the story while Nyasha maintains the rebellious spirit. Claudia, the voice of *The Bluest Eye*, also claims what Pecola lacks—voice and anger. In both portrayals, the protagonists and their co-protagonists are essential to each other’s survival. Tambu describes her relationship with Nyasha as “her first love-affair” (78). Also, similar to *The Bluest Eye*, *Nervous Conditions* utilizes the menstrual cycle as a signature of female bonding (96, 119). Tambu acquires a “new identity” through Nyasha. Tambu’s mind splits “into two disconnected entities that [have] long, frightening arguments with each other” (167). This process may be perceived as a symbolic representation of Tambu’s synthesis of Nyasha’s energy. Nyasha still needs Tambu’s energy, but Tambu’s departure for boarding school serves as a sort of abandonment. Nyasha confesses, “In many ways you are very essential to me in bridging the gaps in my life, and now that you are away, I feel them again” (196). As Nyasha’s progress remains “in the balance” so does Tambu’s (202). In “On the Bodies of Third World Women...,” Saliba maintains, “The coalescing of individualized and collective voices throughout the text suggests that a healthy women’s community relies on the well-being of its individual members, as well as the ability of women to unite across class lines to cure the ills of the community” (Saliba 1995, 141). Both Morrison’s and Dangarembga’s illustrations suggest that a collective women’s community is necessary for the success of a girl’s journey into womanhood.
The need for female collectivity is best explicated when the patriarchy gather to determine Lucia’s fate. Tambu recalls, “...my mother and *maininis* threatened to become quite violent in their opposition to the system” (137). This incident suggests that a collective struggle among women is necessary to debunk patriarchy. Fear divides the aggregation of women, however, and each one is left to fight her battle alone. Nyasha’s hopelessness in part results from this lack of female unity. She gleans false hope when her mother escapes from Babamukuru’s stronghold. Nyasha explains to Tambu, “Sometimes I feel I’m trapped by that man, just like she is. But she’s done it, now she’s broken out, I know it’s possible, so I can wait” (174). Her optimism gradually dwindles as she recognizes the lack of alternatives available to her mother in a patriarchal society. Pecola, too, struggles with defining womanhood in a household where her mother accepts and meets out abuse to her father. Pecola’s strongest “role models” for womanhood are prostitutes. In both Pecola and Nyasha’s quest for self-awareness, re-membering the ancestral self may mark the turning point in their healing process. Furthermore, collective struggle among women is necessary to sustain both female protagonists in their journey as they face the dominant powers that oppress women.
II

JOURNEYING THROUGH:

Myriam Warner-Vieyra’s *Juletane* and Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*

Myriam Warner-Vieyra’s *Juletane* and Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* recount the philosophical journeys of women as they strive through madness toward self-awareness. Further along in their development process than Pecola and Nyasha, Juletane and Elizabeth (Warner-Vieyra and Head’s protagonists, respectively) illustrate that the journey to self-awareness is continuous. The edicts of society, coupled with the isolation of these female protagonists, cause them to withdraw into the realities of their own minds. Both Juletane and Elizabeth’s journeys are introspective, yet their outcomes are quite different. These novels debunk common assumptions that women (particularly black women) lack the introspective capability to “go mad”. Further, they demonstrate how introspection aids one’s healing.

**Juletane**

Myriam Warner-Vieyra’s *Juletane* adds to the wide body of Caribbean women’s literature that explores the motif of madness. In “Interior Schisms Dramatised...,” O’Callaghan comments, “Novels by Caribbean women have increased in number over the last twenty years; in the majority of these, the central character (or characters) is female and in several of these novels she is presented as ‘mad’” (O’Callaghan 1990, 89).
Madness in most Caribbean fiction is construed as a journey or quest. Having suffered identity crises due to their colonized plight, the Caribbean subject embarks upon a quest to reconceptualize her/his identity. Quite often this journey is construed as an escape to Africa. It is typified as a sort of reverse Middle Passage in which the protagonist seeks to retrieve the self that was lost during the enslavement process. In Caribbean women's novels, however, the journey often meets a tragic end. The female protagonists who take refuge in madness often become imprisoned by the realities created within their own minds.

Writing the Journey

Constructing *Juletane* as a diary, Warner-Vieyra attests to the healing power of the written word. Attempting to re-member, Juletane seeks clarity about the dysfunctional path her life has taken. Juletane's only solace is her diary. She says, "writing will shorten my long hours of discouragement, will be something for me to cling to and will give me a friend, a confidante, at least I hope it will" (3). In her introduction to *Juletane*, Betty Wilson adds, "the reason for and the act of writing gives consolation, relief, or simply a sense of coming to terms and attempting to cope with a reality that has become, or is becoming, increasingly intolerable" (Wilson 1987, viii). Writing is Juletane's tool for deconstruction, to find the missing pieces in her life. She admits, "Thanks to my diary, I discover that my life is not in pieces, that it had only been coiled deep down inside of me and now comes back in huge raging waves, to jog my memory (my emphasis)" (30). Putting her "anguish" down on paper helps her to "analyse [sic] it, to control it and finally perhaps to bear it or reject it once and for all" (30). Writing is the most constructive
action Juletane takes throughout the text. Like many black women, Juletane has been
defined by people other than herself. Writing gives her the opportunity to become the
author of her own existence. Through taking control of the text, Juletane even redefines
madness, “What if mad people weren’t mad? What if certain types of behaviour [sic]
which simple, ordinary people call madness, were just wisdom, a reflection of the clear-
sighted hypersensitivity of a pure, upright soul plunged into a real or imaginary affective
void?” (2). As a de(con)structive device, Juletane’s writing can be both constructive and
destructive. Becoming the author of her life, she removes herself as a character. While
she writes herself out of existence, she wreaks havoc and destruction in the lives of those
around her.

Preparation

Juletane prepares for her journey through re-counting the past. Like the
protagonists explored in the previous chapter, there exists a backdrop for Juletane’s
fragmented identity and subsequent “madness”. Juletane recalls how her sheltered
upbringing and colonial education estranged her from her West Indian roots. In
accordance with The Bluest Eye and Nervous Conditions, loss of self in Juletane seems to
be the price that black people pay in order to become assimilated into mainstream society.
O’Callaghan maintains that the “psychic damage and distorted self-images” of these
protagonists are used “as metaphors for a kind of pervasive ‘illness’ to which our societies
are prone as a result of the colonial encounter” (O’Callaghan 1990, 104). Juletane is not
only isolated from her indigenous culture but also from a part of her self as a result of
assimilation.
Juletane is an orphan both literally and symbolically. Her mother’s death leaves her orphaned as a baby, and colonial education estranges her from indigenous Caribbean culture. Juletane relates in her diary: “I knew nothing about my own homeland,” and after being sent to France to live with her godmother, “From then on I was almost completely cut off from my island home and from other young people my age” (10). Part of rites of passage is developing with one’s age-mates. Even in Westernized societies, a critical part of development is the peer group relationship. The peer group relationship acts as a microcosm to relationships in larger society. Juletane’s alienation from peer group interaction, community and mainstream society contributes to her feelings of isolation.

As an assimileé, Juletane is culturally alienated. Wilson describes an assimileé as one who is “assimilated to/by French, European values, education, and culture” (Wilson 1987, viii). Because mainstream society never fully embraces an assimileé, she remains on the fringes of mainstream culture, relegated to the role of “other”. In addition, the assimileé does not feel a part of her indigenous culture. Failure to rectify identity fragmentation and to find some alternative existence leads one to escape his or her situation or to rebel against having to fit into some preconceived box of belonging.

Wilson contends that in Caribbean women’s writings, unlike their male counterparts, “this crisis usually ends in withdrawal and/or flight/evasion rather than confrontation and breaking out” (Wilson 1987, viii). In Juletane, the island (literally Guadeloupe) is a metaphor for a closed space. In the existential realities of many Caribbean women, societal and cultural expectations render them confined and limit their self-expression. If a society is bent on keeping one contained, escape may be the only apparent alternative. In
*Nervous Conditions*, Nyasha represents one who rebels against the confinement imparted upon her by colonialism and patriarchy while Tambu escapes. On the other end of the spectrum, Pecola confines herself in the closed space of her mind, but triggers Claudia’s escape. Juletane seeks her liberation through escaping to Africa. With the baggage from her past, she sets out on an adult pilgrimage. She forecasts that her destination will be a place where she can retrieve roots, family, and identity.

**The “Motherland”- Dream or Nightmare?**

Escape in *Juletane* is presented as a journey to Africa. But Africa is only the geographical destination. The destination Juletane envisions is a place of love and belonging. Because she had no real mother, her return to “the motherland” is literal and figurative. Through escaping the environment in which she feels alienated from self, community, and society, Juletane expects the land of her ancestors will provide rootedness and assist in the re-membering of her identity. However, Juletane’s journey to the fictionalized “motherland” is met with unexpected challenges. Juletane confesses, “This homecoming to Africa, the land of my forefathers, I had imagined it a hundred different ways, and it had become a nightmare” (15). Perhaps due to patriarchal limitations of some African communities, the journey to the motherland can be a challenge for women of the Diaspora. In “Women Writers of the French-Speaking Caribbean,” Shelton asserts, “On the one hand, Africa is viewed as a promised land to which one goes to find personal redemption and plenitude. On the other, Africa is experienced as an alien, even hostile, place where the dream of self-discovery gradually shrivels” (Shelton 1990, 351). The
language, traditions, and culture of the place of refuge are just as foreign as the
environment from which Juletane escapes. Accordingly, Juletane’s destination entails
unexpected detours.

Through her marriage to an African man and simultaneously to what she considers
African culture, Juletane hopes to complete herself. After the death of her godmother,
Mamadou becomes Juletane’s whole world (13). His elusion about his other marriage
renders her unprepared for the polygamous arrangement awaiting her in her new home.
She admits, “As far as I was concerned, a husband was above all the most intimate of
beings, another self, not an object to be lent or shared” (23). Moreover, the language and
customs of Muslim culture are quite alien to her. Juletane is unaccustomed to patriarchal
societies:

...where women seemed to have no importance in a man’s life, except for his
pleasure or as the mother of children. [Husbands] were not companions or
confidantes. An aura of mystery surrounded the affairs of the husband who, as
sole master, made all the decisions without ever worrying about the wishes and
desires of the women (24).

Mamadou’s betrayal drives her to physical and psychological breakdown. Juletane
becomes “deeply depressed,” suffering “fits of delirium” (25). Like Nyasha, Juletane’s
feeling of powerlessness inspires rage: “I do not know what happened to me. I vaguely
remember being overcome with a sudden, desperate rage... I felt good, my mad rage had
given me relief...” (25). In a patriarchal society, anger and rage may be healthy
expressions for women. Women’s emotive responses to stressful situations are often
relegated to sadness and grief, whereas violence and rage are usually construed as male
responses. So while Juletane’s and Nyasha’s expressions of anger and rage are
destructive, they are also empowering in a society that silences women. Nyasha’s rage leads to her rebellion against the status of women in society, and it may empower her to escape those conditions. Juletane takes the path of the mother characters in *Nervous Conditions* and becomes entrapped in her situation. Tambu’s mother illustrates one who seethes from her entrapment and whose internal rage comes out in periodic bursts. Similarly, Pecola’s mother, Pauline, entraps herself in a volatile living situation. Further along in their journey, the maturated female characters have resolved themselves to accepting the burden of womanhood. Characters who stray from this role, such as the three prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye* and Lucia in *Nervous Conditions*, tend to be regarded as loose. In each of these fictionalized cases, the female role is limited by patriarchal delineations. Juletane repeats this pattern through adjusting herself to fit a man’s demands.

In congruence with the novels explored in the previous chapter, *Juletane* explores the interrelationship of women and the necessity for a collective women’s survival. Juletane’s story (like Pecola and Nyasha’s) is not just about one woman, but it is a feminist re-vision—it looks at the collective female community. The primary wife, Awa, looks after Juletane “like a mother” (40). Awa is typified as the ‘traditional’ African wife. Like the wives in *Nervous Conditions*, Awa fulfills her role of silent obedience to her husband and selfless mothering to her children. This identity is not open to Juletane whose barrenness is detected after a car accident. A stark contrast to Awa is the new wife Mamadou takes after Juletane “retired from the ‘competition’ ” (40). Ndye is a ‘loose’ woman. Warner-Vieyra’s novel, like the others, draws attention to the dichotomous labels
that society uses to suppress black women's sexuality. Ndye, who has “already had a husband and countless love affairs,” is sought after like an rare object to be purchased. Similar to Lucia, Ndye has learned to manipulate the patriarchy for financial and sexual gain. Juletane faults Ndye for “stripping [her] of [her] identity as a black woman” (42) as their relationship becomes increasingly explosive. Although Awa makes an attempt, Wilson explains:

There is no female bonding; no strong ties exist between the women as women, as friends, outside the male-centred [sic] relationship. When Juletane opts out of this she cuts herself off from any possibility of integrating within the household or outside of it. Yet her desire for affection and sympathy from the other women remains (Wilson 1987, xiv).

Isolated from her external environment, Juletane withdraws further into an internal reality. Still in search of nurturing, she creates a womb-like space in the confines of her room.

The retreat within is characterized as a kumbla in Caribbean literature. In Caribbean folklore, the kumbla represents a fortress and protection from the outside world. The image of the kumbla is derived from African folkloric tales or Anansi stories. Anansi (a folk spider), it is said, weaves cocoons and creates kumblas as a womb of protection for future generations. Concerning “Go Eena Kumbla...,” Daryl Cumber Dance exhorts, “as comforting and important as kumblas are...one cannot remain indefinitely in one” (Dance 1990, 172). Pecola’s damage signifies the consequence of not emerging from this inner retreat. Nyasha utilizes rage and anger to break out of her confinement. Juletane’s refuge in her kumbla starts out as comforting, but becomes self-destructive.

Juletane creates a kumbla in the solace of her bedroom and the privacy of her thoughts. Isolated from her external environment, Juletane secludes herself in a space
“five paces by four and under the mango tree in the yard” (26). The tree that bears no fruit may represent Juletane’s sense of rootlessness. The tree’s barrenness also reminds Juletane of her own. Juletane’s barrenness makes the whole world seem like a “barren, hostile desert and [she] is struggling in the depths of an abyss, alone, defenceless [sic]” (38). Seeking to overcome her “fate as the will of God,” she ceases recalling the past and writes about the present. Her constructive act of writing turns destructive, for it is driven by the rage she has tried to contain.

Juletane replaces autobiography with creative writing. Fiction and non-fiction coalesce and like Nyasha’s binging and purging, a “weird and sinister drama” emerges through Juletane’s exposition. Juletane’s pen literally becomes the ‘sword’. For the third wife, Ndye, she plots vengeance “like a very special dish” (62). Juletane continues, “It will be my last meal and my madness will vanish” (62). Her madness is reactionary and carefully plotted. Juletane confides in her diary, “Ndye is the stumbling block on the already tortuous path of my life. I must remove this obstacle so that I can see clearly” (67). Juletane is seeking vengeance for her situation. She says, “I have discovered hatred and this feeling drives me as much as love did in the past” (66). Like Nyasha, Juletane has internalized rage. Yet, while Nyasha expels the rage, Juletane enacts hers on those around her. She is able to conceal her quiet murder of Awa’s children. But when she disfigures Ndye’s face with a skillet of hot oil, Juletane is finally hospitalized.

Juletane uses her diary to construct plots, yet she writes her tale as though she is not a character. Writing herself out of the text, she is absolved of all responsibility for her actions. She chooses what she will re-member and those things she wants to forget: “I
would not like to know that I was responsible for the death of the children... However their death had pierced Mamadou’s armour [sic] of indifference” (74). If Juletane remembers the events that lead to her hospitalization, she will have to take responsibility for the destruction she has caused in her household. In other words, Juletane’s healing necessitates her return from fiction to reality: “one must come to terms with reality in order to transcend it” (Wilson 1990, 54). Refusing to merge her internal and external realities, Juletane evades reality all together, “Oh, how I long to fall asleep, too, to have a long, restful night! To wake up in another world where mad people are not mad, but wise and just” (78). After Mamadou’s death, she loses her impetus for chronicling her pain. In line with most other Caribbean women’s quest novels, the protagonist meets a tragic end. However, Warner-Vieyra revises the common fatalistic ending purported throughout much Caribbean women’s fiction. Juletane’s diary acts as a healing mechanism for the reader of her text, her compatriot, Helene.

A Feminist RE-Vision

When Helene recounts Juletane’s journey through madness, she embarks upon her own journey toward healing and self-awareness. Like the co-protagonists in the aforementioned novels, Helene is Juletane’s alter. While Juletane recalls having had a lonely childhood, Helene fondly remembers village life and cane harvests:

*The whole family had set out with the birds in single file behind Aunt Sonia and her huge pot of matoutou crabe balanced on her head... Helene remembered too the sweet smell of magnolia blossoms mingled with the bewitching scent of frangipanis... The day went by without anyone worrying about time passing...* (18).
Helene is well-rooted in her indigenous culture. Similar to Tambu, Helene possesses the rootedness for which Juletane yearns. Juletane, naïve and trusting, marries in hope that her husband will complete her. Helene, independent and embittered toward men, reluctantly decides to marry solely to conceive a child. In spite of their differences, both women are emotionally scarred by men and respond in ways that are self-destructive. Reading Juletane’s diary forces Helene to confront herself and “to deal with feelings and questions she has been suppressing or evading for a long time” (Wilson 1987, xi). This intertextual relationship between Juletane and Helene shows how the written accounts of black women can heal their readers. Wilson maintains, “[Helene’s] night’s vigil is symbolic of an emotional journey, a cleansing and revitalizing ritual” (x). Upon completion of Juletane’s journal, “...for the first time in almost twenty years, [Helene] wept. Juletane’s diary has broken the block of ice around her heart” (79). Warner-Vieyra’s text raises critical issues about this necessity of female bonding in the development of a healthy women’s identity. This necessity is set in direct opposition to defining oneself in terms of a man or in traditional women’s roles, such as motherhood. Stripped of the role of wife and mother, Juletane does not possess the strength of self-definition. Although independent, Helene is still seeking to be fully a “woman” through having a child. Both women attempt to define themselves outside of themselves. Warner-Vieyra’s novel attests that through shared experiences, women must go within themselves in order to seek definition.
A Question of Power

Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* integrates the themes of the previously analyzed works. Head’s exploration affirms that the forces influencing the madness of these fictionalized females is, in essence, a question of power. As an assertion of power to define their own identity, Pecola, Nyasha, Juletane, and Head’s protagonist, Elizabeth, create or experience alternative realities in their own minds. In so doing, the protagonists seek to counter the disturbing effects of the predominant powers (patriarchal, racist, and social class authorities) on the self. Head’s novel delves into the philosophical underpinnings of domination and further sets forth a humanistic vision.

The theme of madness in the literature of Bessie Head has its roots in the tragic beginnings and isolation of the author. Bessie Head was born in South Africa in 1937 to a white mother and South African native father. Head found out at age thirteen that the family she had always known—a foster family—was not her biological one (Head 1990, intro.). While in a missionary school, she was told by one of her teachers that her mother was insane and institutionalized and that if Head was not careful, she might go insane herself. Head’s tragic upbringing serves as the background of her semi-fictional character, Elizabeth.

Head’s exile in Botswana also provides the backdrop for *A Question of Power*. After her early writings in South African newspapers made her politically suspect to the authorities, Head took permanent exile in Botswana. Her life as a refugee there provides the “statelessness” and isolation that permeate all her novels and the madness that rings...
throughout *A Question of Power*. Already suffering the pain of rootlessness from being an orphan and a Coloured South African, in Botswana, Head’s protagonist, Elizabeth feels even further estranged from African culture. Akin to Juletane’s experience, the land of refuge further isolates Elizabeth and causes her to question her identity. As is common to all the previously explored protagonists, the fragmentation caused by external realities directs the protagonist’s search within.

*A Question of Power* was described by Head as a semi-autobiographical account of her “private philosophical journey to the sources of evil” (Head 1990, 69). Similar to the aforementioned characters, Head’s protagonist, Elizabeth, suffers identity fragmentation as part of her initiation into womanhood, her community, and the larger society. Coming of age in apartheid South Africa, racism, classism, and colorism frame the fragmentation of Elizabeth. Like Juletane, Elizabeth’s existence as an orphan is both literal and symbolic.

To experience Elizabeth’s madness, the reader is placed in the “head” of the protagonist. According to Rose, “it was widely believed by colonialists that African women did not go mad,” for they had not reached the level of self-awareness and introspection required for mental breakdown (Rose 1994, 404). Head’s account in this instance is deconstructionist—it challenges traditional perceptions of African women and of madness. Furthermore, like *Nervous Conditions*, *A Question of Power* presents a startling critique of the power-holders in African society—the colonialists and the males of both African and European descent.
Preparation

Similar to Juletane’s, Elizabeth’s travail with madness is structured as a journey. Elizabeth’s excursion is not presented in first-person, however, for Head is recounting through fictionalized means, the events that marked her own mental breakdown. Elizabeth’s preparation for her journey is rooted in her upbringing. Her neurotic tendencies, sexual dysfunction, and quest for transcendence are all traceable to her background in South Africa.

Like Juletane, Elizabeth is orphaned. After being institutionalized, Elizabeth’s mother eventually commits suicide (17). Elizabeth considers her mother’s trauma as a “silent appeal” for Elizabeth to share the stigma of insanity (17). Her foster mother’s activities only add to Elizabeth’s instability. As a child, Elizabeth’s life in a beer-house/prostitute influences her ideas about sexuality. Sexual activity increasingly becomes congruent to a defiled act as she marries an ex-convict who sleeps with various women and who also has a homosexual affair (19). All of the themes of her upbringing come into question as her mind internally struggles with the conflicting realities of the outside world.

Life in apartheid South Africa equips Elizabeth with a load of baggage to take on her journey. She recalls her hatred for South Africa as she leaves for Botswana on a ‘never to return’ exit permit:

It was like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you. They were just born that way, hating people, and a black man or woman was just born to be hated. There wasn’t any kind of social evolution beyond that, there wasn’t any lift to the heart, just this vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks... (19).
Rootless and stateless, Elizabeth goes from the racial hatred of South Africa to the exclusionary environment of Botswana. Elizabeth has no place in Botswana. Similar to Juletane, Elizabeth does not speak the language and is not connected to the people. Even the name of the place in which she takes refuge, Motabeng, "place of sand," denotes rootlessness. Elizabeth is "an out-and-out outsider" in Botswana. In "Authority and invention in the fiction of Bessie Head," Coundouriotis explains, "Both [Elizabeth's] land and her sex (socially constructed) are discursive spaces that [she] must retrieve and impose her authority over" (Coundouriotis 1996, 22). Her journey, then, is one of remembering, retrieval, and transcendence.

Journey to the depths of Hell

Contrary to Juletane, Elizabeth does not embark upon her journey alone. She is guided and pushed by forces seemingly beyond her control. In Thunder Behind Her Ears, Eilersen proclaims:

In the first pages of A Question of Power we are presented with what could be described as a chart, drawn in clear simple, lines, and mapping out a journey. Our attention is directed to the places where important incidents occur. The landscape is blocked in in general terms; the three travelers are named and presented (Eilersen 1995, 143).

The passengers are Elizabeth, Sello, and Dan. The carrier is Elizabeth's mind. The three passengers share a "strange journey into hell and [keep] close emotional tabs on each other" (12). Sello and Dan are real men who live in Motabeng society, yet they reappear in Elizabeth's mind to visit her as spirits or hallucinatory images. As Head's account illustrates, the "boundaries between reality and hallucination are culturally specific and
historically (as well as psychically) mobile” (Rose 1994, 407). What Western mental health professionals deem hallucinations or apparitions can be natural experiences for many indigenous cultures. In most indigenous African spiritual systems, communing with those in the spiritual realm is a desired occurrence, for members of the community feel as though their ancestors have lessons to impart and can assist them in the earthly realm. Moreover, most ritualized journeys contain an element of fear that the initiate has to overcome in order to reemerge as a more self-actualized individual. In Of Water and the Spirit, Malidoma Somé describes his initiation as a shaman. Recounting the beliefs of his ethnic group, Somé proclaims, “The Dagara believe that contact with the otherworld is always deeply transformational” (Somé 1994, 19). Elizabeth’s journey through “madness” and the spiritual intervention it entails is essential to catapult her into a more highly evolved state of being.

In order to uncover the basis of good and evil, Elizabeth visits the sources. Her first teacher is Sello. Elizabeth’s initial attachment to Sello is at the expense of her own journey: “she had no distinct personality, apart from Sello” (32). Sello’s appearance as a white-robed monk symbolizes the power of religious figures and perceptions of God. Sello teaches Elizabeth that the predominant perspective on God is based upon notions of hierarchy and power relations. As Elizabeth continually depends upon Sello as a god figure, he warns her to “retain her own mental independence” (29). Sello further informs her, “...the title God, in all its absolute all-powerful form, is a disaster to its holder, the all-seeing eye is the greatest temptation. It turns a man into a wild debaucher, a maddened and wilful [sic] persecutor of his fellow men” (36). Sello conveys to Elizabeth that “the
root cause of human suffering" are those who think so much of themselves as to believe that their power is stronger than anyone else in the world, hence, to believe they are God (36). In order for Elizabeth to understand fully the intricacies of power and corruption, "the possibilities of massive suffering" have to be worked out within her (39). She has to comprehend how it feels to be absolutely powerless.

Identifying with the suffering of humankind assists Elizabeth in redefining what God means. Sello, manifested as an Asian man, forces Elizabeth to make "an identification with the poor and humble" (31). Being stripped of her "vesture garments," Elizabeth becomes simply ordinary. Yet, she realizes that the ordinary beings of the world make up God. Elizabeth recognizes "God" as a title to be shared and in which she deserves a portion. As Eilersen recalls of Hindu thought, "If Man with his human frailties is God, then God is both good and evil" (Eilersen 1995, 128). Elizabeth is being offered the keys to awakening the power and the God within herself. But in unlocking the goodness, she also has to reckon with the evil of God.

Sello or Elizabeth’s image of God manifests itself in several different characters in order to better illustrate the intricacies and multifaceted nature of God and of Elizabeth. Eilersen maintains, "There is a constant fragmentation of the ‘characters’ in Elizabeth’s inner universe, which increases the pressure on her mind" (Eilersen 1995, 144). Sello and ‘The Father’ are "easily interchangeable souls" (30). Further the “Asian man who [looks] like Sello” is yet another materialization of God. Both these figures teach Elizabeth of the value of identifying with the poor. Reducing himself from a god-like figure to a man, Sello replicates himself in a brown suit (37). This replication has a strange similarity to
biblical lore of God coming down to earth as a man, Jesus. It also metaphorically suggests
man's fall from godliness (42). Likewise transposed is the concept of the "holy mother"
Mary and that of evil Medusa.

Medusa expresses "the surface reality of African society" (38) and challenges
Elizabeth's identity as an African woman. Hurling magical thunderbolts, Medusa shatters
Elizabeth "into a thousand fragments" (43). Medusa's accusation that Elizabeth has "no
vagina" and no link to African people makes Elizabeth question the value of her existence.
Elizabeth's torment is like a record playing over and over in her head, "Dog, filth, the
Africans will eat you to death," but the worst part of it is that the accompanying thoughts
have existed as a part of her sub-conscious all along and are just being thrusted into
conscious awareness (45). Elizabeth's tragic birth instills in her a sense of self-hatred that
is brought to surface by her mental tormentors: "...you hate Africans. You don't like the
African hair. You don't like the African nose..." (48). Medusa further assaults
Elizabeth's identity as a Coloured by introducing images of Coloured homosexual men
whom Elizabeth recalls having seen in South Africa. Elizabeth "could not help but identify
with the weak, homosexual Coloured men who were dying before her eyes. One day of it
set her nervous system screaming" (47). As a Coloured, Elizabeth is strange and inferior.
She does not possess the feminine and sexual qualities of Medusa because she is not a
"pure" African woman. Elizabeth realizes, "the evils overwhelming her were beginning to
sound like South Africa from which she had fled. The reasoning, the viciousness were the
same, but this time the faces were black... large, looming soul personalities" (57).
Elizabeth is faced with the reality that oppression and evil are not just a matter of black
and white and that the oppressed may internalize their oppression such that they in turn
become the oppressor. She notices that the power of evil can affect even those with good
intentions. She confesses to Birgette, her friend and coworker: “I imagine a situation in
some future life... my face contorted with greed and hatred... wilfully [sic] grabbing things
that are not mine. And in this darkness of the soul, you will walk up to me and remind me
of my nobility... I’ll hear you and turn away from the darkness” (85). Elizabeth
understands the “basic teaching methods of goodness” (99). But as Sello painfully
demonstrates, good and evil are not diametrical constructs.

Elizabeth’s instructor in the exploration of evil is Dan. The living Dan is a cattle
millionaire and black nationalist. Like the real Sello, Elizabeth only knows scant details of
the actual Dan’s existence. The Dan in Elizabeth’s mind is a “spectacular display of soul
power” (104). Elizabeth is immediately attracted to his masculinity. Dan knows all of
Elizabeth’s weaknesses and is aware that, “Anything toppled her over, a thunderbolt, a
command, any suggestion of powerful assertiveness” (115). Charming and seductive, Dan
is “a revolting example of erotic power and ethnic arrogance” (Brown 1981, 177). Dan
controls Elizabeth’s physical feelings. When Dan convinces her of his love for her and
their destiny as soul mates, Elizabeth makes the same mistake as she did with Sello. She
gives away her power and “leaves the shaping of her identity to someone else” (Eilersen
1995, 147). Dan uses sexuality to gain control of Elizabeth; then he manipulates her mind.

Vaginas and minds are used interchangeably throughout Head’s story. Dan attacks
Elizabeth’s head the way he attacks “the vaginas of the nice-time girls” (180). The
association between minds and vaginas may metaphorically expose the ways in which
control over a woman’s sexuality can influence control over her mind. Throughout Elizabeth’s journey her sexuality is assaulted. Nyasha’s battle with patriarchy involves her regaining control over her sexuality and her mind. Pecola is abused sexually and loses her mind. Elizabeth hands over her sexual power due to false concepts of love. Juletane makes a similar error and totally loses herself in the name of love. Dan uses both his sexual prowess and false love to control Elizabeth’s actions and feelings: “Now cry, now laugh, now feel jealous” (117). He also applies her feelings of inferiority as a Coloured to degrade her as a woman: “I like girls like this with that kind of hair. Your hair is not properly African” (127). Dan continually parades images of African women in front of Elizabeth and demonstrates his sexual stamina with them: “I go with all these women because you are inferior. You cannot make it up to my level because you are not made the same way” (147). The fact that the images walk into Elizabeth precludes that they are all a part of her. Through the use of several stereotypes of women, Dan not only discloses to Elizabeth the way in which black men have utilized their power to manipulate black women sexually, emotionally, and mentally, but also the way in which black women give their power away.

When Elizabeth surrenders her mind to Dan, he places ideas in her head that directly contradict what Sello has taught her of goodness. Dan’s objective is to destroy Sello. Sello represents goodness and God—Elizabeth’s attachment to him is the only threat to Dan’s (evil) power. Dan’s severing the “umbilical cord” that binds Elizabeth and Sello expresses his desire for total control of Elizabeth (140). Dan is the Satan that seeks to lure prophets away from God. He implants images of Sello as a child molester and a
homosexual in order to further push Elizabeth away. Dan tries to convince her that evil is more powerful than good, “patterns of goodness were too soft, too indefinable to counter the tumultuous roar of evil” (159). For Elizabeth, the spirits of Dan and Sello begin to merge into one being—“God and Satan at the same time” (161). Her internal world becomes confused with her external reality and good blends with evil. These chaotic cross-currents tormenting her psyche day and night completely shatter her nerves. Her enactment of internal rage on people in her external environment lands her in the mental hospital for a second time. Elizabeth has reached her destination. Spiritually deteriorated, Elizabeth hears the voice of Sello after over a year of his silence, “Elizabeth, love isn’t like that. Love is two people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the soul of the other like a ghoul!” (197). Sello/God—or rather the God that exists inside of Elizabeth—gives Elizabeth the “lever out of hell” (198). Her spiritual deliverance is also assisted by ordinary means.

Elizabeth’s internal drama is countered with her everyday life encounters with ordinary people. The objectives of her soul-journey to hell are to re-member or regain control of her identity, her sexuality, and her sense of rootedness. In order to re-member differing aspects of her identity (color, gender, class, etc.) she has to deconstruct dichotomous notions (good/evil, black/white, God/Satan). Ironically, Elizabeth finds a sense of grounding in a collective gardening project. The project offers periodic detours from her internal journey. Elizabeth is comforted by “people of totally foreign backgrounds made to work together and understand each other’s humanity” (158).

Birgette, a Danish woman, is identified “with impulsive, good actions” (Coundouriotis
1996, 29). Birgette is a stark contrast to Camilla, whose paternalistic and ethnocentric attitude to the natives personifies the kind of white people Elizabeth always tried to avoid (77). Elizabeth’s closest friendships are with Tom, a Peace Corps volunteer, and Kenosi, her gardening partner. Even in the height of her insanity, Tom comes around to engage in philosophical banter with her. Kenosi is equally a life-line for Elizabeth, “‘You must never leave the garden...I cannot work without you’” (142). Elizabeth clings to Kenosi for sanity and grounding similar to the way Nyasha cleaves to Tambu. Another one of Elizabeth’s most important rescuers is undoubtedly her son, Shorty. Shorty remains on the periphery of Elizabeth’s journey the entire time. Her son’s chatter about ordinary childhood things retrieves her from the internal chatter in her mind numerous times and ultimately snaps her back to reality. Through debunking conceptions of an “Almighty,” Elizabeth finds sacredness in the ordinary.

Elizabeth’s final destination on her journey is transcendentalism. Ill at ease with the reality she has been presented in society, she searches for an alternative reality through spiritual intuition. Elizabeth’s journey goes a bit further than those of the protagonists mentioned earlier, for a result of her madness is finding an alternative vision. Pecola seeks a new vision through attaining the eyes of mainstream society. Her ancestral voice beckons her back like the Medusa image forces Elizabeth to confront her identity as an African woman. Elizabeth eventually accepts her “mixed blood” and moreover relishes in the insight it gives her into the idiocy of racial supremacy. She realizes that power over another, whether it be black power or white power, is “the root cause of human suffering”.

Rebellion against power is a critical theme in *Nervous Conditions* as well. As previously mentioned, both Elizabeth and Nyasha struggle to regain power over their sexuality and their minds. Moreover, their journeys entail regaining a sense of rootedness to their homelands. Elizabeth wants to belong to the local African community as Nyasha does to her Shona culture. Yet neither of these protagonists are willing to sacrifice self in order to assimilate into their collective communities. The difference between the two protagonists is that Nyasha does not yet see an alternate vision for women to exist free and independent in a male-dominant society. Elizabeth establishes a spiritual connection with Africa. She says,

> Africa isn’t rising. It’s up already. It depends on where one places the stress. I place it on the soul. If it’s basically right there, then other things fall into place. That’s my struggle, and that’s black power, but it’s a power that belongs to all of mankind and in which all of mankind can share (135).

Elizabeth forges a connection with the land through belonging to a collective community. She further regains power “over her land” after a psychosexual power struggle with Dan (206). She recognizes that allowing men to control her sexuality is synonymous with allowing them to control her mind. Nyasha’s venue to regain control over her body ends up being self-destructive. Her challenge is to find a healthy vision.

Both *Juletane* and *A Question of Power* explore female protagonists who seek refuge from their feelings of isolation. Juletane is disheartened when she fails to find refuge in a man. Seeking a re-vision through re-membering the aspects of her life, she mentally returns to her “island”. Juletane listens only to her own voice until it becomes an obsession (Warner-Vieyra 1987, 78). Elizabeth, on the other hand, has the support of a community to counteract the voices that haunt her mind. Her “gesture of belonging” at
the end of the novel affirms her connection to the “brotherhood of man” and to Africa (206). But, self-love results from the price she pays through walking through madness.

Employing Alice Walker’s terms, Elizabeth observes a womanist vision. Not only has she discovered self-love and her power as a woman, but she has equated self-love with a love of humankind. Accepting her healing, “A peaceful, meditative privacy settled on her mind. Her painful, broken nerve-ends quietly knit together” (206). Eilersen expounds on Elizabeth’s recovery:

She has learnt to accept herself as she is, personally, socially, and politically. She has been forced to consider her own emotional life and has chosen service to others rather than self-indulgent forms of love. She has clarified her views on moral issues and acquired firm humanistic convictions. She has been able to surmount her feelings of isolation and alienation and place her hand on her land in a ‘gesture of belonging’ (Eilersen 1995, 148).

The moral of *A Question of Power* parallels Head’s own Buddhist philosophy. Similar to Somé’s account of his journey into shamanism, Head’s chronicle purports to offer spiritual insight. As a metaphor of madness, it suggests that those things that can destroy can also heal. In Head’s analysis, madness is cure. A collective look at all the works—Head’s work being climactic—suggests that there are essential elements necessary for healing a fragmented identity.
IV

CONCLUSION

This thesis analyzes the motif of madness in four works of literature by and about black women. Purporting madness as a social metaphor, this writer discovered a connection between fictionalized madness and the oppressive forces that fragment the real lives of black women. In this study, fictionalized madness is akin to an exaggerated portrayal of the impact that societal oppression has on the psyches of black women. As is traditional in the writings of black women, their re-vision of madness serve to relay a message to readers.

Though these analyzed accounts of madness are fictional, our historical experiences as people of African descent are rooted deeply in the texts. While the acts committed by the female protagonists are considered “mad” in a psychological sense, the authors of the texts emphasize that there is a social framework in place that is actively driving these women insane. Although in a somewhat melodramatic way, these explications of mad behavior announce the trauma that exists in the real lives of black women.

Contrary to popular notions, the oppressive factors that are implicated in driving black women mad are not limited to racism. Colonialism and racism are implicated in the texts as having a deleterious effect on the psyches of black people. Yet, social and gender
hierarchies that exist in black communities are equally culpable. This writer would go even further to suggest that even if racism were nonexistent, the theme of madness in Africana women’s literature would still have a context. Male domination in Africana spaces exists independent of racism and negatively affects the autonomy and self-definition of black women. This argument, in part, supports the reason that madness is such a common theme in white women’s literature. Independent of racist notions, men still oppress women socially and sexually.

Madness is a recurrent motif in literature, in general, but due to the unique experiences of black women, the factors influencing madness are conceptualized differently. The spaces that black women occupy in the world makes it such that madness in Africana women’s literature differs from madness in white women’s and black men’s literature. At the same time, our territorial location—centered in racist and sexist domination—binds black women together. In this sense, the same systems that fragment us can be utilized as tools for our collective healing.

The imaginative process has promoted madness as a theme throughout Africa and the Diaspora. This literary theme links women of diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Evidencing itself similarly throughout Africana women’s literature, the metaphor of madness suggests there are universal truths in the lives of black women. Social and cultural differences then are only surface distinctions. Black women’s writings have created frameworks for reconceptualizing our identities. Announcing the historical mandates for black women to sacrifice individual identity for the collective, the motif of madness expels that this forfeiture fragments our identities. Re-
membering, in this thesis, connotes the synthesis of individual and collective identity; thereby creating a multiple identity. Multiple identities are commonly construed as psychological disorders. Yet, in terms of black women, the multiplicity of our experiences mandate that our identities reflect our diversity. The challenge, then, as implied in the explored literature, is re-ordering our “dis-orders” into a workable healthy framework. In order to accomplish this feat, we must reconceptualize ourselves in terms of our experiences instead of conforming to essentialist notions of race and gender. Remembering our identities by virtue of our experiences allows us to integrate the multiple aspects of ourselves into a wholistic existence where we are not conceptualized in unitary terms (black, rich, lesbian, poor, etc.), but in accordance with our complexity.

**Directives for further study**

The way in which the suppression of black female sexuality impacts the protagonists looked at in this thesis suggests that further exploration could be given to the relationship between madness and sexuality. The impact of sexual abuse as well as the socially constructed dichotomies that define black women’s sexuality both merit further research. Further, the homosexual subject in the literature of madness has been virtually unexplored. In recent years, there have been several novels in which the homosexual protagonist is driven mad. The madness of these protagonists often leads to suicide.

The relationship between madness and biracialism also deserves further attention. This subject is most common in American and Caribbean literature. Caught between two opposing worlds, the protagonists in these texts seem almost predestined to go mad. Attaining self-definition may be even more difficult when society confines your choices to
a census box. Exploration of the motif of madness seems to suggest that the elements for a sane society reside in acceptance of everyone's humanness.
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