Female Victimization: A Cross Cultural Perspective in Toni Morrison and Anita Desai’s Writings

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Abstract:
The role of woman is significant in the human world from the ancient era not only as a human being but also as an inseparable entity to take the mankind ahead with the time. The woman represents the symbol of nurture. She contributes to make progress in the family, society as well as country through her active participation same as the male counterpart. But woman is suppressed into lower status compared to the male power and position in the society intentionally, even after her great contribution in reality. The evidence can be found in the portrayal of woman in the literatures from the different cultures. It’s quite relevant how does the patriarchal society suppress the woman? How is the patriarchal ideology dominating the grand-narrative as well as molding the notion of woman’s psychology? In what ways, the voice of woman is controlled and represented with manipulative hegemony in unconstructive words? How is the woman’s battle against the psychic violence to construct herself? Anita Desai’s and Toni Morrison’s novels echo those thought provoking questions with ravenous eyes to discover the real female subject. Both writers exhibit the woman’s situation, emotion and realization which are scrutinized to observe the universality of female psyche. Thus, the tragic entrapment becomes the only sign structure signifying the existence.

KEYWORDS: woman, human-world, progress, patriarchal society, battle, psychic-violence
Many Indian women novelists have explored female inequality in order to create an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. It represents the sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. “The Black Woman” according to Joyce Ladner, “suffers from twin burden of being Black and female”. It is a double jeopardy which has haunted, tormented and also paradoxically, liberated black women. This “depth of degradation”, as Beale says, “to be socially manipulated and physically raped” (92) has had a lasting impact on the real lives and literary images of black American women. That black women survived and flourished under these conditions is surely a testament to the human spirit, but that is precisely the point: Black women, in the midst of both racism and sexism, did survive, and their ability to do was the glue that wrapped together black communities both during and after slavery.

Hence the hierarchy created by patriarchal society crumbles to a certain extent in Morrison and women are the prime focus.

This can also be portrayed in the world of Anita Desai. In her major novels, she deals with, depicts and describes the world of heroines. They may be aloof, sensitive, educated, fondled or motherless, or trapped in the psychological turmoil in the insensitive world around them. But these protagonists not only attract but also haunt readers. Maya in Cry, the Peacock is haunted by Albino’s reading of her horoscope and prophesizing an early death of one of the partners. Monisha in Voices in the City is sensitive, appreciative of fine arts, becomes a victim of her monitoring in – laws. She is a private personality, keeps a diary, and feels ill at ease at the in-laws huge joint family mansion. Amla is a character who is opposite polls and quite varied from her sister. She is an artist and learns survival techniques early like Claudia and Frieda, the MacTeer sisters in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye. In Where Shall We Go This Summer? Desai has portrayed a magic world of Manori Island, the charismatic personality of Sita, a Gandhian father and her businessman husband, Raman. The brutality all around her makes her almost deserted from the day to day world of reality; but she explores that the enchanting world of her childhood days on Manori Island is lost. She does not want her child to be born in a chaotic, insensitive world, where new life will be jeopardized.

Desai comments on the bureaucrats who fail to nurture their wives and daughters in their race for power and position.

Morrison deals with themes of love, friendship, beauty, ugliness and death. Her heroines as well as heroes battle to understand aspects of the human condition: good or evil. Sula is a memorable novel and heroine. She is “a marvelously unconventional woman”. Sula
Peace’s life is “one of unlimited experiment.” She is neither bound by any social codes of propriety prevalent in the black community nor awed by the matriarch Eva Peace, her grandmother. Eva is a black woman who dares to get her leg cut, collects the insurance money and maintains her family with dignity when she is deserted by her husband, Boy Boy. Morrison deals with the theme of friendship between two adolescent girls Sula Peace and Nel. Even in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola Breedlove quest for affection goes awry. She hungers for love and admiration, but fails to receive it at home, at school and in the community. She gradually creeps into a world of fantasy. Then she is the girl coupled with the desire of the bluest eyes, the most beautiful girl. She converses with her “other” self. This “other” becomes her best friend, who assures her in her town Lorain, Ohio, none has such blue eyes. The pathos of this young girl’s destiny is quite choking. Then the whole town feels better. No one pays any attention to Pecola.

Morrison is an artist with commitment to her people. She feels the tragedy of the children’s total neglect by society, by parents, by all.

The theme which cuts across the novels of Anita Desai and Toni Morrison is that of alienation. Alienation proves devastating for black women in white America. Away from their native land and chained by the chains of slavery, black women were reduced to the roles of breeder, maid and domestic, and several other such menial roles. Thus, they have endured the most vicious form of racism and sexism which results in their uniquely agonizing alienation.

Pecola of *The Bluest Eye* is accepted by good – hearted Claudia and her sister Frieda. Even those befriending sisters have problems communicating with grown-ups and understanding the values of the adult world. There is none to convince or reassure Pecola of her self-worth. Instead, her interaction with other human beings serves only to reinforce her self-image of worthlessness. Thus, her negative self-image alienates her from her parents and classmates as well as from the larger society.

Black women like Pauline Breedlove experienced isolation in northern cities during the black people’s migration in the late thirties and early forties. Pauline’s alienation is the outcome of her struggles to achieve the white bourgeois social model in which is itself produced by the capitalist system of wage labor. She leads a schizophrenic life, working as a housemaid in a wealthy lakeshore home. Her marginality constantly confronts the world of Hollywood movies, white sheets, and tender blonde children. She feels isolated at work where she separates herself from her own kinky hair and decayed tooth. Even in her childhood at her
Alabama home anywhere, or experienced a sense of belonging to any place. Her constant general feeling was that of “separateness” and “unworthiness”. Thus, the tragedy of Pauline’s alienation has its dire impact on her role as a mother. She never develops a positive relationship with Pecola. Pauline showers tenderness and love on her employer’s child, and rains violence and disdain on her own.

Pecola is alienated from her own mother as she addresses Pauline as Mrs. Breedlove, a most formal way of addressing one’s mother. The intimate touch of a mother-daughter relationship is non-existent between Pauline and Pecola in the novel. Occasional fights between her parents make her dream of an impossible wish for a pair of the bluest eyes. Her isolation from other members of eyes. Her isolation from other members of her family and from her friends at schools is aggravated by problems of appearance and self-image. Devoid of friends at school or in the neighborhood, she experiences a sick feeling which she always tries to prevent by “holding in her stomach”.

Interestingly, the two novels -Anita Desai’s Fire on the Mountain (1977) and Tony Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1979), through which we will analyze the psychic violence in the female character, are published at the end of second phases. It can also be said that the content of the stories and time of the writings of the novels comprise the first and second phases where Anita Desai and Toni Morrison like the feminist critics try to find the position of woman and struggle to build the female subjectivity in their respective location and culture. Although the two novels deal with different continents, contexts and experiences, the main common issue is that both share the same kind of individual female experiences in the male dominated societies. It is evident that Morrison’s The Bluest Eye shows more intense violence of psychology through the character of Pecola and Pauline than Desai’s Fire on the Mountain which focuses on an old woman, Nanda Kaul living in Carignano, India. Nanda Kaul’s life is full of isolation. In The Bluest Eye, Pecola and Pauline are daughter and mother in relation. Although there is a generation gap between the mother and the daughter, both of them go through the typical Black American woman’s growth where physical and sexual humiliation by the male, psychological deformity, falsehood, pretension, domination, fascination for the white beauty, self-conflict, internalized alienation and identity crisis for being woman are obviously touched. The American Black slave history is also in the background which creates resonance to the present Black womanhood. On the other hand, Nanda Kaul also faces the traditional Indian patriarchal domination. She talks little and her unwillingness to keep in touch with her known relatives reveals her intention of escapism.
Even she expresses her uneasiness and inability to connect to the different generation when her great granddaughter Raka comes in Carignano for recovering from typhoid.

Morrison points at the center of her novels- isolation of young black girls and disruption of the black cultural heritage- as relevant in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby*. Pecola’s isolation is complete when she retreats into her own world of madness, in which she deludes herself that her drunken father had not raped her; in this dreamland, an imaginary friend is her only comfort and reassurance. She loves this newly-won friend who assures her that she has the bluest eyes in the world. Pecola’s deranged nerves say a lot about the socio-economic and political oppression of little black girls as they alienated from black and white America.

In *Sula*, Morrison depicts the camaraderie between Sula and Nel. Simultaneously, these growing teenagers are like Pecola. Sula too lives a solitary life in her house. Her mother Hannah is hardly aware of her only daughter Sula’s need for emotional nurturance. Since the death of her husband, Rekus, Hannah refuses to live without the attention of men.

Thus, Sula is the daughter of a distant mother. Nel’s mother, Helene Sabat, is class conscious and precise about her manners. She manipulates her daughter and husband. Helen turns young Nel into an obedient daughter, driving her imagination “underground”. Much like Pauline in “*The Bluest Eye*”. Helene in *Sula* violates Nel and rubs her imagination down to a dull glow. Thus Sula and Nel are isolated from their own mothers.

Thus, Sula is a heroine who realizes the dire consequences of alienation. Even in lovemaking, which seems to her, in the beginning, the creation of a special kind of joy, she gradually feels that “in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning”

After lovemaking, she wants her partner to turn away and leave her “to the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony.” Such isolation of Sula culminates in her confession to Nel while dying. Sula’s life may not be a tale of success. Yet she leads an independent life, pursues her own course to freedom. In doing so she is destroyed, yet achieves a rare personhood which none of the Bottom women ever dared to achieve by defying the role models set for them.

In Anita Desai’s fiction too, female alienation stands out in bold relief. Anita Desai’s heroines are a study in female psyche alienated due to a lack of compassionate companionship. Their predicament is all the more touching as these female protagonists long for the human touch, sensitivity and companionship of their husbands. *Maya inCry, the Peacock* reflects on her husband’s non attachment as she fervently longs for his affection.
Right from the start, she intuitively feels: that he (Gautama) knew nothing that concerned me”. (Desai 1980:9).

Gautama, for the most part, is hardly aware of Maya’s misery. He doesn’t know how to comfort her when she experiences agony after her pet Toto’s death. His relentless attitude to Maya’s needs is voiced by Maya thus:

“Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed.”

Repeatedly, Maya realizes her loneliness in the house. Her agony and pain of being left all alone after Toto’s death reminds us of Sula. Both these heroines associate the impact of a felt experience in the past. Maya remembers her pet’s wild, thrilled bark as he sees her return from morning in town. Affectionately, he flings himself upon her and the feel of his body is enduring to Maya. Like-wise, Sula cannot disremember Chicken Little’s laughter as she swings him, and the warm hard touch of his little fingers on her palm before he drowns in the river.

Even at the familial level, Maya experiences a void, as her brother Arjuna has run away from home long ago, and her father is on a long tour to Europe. At Gautama’s house, neither his mother nor his sister is compassionate enough to share Maya’s sorrow. Instead they mercilessly suggest that Maya needs therapy.

Maya goes insane when Gautama dies. The cause her anguish lies in her alienation. She has no human contact, no friendly touch to tide her over her spiritual crisis, and she passes before her eyes as agitated as a nightmare, an illusion. Desai has aptly named her heroine “Maya” that is, illusion, as her quest for a more meaningful life proves to be illusory.

Monisha in Voices in the City is also a study in female alienation. Against the back –drop of the huge, palpitating city of Calcutta, Monisha stands out as a modern Indian woman, uprooted from her natural surroundings in Kalimpong. She has no kin in her new abode at her in-law’s place. As she is educated, intelligent, and sensitive and well - read, she cannot fit into the worn-out pattern of joint family and convention. A woman at her in-laws’ place is regarded in terms of her utility value and as a progenitor of future heir and not as a living, pulsating human being. Desai deals sensitively with, as Krishnaswamy (1983:252) observes,

“The social problems caused by the tensions of modern womanhood rather than crisis in mental health as such.

The remedy lies not in individual therapy but rather in social reconstruction.”
The malady afflicts Desai’s female protagonists like Monisha, Sita and Bim as the adult sex roles of women in Hindu society need to be redefined in greater harmony with the socio-economic and ideological character of modern society. Monisha’s alienation ensues as she, like Bim and Sita, lives not in defeatism but in absolute negation. She, unlike Maya, confesses, in her diary, that she does not have faith in religion. In olden times, women in India were bolstered by faith to endure in order to survive. With urbanization and industrialization in modern India, the lack of devout faith and the ceaseless questioning and questing pave the way for women’s annihilation. Women like Monisha and Sita, Bim and Nanda Kaul, endowed with ability and feminine sensibility, are disposed to battle against the degradation in store for them. What Desai depicts is the very essence of female existence in Hindu society where women, either out of ignorance or intent, offend the relentless requirements of a religious and social order. Finally, their subversive independence stands trapped.

Monisha and Maya, Sita and Nanda Kaul, can be interpreted as symbols of female imagination and sensibility. These protagonists are pitted against the dehumanizing forces abroad in Indian society. When these heroines seek a higher communion of free spirits, they are compelled to conform and yet are denied even the ordinary comforts in marriage and motherhood that lesser beings are blessed with. The compulsion to succeed in conformity leads them to despise themselves. Monisha too, like Maya and Sita, is faced with negation. She too becomes an image of isolation, fear, bewilderment and potential violation.

Anita Desai’s **Fire on the Mountain** portrays the pangs and agony of an old woman, Nanda Kaul. But we, the readers ‘do not get the real picture of Nanda Kaul’s actual struggle to live in this world until we reach the last few pages of the novel. The whole story gives an indication of her unhappiness and detachment from surrounding. The suppression of the suffering of a middle class Indian woman is reflected by evading the main story. Similar to this argument is Amar Nath Prasad’s thought provoking questions regarding the portrayal of women by the women novelists in his essay **“A Brief History of Indian Women Novelists in English”**.

**Now the question is:** Why is it that women novelist portray mostly the miserable life of an average Indian women? Why is it that a woman has to suffer insult and abuse, tyranny and injustice without any rhyme and reason in this male – dominated societal framework? (2)
The questions are relevant for Desai’s “Fire on the Mountain”. Although it is not clear whether Nanda Kaul belongs to the upper class or from the middle class, her lifestyle and attitude reveal her social status. She is like the other average Indian women who are always expected to be devoted, docile and responsible traditional women. The conventional ideology of Indian culture is that the women’s position should be inferior compared to men. Here, the women’s psychic and psyche, both are dominated by the institutions’ social structure. For example, social value, religion, education and myth are used to repress the female through creating strong notions of hierarchy. Indian women become the victims of that process. Their voices do not get an opportunity to speak out of the women’s problems and needs. Their desires always get lost before the grand narratives of patriarchy, even the national history and narrative rarely recognize the major contribution of the females in the texts or document. Whenever the woman is portrayed, she is put in the second position below the man. Identifying this issue, Indian critic and feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks – can the subaltern speak? in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak”? To answer this question, she says: “There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak…. The subaltern cannot speak”. (Spivak 103-104) The reason, Spivak shows, is that Indian woman is always given a label of Sati or good wife. “Sati as a woman’s proper name is in fairly widespread in India ….. Naming a female infant “a good wife” has its own proleptic irony…..” (102). By giving a great woman portrayal to the Indian woman, the grand narrative of patriarchy stereotypes the status of woman in the society. Through this, a boundary is imposed on the Indian women’s lifestyle and so-called freedom. While examining the power and position of Indian women, Spivak observes a fragile state:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject – constitution and object – formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “third-word woman” caught between tradition and modernization. (102)

So the position of the third world woman is in-between ‘patriarchy and imperialism, subject-construction and object – formation and tradition and modernization.’ With Morrison’s Pilate in Song of Solomon, alienation takes a different form. She too, like Sula and Pecola, is isolated but loving. Her navelless belly is the symbol of her alienation. Like Sula, Pilate is also endowed with a unique physical feature. Her alienation at the physical level from the bourgeois black society is, as Skerrett (1985:198) observes the ultimate cause of her radical individuality. She exerts power and has an aura of mystery.
These attributes keep her “just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people” (Morrison 1978:150)

Pilate’s initial experiences of alienation were harrowing. Like many a heroine of Anita Desai, Pilate in Song of Solomon has no sustaining relationship with her mother. Her mother died before she was born. The first intimate contact of the child after its birth is with the mother. Pilate’s mother being dead before she drew her breath, she never saw her face. She does not even know what her name was. Pilate recollects disenchanted memories of her early childhood: motherless from birth and bereft of her loving father since twelve, Pilate’s agony of an alienated being marks deep furrows on her psyche. One can well imagine Pilate’s isolation as she was almost an orphan since her adolescent days.

As her name reflects her headstrong qualities, she sides with truth, break off with her affectionate brother Macon, abandoning gold near cave. Since then, she led a solitary life. Her early life is the life of a wanderer with a penchant for geography. Except for three years spent in relative bliss on the island of Virginia, Pilate lived in isolation. Due to her “navellessness” and men’s weird ideas about it, she is denied “partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion” (ibidem: 149)

Thus Pilate undergoes the trauma of alienation. It is the sheer strength of her character by which she overcomes alienation. She questions herself about the vital needs and necessities of living and leading a satisfactory life. As an outcome of her inquiry and struggle, she ripens with “compassion for troubled people” (ibidem: 150)

Jadine is haunted by a sense of alienation from the time she sees the African woman in a canary – yellow robe in a shopping center in Paris in Tar Baby. Obviously, Jadine’s alienation is due to her being severed from her people, her family – Ondine and Sydney. Overtly, Jadine declares that she loves Ondine her aunt, and Sydney her uncle, but she hardly attaches any significance to their ideals, principles, thoughts, or their way of life. Thus, her attachment to Ondine and Sydney is a means to an end. She feels alienated because she embraces white values. She does not regard her black heritage more precious than her training as a fashion model in Paris and her superficial success in the business world. Whenever Jadine thinks of her uncle and aunt, she hardly bothers to value their tremendous sacrifice for her sake. On her visit to the island, Jadine proposes to live together and proposes to live together like a family at last. She will accept a small assignment in New York. Such a proposition smacks of vain glory. Her uncle and aunt.
This shows Jadine’s commitment and her alienation squarely. Moreover, like other heroines of Morrison, Jadine too has lost her mother early in life. Later on, she loses her father as well. Since the age of twelve she has been living with her aunt and uncle. Studying in France, staying out of the homely atmosphere, Jadine never experiences a sense of place; placelessness is a defining feature of her character. It is this rootless existence of Jadine which disturbs her when she encounters “that woman’s woman – that mother/sister/she; thatographable beauty”. Jadine does not feel alienated even when she runs away to Isle des Chealier.

Tar Baby is a study of alienation of a westernized black woman, in her values, outlook and way of life. Partly, the tragedy ensues due to a thoughtless following and imitation of white male values. Morrison discerns the hideous outcome of such a blind following and creates an exquisite epiphany in Tar Baby, reinstating black values and black heritage.

It is evident that the process of Othering and stereotyping the woman is attacked by both Anita Desai and Toni Morrison. Morrison’s exhibition of woman echoes the colonial binary concept-self and other. In the colonial setup, the Black woman is projected as the other but Morrison shows the whole story from the other’s perspective in the postcolonial as well as post slavery era. Simultaneously, Desai also demonstrates the so called third world woman as the other in both colonial and postcolonial structural modes. It will be very difficult to measure the power and position between an American Black woman and an Indian woman. But the target from “Fire on the Mountain” to “The Bluest Eye” is to form a female identity or subject in their respective realms.

In the body of black American fiction and Indian English fiction written by women, crucial issues like female alienation and oppression are mirrored and artistically dealt with. One hears and feels the chords of an orchestration too deep to be vocalized. Yet, the women novelists study have engraved a unique filigree in literary genre in their own right.
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