5.1 INTRODUCTION

The colour of one’s skin has, for too many years now, determined one’s place in society, the treatment that is meted out by other members of the society one belongs to, matrimonial alliances, class - and in unfortunately far too many cases, one’s own perception of oneself. What does it mean to be marginalised not only for reasons of your colour but also for being a woman? Neither of these is under an individual’s control but people are mocked, pushed out of the mainstream and looked down upon for both reasons. Don’t you think this is a ridiculous state of affairs? But this has been going on for centuries all over the world!

In a world that places a premium on ‘white’, it is a given that people with less than white skins will be penalised - for no fault of their own - in innumerable ways, some subtle, some blatant and overt.

On the one hand, certain communities or even the natives of entire nations are humiliated, colonised or pushed into slavery for reasons of their colour. On the other hand, female foetuses are aborted, girls are killed at birth and there are women who are discriminated against within their own communities or families due to stereotyped, patriarchal notions of what constitutes ‘good’ behaviour and conduct becoming of a girl child.
In this Unit, we will read some life narratives by women of colour from different countries of the world and see whether their experiences are similar in certain ways. Does being a woman of colour mean being discriminated on both counts? What does this entail in terms of physical and psychological trauma? Let us try to respond to these questions through our discussion of specific works.

5.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Define the term ‘women of colour’;
- Discuss the situation of marginalized women through the study of literary works by women of colour;
- Distinguish between autobiographies from majority communities and those of minority communities;
- Discuss the societal, collective aspects inherent in autobiographies written by women of colour; and
- Analyse the representation of the self in such autobiographies as a social act.

5.3 DEFINING ‘WOMEN OF COLOUR’

The problem with a lot of discussion about earlier feminist theories was that many feminists tended to ignore women’s differences. Many of them spoke about women as if they were a homogenous group: all white, educated, middle class... While trying to put women on the same platform with men, they also put women on the same platform with other women, which as we all know, is just not in tune with reality. Emphasising women’s sameness in their attempt to assert their equality with men made feminists guilty of what they accused patriarchy of doing for, to ignore differences is also a form of oppression just as ignoring similarities is. Also, for white women to think that women with different coloured skin are just the same underneath is to insult, trivialise and objectify those women. (Similar issues have been discussed in previous courses: for instance, see discussions in MWG 002, Block 2, Unit 3; MWG 007, Block 3, Unit 1.)

This is why many women of colour refused to accept feminist thought, viewing it as the white woman’s way of thinking. Audre Lorde, Bell Hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins were among the very first to speak of women’s differences and articulate the complexity of what it meant to be ‘coloured’ or part of other minority groups in America. However, part of the debate also dealt with the apprehension that to define themselves as ‘women of colour’ would mean that the white woman is the ‘self’, the point of reference
and the woman of colour is the ‘other’. So would the term be liberating or oppressive? This led to feminists like Maria Lugones and Audre Lorde asserting that even if the term ‘women of colour’ was in opposition to the implicit ‘women of non-colour’, these women needed to see themselves as themselves and stop trying to explain their differences from white women. On the contrary, they should demand explanations from white women about how they were different from non-white women.

The writing of these women is a description of their experiences in a world that discriminates against non-white skin; an expression of their feelings and ideas and the determination to stand up and speak out both as ‘coloured’ people and as women. Apart from its intrinsic worth as literature, writing, whether fiction, poetry, essay or drama, provides a window into society and, as such, is a useful tool in the analysis of sociological, political and anthropological facets of culture and civilization. And when the writing is done by a (doubly!) marginalized section of the world’s populace, its significance increases a hundredfold.

In the next few sections of this Unit, let us look at some specific life narratives by women of colour in which these aspects are brought to the forefront.

5.4 BELL HOOKS: BONE BLACK

The Black Belt region in the Deep South of the United States was initially called so because of the prairies and dark soil to be found in and around central Alabama and northeast Mississippi. However, it has also, for long, come to denote the agricultural region in the South that was characterised by plantations and with a high population of African-Americans whose ancestors were brought to America as slaves to work on the plantations. Having lived for several generations there, many of them stayed on after the American Civil War and the Emancipation (when the slaves were declared free) although they continued to face discrimination even after that for many years. A large number of them were rural workers, tenant farmers or sharecroppers but with the decline of family farms, acute poverty was rampant. This often resulted in low literacy levels, inadequate hygiene and healthcare, pathetic living conditions, high unemployment figures, a high crime rate and rural migration.

The earliest black short-fiction writing was probably from the South, mainly about the slave experience and its aftermath. As you have already learnt from your reading of the unit on “Slave Narratives” (Unit 1 of this block), slave narratives were integral to the literature produced by African-Americans. Their writing can be seen as refuting the dominant literary culture and also as existing both inside and outside American culture. This was because although they lived in the USA for several generations, they
were not accepted as part of the mainstream and were kept on the fringes of white society. They thus were both within as well as out of American society. Black writing brought in new styles of story telling and a unique voice which has enriched American literature.

**Activity:**

_Before we begin to discuss the book, spare a few minutes to think of the way the author’s name has been written without any capital letters as is the custom. What do you think it says about her? Try to find out more about why the author chooses to spell her name in this manner._

_Bone Black_ reiterates the cathartic power of the written word, of the imagination and of memory - to heal and give rebirth. By writing about the agonisingly painful memories of her past, bell hooks does not reject her past but sees it as a means to come to terms with what has happened, with her own self and uses the experience to put together the broken pieces of her self. As she says:

_In the end I did not feel as if I had killed the Gloria of my childhood. Instead I had rescued her. She was no longer the enemy within, the little girl who had to be annihilated for the woman to come into being. In writing about her, I reclaimed that part of myself I had long ago rejected, left uncared for, just as she had often felt alone and uncared for as a child. Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, ‘the bits and pieces of my heart’ that the narrative made whole again. (hooks, 1989, p.159)"
Women of Colour

_Bone Black_, while being a remarkably forceful book that records the author’s experiences of growing up as a black girl in the South, is also an account of her evolution as a writer. The book is a touching memoir that merges feeling and ideas and traces the development of a strong-spirited child as she gradually becomes aware of the place of women in a man’s world and how vulnerable children can be. The society in which she grows up is one in which all the joys of marriage seem to be reserved for the menfolk while all the drudgery and labour is for the women who are expected to put up with their lot in stoic silence. There is no question of rebelling against this state of affairs as the women are raised into believing that this is what constitutes life. The world of men and women is so different that daughters are alienated from their fathers as though they live in separate domains even though they live in the same house.

The situation in school is no better for the little black children are herded together like animals in an ostensibly white and black ‘integrated’ school where they are expected to turn their backs on their own history and traditions and injustices meted out to them through the years and fall in with the ways of the white folk.

A touching part of the book deals with the experiences of the author within her own family. She is the active, questioning one - the rebellious daughter who refuses to accept the passive role that society has decreed for women. As a result, she is scolded and punished, viewed as a heartless person with no attachment and love for her kinfolk. This is so blatantly untrue and unjust that as one reads the book, one is filled with compassion for the little girl who dares to swim against the tide and forge her own identity. However, intertwined inextricably in the rebelliousness of the child is the insatiable and perhaps universal wish to belong, to be loved, to be accepted, to be understood.

The book comes across as a series of recollections, of sketches but they are not only of actual incidents but also of those imagined and dreamt - something that hooks is aware of. Autobiography therefore emerges as just one of the versions of truth - it is a retelling of events as the author remembers them - or wants to remember them - rather than an unalloyed representation of reality as it occurred. And, even more important than the incidents themselves are the imprint they left on the mind of the author as is evident from the final words in her foreword: “…this is an autobiography of perceptions and ideas. The events described are always less significant than the impressions they leave on the mind and heart.” (hooks, 1989, p. xv)

But memories are evoked not merely for a sense of nostalgia, a longing to return things to what they were or an airing of hurts and grievances but as a way towards a knowledge of and learning from the past so that it can
inform and enlighten the present. This is an extremely positive, constructive and creative way of harnessing recall of even painful memories to fashion a cogent and dynamic present.

**Activity:**

*Read the novel and jot down the author’s experiences of discrimination.*

*To what extent can these experiences be related to her gender or to her colour?*

Being an inhabitant of an unfair world, the author needs to find escape - as though she needs an open window to breathe in fresh air - which she finds in books and in blessed solitude to think her own thoughts and nurture her burgeoning creativity. Having been taught quilting by one of the older women who tells her that it would make her patient, hooks does indeed use her patience and courage along with an intuitive analysis about life and people to tap into reserves of strength. This enables her to recognise the hurt within her and, even more importantly, to rise beyond that pain into a creativity that embraces her history.
In the next section, let us turn to the work of another well-known contemporary African-American author, Toni Morrison. As you begin to read these works in the original, look for similarities and differences in the works.

5.5 TONI MORRISON: SULA

The novel Sula can be said to be a ‘frame narrative’. This is a literary technique in which the writer sets out a story and then leads on to one or more other stories within it. Opening with a prologue in the first part that is set in 1965, the story then takes the reader back to the year 1919 after which it moves linearly and chronologically forward to end at the year where it all started – in 1965. The importance of time is further emphasised by each chapter or section titled by a year. The story traces the life of its main characters through various stages and situations.

Beginning with an introduction to the place that serves as the setting to the events of the novel - The Bottom - and the interesting character of Shadrack with his weird? National Suicide Day , the book ushers in Sula and her friendship with Nel that may be said to be the backbone of the plot. With Nel’s marriage, Sula leaves The Bottom for ten years and this signals the end of the first part of the book.

The second part begins with Sula’s return and thenceforward relates major events in the lives of the two main characters, like Sula sleeping with Nel’s husband, the falling out between the two friends, Sula’s ostracism by her community and eventually her death. By the end of her life, Sula has come to believe that her life has had no meaning, served no purpose. But we later see Nel acknowledge that, even more than marriage or motherhood, it was Sula’s presence and their friendship that had been the most significant - in fact the best part - of her life.

While the first part of the book is set at the time of World War I and the years following it, the second has the time frame of the years leading up to the Second World War. The gradual end of The Bottom is an echo of the changes occurring in the lives of African-Americans during that time, something that is reflected in the time shift and dislocation that begins the novel. Morrison says in ‘Unspeakable Things Spoken’: “In between ‘place’ and ‘neighborhood,’ I [now] have to squeeze the specificity and the difference; the nostalgia, the history, and the nostalgia for the history; the violence done to it and the consequences of that violence’” (Morison, 1989, p.152).
Activity:

Read the novel and put the various events in a time frame. See how each impacts the other and how the events mould and influence the main characters.

It was a time of great change in America, particularly for Black America. The beginning of the century saw thousands of African Americans filling up jobs in rail and shipyards, domestic and hotel services, steel mills and meat packaging houses. They were part of what came to be known as the Great Migration when they left the South to fan out in the North for opportunities that the War had opened up while natural disasters contributed to their loss of jobs in the farms and plantations, forcing them to migrate. This naturally led to a sea change in the attitudes of both the black people and white Americans. The former slaves were now economically more strong, outspoken, aggressive and critical of racism. Predictably perhaps, the reaction against this ‘new Negro’ was often violent.

The novel traces the life and loves and struggles of two black women who share a deep and rich friendship but follow divergent paths in life. While it is a commentary on life and relationships, it also offers meaningful
insights about what it meant to be a black woman growing up and living in the America of that time. Even as it talks about the intense and vibrant relationship between the two protagonists, it also talks about a rural black community battling economic woes in a small town in Ohio. In fact, the novel begins with the end and violent dislocation of this community: “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood” (Morison, 1989, p.3).

One of the major events in the novel is the death of a little boy called Chicken Little who, during the course of a playful session with Sula and Nel, is accidentally drowned. The girls decide not to tell anyone about this incident but while Sula is distraught over the death of the little boy and blames herself all her life, believing that she was evil, Nel encourages her in this belief. She is smug in her sense of innocence that she did not cause the death and was merely a witness to it but she also secretly rejoices. At the end, Nel accepts that she is in fact, more evil than Sula ever was. Sula, with all her wild, unconventional ways was much more honest than Nel who lived out her life in a prim and proper way, clothed in hypocrisy and deluding herself and the world about her own goodness.

The strands of good and evil, right and wrong, truth and lies, acceptance and denial, ignorance and awareness run throughout the novel as the events play out and the characters develop and grow with time and experience. The contradictory nature of identity and self-awareness foregrounded against violence, betrayal and death is brought out starkly in the story. For instance, the very name of the place - The Bottom - came about because a black slave was tricked into settling on hill land, being assured that it was the bottom of heaven!

One of the themes in the novel is relationships/friendships and their presence or absence thereof. The two girls influence the lives and perspectives of each other both when they are together in love and friendship and later when there is bitterness and betrayal between them. Even in their absences, they still influence each other - as when Nel visits Sula’s grave and finally accepts the hypocrisy of her own conduct.

The influence of family is another significant element in the story. The lives and conduct of Sula’s and Nel’s mothers and grandmothers seem to chart a course for the girls - either to follow or to rebel against - and this shapes their lives and personalities substantially. The need for love and commitment - even if unperceived at the conscious level - informs the conduct and perspective of the characters in the novel. Even though Sula always professes herself to be above this need to be loved, she realises the hollowness of
this claim when she falls in love with Ajax but scares him away with her intensity.

Key characters in the novel leave their home for various reasons but come back changed either physically or emotionally. While the characters returning to their home is not exactly a reflection of what happened during the Great Migration, it is, as critics have opined, a good indication of the collective sense of belonging to a place that the African Americans shared. In the words of Barbara Christian, “Like the ancestral African tradition, place is as important as the human actors, for the land is a participant in the maintenance of the folk tradition. It is one of the necessary constants through which the folk dramatize the meaning of life, as it is passed on from one generation to the next. Setting then, is organic to the characters’ view of themselves” (Christian, 1985, p.48).

The already dislocated African people, facing another dislocation are full of the desire to be liberated in all ways, a desire that appears to be symbolised by the character of Sula. Morrison says of her created character that she “is a new world black and new world woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things. Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, policing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female” (Morison, 1989, p.153).

In the end, *Sula* leaves us with the idea that good and bad are both mixed up in each other. While Sula lives out her life in daring and selfishness, she dies an early and lonely death. But finally, Nel realises how much she has missed her friend over the years. Nel is the one in whom Sula still survives and she is the character who ultimately draws all the loose strands together to give a conclusion to the novel.

“Nel emerges as the traditional “old world” hero, because Sula, as Morrison conceives and constructs her, cannot. Because the notion of progress is antithetical to Sula’s make-up, her character never builds any momentum...Though exciting, independent, and unpredictable, her character is fundamentally, finally static; Sula’s uncontainability is so well-contained that no one and nothing can get to her. A non-traditional or, to use Morrison’s word, “improvisational” character cannot sustain a traditional role...Only by eluding the formal containment of narrative realism, and shrugging off the responsibilities of novelistic form, does Sula become the “new world woman” of Morrison’s vision (Galehouse, 1999, p.339).
As one reads this novel, one becomes aware of how there are so many elements that go to make up one’s identity. It is not just the family, it is also the community, the environment that shape us even if they may appear at times, amorphous and barely present. How then is one to discover what one is? It is through memories that light up the past, of fitting together various pieces of history into a composite mosaic so that a coherent strand of narrative informs our sense of who and what we are.

5.6 SALLY MORGAN: MY PLACE

The Aborigines are the original inhabitants of Australia and the living representatives of the ancestors of mankind. Discrimination and humiliation are experiences familiar to Aboriginal women in double measure - as women and as aborigines. Some of these women have now started telling their stories, often intertwined with the stories of their family and community.

The Aborigines believe that their ancestors sang their land into existence during their travel in the Dreamtime. Those on walkabout, singing the songlines, maintain its continued existence even after 40,000 years. Each boulder and crevice of the unrelentingly immense outback has a song associated with it and, incredible as it may sound, the entire continent can be sung like a musical composition.
These songs acted as travel and navigating aids because the traveller knew the location of each geographical landmark exactly by its place along the song-line. Thus, any deviation from the precision of the song would most certainly bring death to the traveller.

Similarly, and symbolically enough, the narratives of the Aboriginal people emphasize the role of memory as they establish important markers in the authors’ long and difficult journey to self-realization, self-worth and identity. Their stories are the search for their roots and their Aboriginality, in which the family plays its own pivotal part as it adds its cache of recollections, long suppressed and buried beyond its own consciousness in an attempt to survive the pain of those memories.

These narratives also trace the Aborigines’ fight for survival and their awakening political consciousness leading to the 1967 referendum through which, in a supreme irony of circumstances and colonial angst, they became citizens for the first time in their own land! Sally Morgan, in *My Place* also speaks of her efforts to rise above the disadvantage of her social position and be empowered through education.

The stories recount the ways in which these people struggled to come to terms with their changed circumstances, some managing to adapt while others were consigned to the rubbish heap as they tragically failed to bridge the gap between the two cultures. The stories dwell on the reasons for the increasing role of women in Aboriginal society and are evidence too of the growing number of indigenous women taking to autobiography and the documentation of their family’s and community’s experiences and history.

**Check Your Progress:**

What are the various ways in which the title *My Place* can be interpreted? What do you think the word ‘place’ could stand for?
Sally Morgan’s *My Place* is not pure autobiography, history or novel but rather an eclectic mix of all these - it draws on various available literary devices and genres and also relies extensively on library research, which further validates the historical, sociological and anthropological content of the book. *My Place* is not just Sally Morgan’s story. Since it includes the life stories of her mother, grandmother and great-uncle, it is also biographical. She says, “There’s almost nothing written from a personal point of view about the Aboriginal people...No one knows what it was like for us...A lot of our history has been lost...” (Morgan, 1987, p. 163-4). It is clear then that the book goes beyond personal histories and is visualized in terms of a social document. She states that her reason for writing the book is to let people know what has been done to the Aboriginal people, how history has been distorted and misrepresented. “All the history’s about the white man,” says Sally’s mother (Morgan, 1987, p.161). This, then, is meant to be the Aboriginal version of history.

It is important to remember that at one time or the other, Sally, her mother and grandmother were very ambivalent towards owning up to their Aboriginality. In fact, for a long time, Sally thought they were Indian. This needs to be understood in the context of the assimilation policy in which Aboriginal children were taken away from their families and raised separately, forbidden to speak their language or follow any of their customs. They were brought up as Christians, trained to serve as domestic help. These children constituted the ‘stolen generation’. Daisy and Gladys are therefore justifiably fearful and ashamed of their Aboriginality which they conceal while making every attempt to repress their memories of their past. But the book is a testimony to the attitude of the younger generation towards their Aboriginality. They wear this identity proudly.

Spiritualism and a mystical sense of the universe is a strong element in *My Place*. Morgan recalls that although religion was never imposed on her, she and her siblings were in the habit of reciting The Lord’s Prayer which she humorously alludes to as “mum’s secret weapon” (Morgan, 1987, p.62). Mum Gladys took her children “to every religious meeting imaginable” without any sense of prejudice or bias. While Morgan initially conceptualised the Almighty as a dreaded Being, she suddenly has a strange experience at a youth meeting in church: “I was having an audience with Him, whom I dreaded. The mental images that I had built up of Him so far in my life began to dissolve, and in their place came a new image. A person, overwhelming love, acceptance and humour.....In an instant I became what others refer to as a believer” (Morgan, 1987, p. 102).
In another instance, Morgan describes how Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality blend beautifully together when the whole family prays together during the final days of Nan, her grandmother. There is the description of an experience that follows the prayers and the family feels that her end is near as they hear “…a weird sound, like a bird call, only it wasn’t. It was something spiritual, something out of this world. I think she’ll be going soon” (Morgan, 1987, p. 356). In an interview, Morgan has also spoken about the possibility of Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality co-existing in complete harmony: “…there is a conflict when people make it a conflict...spirituality doesn’t function on one level, it functions in layers, and so you might have a form of spirituality in the Christian sense but then you can have another from outside of that which is just as valuable, and that tends to be what happens in Aboriginal people” (Bird & Haskell, 1992, p.11).

Humour can be seen as a survival mechanism, as a way of getting around authority or subverting the system. Humour comes across as a very strong Aboriginal trait in their attempt to deal with their circumstances, no matter how difficult.

Family and mateship - especially between women - is a strong presence in My Place. Most Aboriginal families have at least one strong female character - it could be a grandmother or an aunt - who holds everything together and to whom everyone goes to when faced with problems or need help. Even the other women who might appear deceptively passive are quite strong - stronger than the men in their lives and with a more determined sense of survival and the ability to cope than their male counterparts. This difference can be seen quite clearly in the way in which Morgan’s parents respond to and engage with life and difficulties.

The family is the site of story telling - the way in which memories are conserved and history is transmitted. This is an important part of the process of the forging of one’s Aboriginal identity and becomes specially important in oral cultures where there are no written records. My Place weaves together the strands of many stories - the mother, the grandmother, the great-uncle, Sally herself - all have their own narratives that together make up a composite picture of their world - and their own ‘place’ in this world.

Sally’s family history, as that of countless other Aborigines, is underlined by the laws and governmental policies that affected the lives and personalities of so many of her relatives. In writing about all this, by bringing it all out into the open, the book evolves into a powerful political statement.
Check Your Progress:

Look at the instances of family conflict and conversely, family support that dot the narrative. See how they reinforce the familial bonds and enable each member to face the outside world. Jot down your thoughts.

The writing of Australian Aboriginal women reveals their concern about the onslaught of white civilization on the Aboriginal way of life and the dispossession of Aboriginal land and holy sites. These writers have attempted to create an awareness of the injustices perpetrated on Aborigines in the past (and which have not completely ended yet) and their own desire to be part of the majority culture and governance of Australia.

The stories dwell on the facts of colonization that are only just coming out: the refutation of the fiction of Australia as having been 'terra nullius' (empty land) on which the white man settled through 'peaceful' means; the impact of immigration on its society and policies; a definition of Aboriginal rights and an attempt to shift their location from the periphery to the centre.

In the above sections, we have looked at life narratives in the form of novels. Let us now turn to other genres such as poetry and short stories, which have also been employed by women authors to explore issues of race and marginalization.
Alice Walker is an eminent American writer, poet, critic and activist. Her book *The Color Purple* (which won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize) is one of her most read, quoted and prescribed books for study in universities across the world. She is actively involved and passionately articulate about issues that involve both gender and race and all her work - be it fiction, poetry or essays - deal with these concerns and she is known as one of the most effective and intense voices of black American women writers.

*Once* was Alice Walker’s very first published volume of poetry and was immediately recognised as the work of a mature, sensitive and powerful poet.

The poems in this collection dwell on varied themes, arising from Walker’s own experiences during her travels to Africa and with the civil rights movement. While the first few are vignettes of Africa as seen from the perspective of a Black American woman, others focus on the Civil Rights Movement in America, the South and on love. Some of the poems are witty and flowing while some are meditations on love and even suicide. After her visit to Africa in 1964, Walker returned to her college and then was ridden with conflicting feelings on having to cope with an unwanted pregnancy. She has written honestly about her struggle and the mental and physical torment she underwent on finally deciding to undergo an abortion. Certain poems in *Once* are an expression of that sorrow which prompted her to consider suicide. But, her turning away from this dark abyss and the positive decision she made to overcome despondency and live life to the fullest, are also given expression.

**Check Your Progress:**

Look at the poems that are observations made during the poet’s travels to Africa. What are the qualities that make them appealing to the reader?
The little ‘snapshots’ that Walker offers of her African journey, encompass within their ambit, landscape, people, animals, attitudes and reactions. There is also the understated concern over the loss of animal habitats and their killing coupled with an insane commercial greed and superstition as when she talks about “A tall warrior/and at his feet/only/Elephant bones” (Walker, 1968, p.4). And again, “Elephant legs/In a store/To hold/Umbrellas” (Walker, 1968, p. 4). Or, “The fresh corpse/of a white rhinoceros/His horn gone/Some Indian woman/Will be approached/Tonight” (Walker, 1968, p. 9).

But she is equally concerned with the plight of humans in an under-developed, malnourished world: “A tall man/Without clothes/Beautiful/Like a statue/Up close/His eyes/Are running/Sores” (Walker, 1968, p 20). He is the embodiment of that well-worn Western cliché of the “The Noble Savage” but who, standing barefoot but erect, displays on close consideration, “His pierced ears/Infected” (Walker, 1968, p 20).

The poet sees a woman “Bare breasts loose/In the sun/The skin cracked/The nipples covered/With flies/But she is an old/Woman/What?-twenty?” (Walker, 1968, p 21). Even where there appears to be some spark of hope, it turns out to a deceptive light: “How bright the little/girl’s/Eyes were!/a first sign of/Glaucoma” (Walker, 1968, p. 22).

There is no poetical posturing or placard waving here. The starkly pictured image is all and it is this which makes the poetry so intense and poignant.

Let us look more closely at the title poem “Once” quoted below:

Green lawn
a picket fence
flowers-
My friend smiles
she had heard
that Southern
jails
were drab...
Running down
Atlanta streets
With my sign
I see heads
turn
Eyes
goggle
“a nice girl
like her!”
A Negro cook assures her mistress:
But I had seen the fingers near her eyes wet with tears.
(Walker, 1968, p. 23-36)

The title poem “Once” has been written in free verse and has fourteen numbered sections of irregular lines, ranging from fifteen to forty one. The first begins with the poet in jail for her activism and each of the sections then goes on to present a picture or account relating to her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. It is like an Impressionist painting, each section coming together with the others like a mosaic to form the complete image. The other poems with this theme are terse but pithy descriptions of people, events and attitudes, some wryly humorous as when an “an old mistress” of her mother gifts the girl a pair of bloomers that is “ten sizes too big”. Her father comments that this is so typical of the white masters - “neither the colour/she knows/nor the/number” (Walker, 1968, p. 40). Some matter-of-factly stated poems tug at the heart strings with their undercurrent of pathos as when the narrator prays all night for sight to be restored, not knowing if it ever will for “…last sight/had been/a broken bottle/held negligently/in a racist/fist…” (Walker, 1968, p. 39).

Check Your Progress:
Look at the various aspects of love that the poet brings out and jot them down.
The poems that deal with love ("Johann", "Ballad of the Brown Girl", "Watching you frown...") speak freely of what it means for two people of different races to come together and what it entails both in society, given its history of racism and for the two individuals themselves (Walker, 1968, p. 63; p. 72; p. 56). They also speak of love, longing and separation. But it is not as though youth has a monopoly on love and companionship. There is a touching tenderness in the poem "Medicine" (Walker, 1968, p. 70) where the poet speaks of the beautiful bond between grandparents. Some of the untitled pieces on love are like short paragraphs - almost like diary entries that capture a fleeting moment, an ephemeral feeling, a wisp of emotion. One can see the influence of the Japanese haiku form of poetry and the philosophy of Albert Camus (she begins the volume with a quotation from Camus) in Alice Walker’s musings.

5.8 BESSIE HEAD: THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES

One of Africa’s most well known writers - one can even say the best known - Bessie Head’s stories in this volume are all set in Botswana. Although she was born in South Africa, she went to Botswana as a refugee where she lived for many years before she finally received the citizenship of that country. Her life was not a very happy or peaceful one. She was born the illegitimate daughter to a black mother and white father and was raised by foster parents. Later, she had a broken marriage and underwent the ordeal of surviving as a refugee in another land. She died at the relatively young age of 49. However, Head used all her experiences and struggles as malleable clay and moulded stories from them, firmly fixing her position in the literary firmament as a greatly respected writer. She put her observation and first hand experiences as a black woman to creative use and makes strong statements in her stories about the treatment meted out to them. Women - both in pre-independence Botswana as well as later - were mistreated in various ways. It is also interesting to see how their suffering changed after independence and how the new ways and customs still wounded them. The stories in this collection have emerged from the oral story-telling tradition of Southern Africa, strongly evoking the language and imagery of that genre.

Head’s stories are not only drawn from her own life but also weave in tales she had heard from various people over the years. All the stories in The Collector of Treasures - her fourth book, published in 1977 - speak in varied ways of a precariously balanced society in which old customs vied to survive in the face of new ideas and a different way of life that followed the country’s independence. It is obvious that, in this struggle between the old and new, people face a lot of difficulties as they strive to come to terms with the passing of an era and the beginning of another. There is no clear
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endorsement of either of the two ways of life, no clear-cut stand of one versus the other although it is quite obvious - and inevitable - that the new customs pose problems and cause discord.

The stories draw out the conflicts in the newly independent society - particularly as they affect women. The skirmishes are various - between men and women; different religious beliefs; old customs and new - the age-old tussle between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ - problems arising out of the spread of education, insistence on certain marriage rites and the expectations thereof; the emerging capitalist market and the communal gift economy. Stories like ‘Witchcraft’, ‘Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest’, ‘Snapshots of a Wedding’ and ‘The Wind and a Boy’ are portrayals of the ways in which the capitalist western values are slowly making an onslaught on the traditional, community-based lifestyles and how they impact the society - specially the women, often marking the death of an entire way of living and sharing.

**Activity:**

*Read the title story in the collection The Collector of Treasures and see how the title has been used ironically by the writer. Explain the use of the title in your own words.*

Head uses uncomplicated and direct language and the stories - deceptively simple - actually give the reader something to think about. The stories offer a vivid and tangible portrayal of a changing society with characters who seem real. The reader is drawn into the world that Head conjures up and can even identify with the motives, choices and actions of the characters. The author does not offer clear cut opinions or judgements regarding the character she portrays in her stories. Rather, the reader is taken into their lives and out of it somewhat abruptly and expected to make their own
decisions regarding the encounters. It is as though we have gone into someone’s home and met certain people. We come away feeling that human nature is inscrutable and unpredictable.

There is also the sense of reading real stories about real people and their attitudes and experiences. For instance, ‘Looking for the Rain God’ is a tragic tale that has the feel of mythology and has its roots in a community’s beliefs and experiences. Similarly, the so-called ‘saint’ Mma-Moompati (‘The Village Saint’) who is finally exposed as a bad mother-in-law ill-treating her son’s wife and Galethbege, the deeply religious Christian woman who marries a man from the Setswana creed, (‘Heaven is Not Closed’) are all vividly pencilled characters who appear to have been created from real village people. Dikeledi Mokopi, the protagonist of the title story ‘The Collector of Treasures’ is a long-suffering woman who finally kills her husband and is punished for it but she embodies compassion, a resigned acceptance of reality and the complex nature of people in her attitude that always picks out treasures (moments of happiness) in the midst of all her trials and tribulations. The story is also a strong indictment of the cruelty and oppression that society allows against women and children from the men, who are supposed to care for, love and protect them.

Head’s active involvement with social and political issues is used creatively in the form of her fiction and the manner in which she puts across her views about this genre. She attached great importance to reading as an inspiration and one can see that her varied reading has not only helped her to crystallise her ideas of what role she should play as a writer but has also influenced the layering of structure and meaning that one encounters in these stories.

**Check Your Progress:**

Read the stories and categorise them into the nature of the conflict that each one depicts. How many of them deal only with one issue? How many talk about multiple societal dilemmas?
5.9 LET US SUM UP

In all the works that we have discussed in this Unit, we can see some common strands that run through the writing by such different people from various corners of the globe. It is not only the gender and colour that we can see as a common element, it is also the writers’ determination to rise above these constraints and establish an identity of their own that comes across so strongly in their work.

The family unit is an important constituent for that is where relationships are forged and sometimes break up, personalities are formed and one’s perceptions of society and one’s own self are crystallised.

Faith is another concern that comes into focus when we read these works. Faith – or a lack of it – informs many of our attitudes and endeavours and is frequently the cause of conflict even in ‘civilised’ societies. And, it is impossible to miss the wit and the humour that runs through so much of these writers’ work. Humour can even be viewed as a strategy of survival as it helps to dissipate some of the stress and bleakness of a given situation. It also helps to bond people together and give them the energy to work collectively towards a goal or to fight against discrimination.

The writers selected for study in this Unit take up notions of gender, patriarchy, race, society and change. Sometimes these strands are so inextricably linked that it is impossible to tease them apart and say that a particular writer is taking up specifically one or two of these issues. Sometimes one is left wondering at the similarity of experiences and feeling, the exploitation and humiliation and – of course – the triumph, whether psychological or otherwise, experienced by women all over the world, regardless of race or colour.

5.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) “For bell hooks, fighting oppression doesn’t require anger or conflict—just opening our hearts and speaking the truth fearlessly”. Do you agree? Illustrate.

2) How does bell hooks articulate the concerns of a black female child growing up in America? Is her experience similar to other like-minded girls growing up anywhere else in the world? Discuss.

3) Would you say that shifts and changes in an oppressive society sometimes result in too extreme a swing of the pendulum? Elaborate with reference to Toni Morrison’s *Sula*.

4) Do you think the experiences of Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women are similar as brought out in *My Place*? Discuss.
5) a) How does the brevity of Alice Walker’s poetry affect the reader? Does it increase or take away from the intensity of her feelings and strength of her ideas? Elaborate.

b) How does Alice Walker delineate love in her poems? Illustrate with suitable examples.

6) How does Bessie Head bring out the social imbalances between men and women in the story The Collector of Treasures?

7) Select any one story from the volume The Collector of Treasures and analyse it from a feminist viewpoint.

5.11 REFERENCES


5.12 SUGGESTED READINGS


