



DISTRESSING ISOLATION AND ALIENATION OF WOMEN: A STUDY OF THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON AND ANITA DESAI

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ABSTRACT

The woman represents the symbol of nature. 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. 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. 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. Toni Morrison deserves to be called as one of the most prolific contemporary black writers. She has always been concerned about the unique positions of black women in American life and literature. Morrison deals with varied themes and this paper deals with one particular theme: alienation. The heroines are usually alienated from their family, friends, and society and even from their own self. This alienation turns the heroines either to madness or death. Morrison and Anita Desai clearly depict this in all of her novels.

Keywords: alienation of women, patriarchy, racism, sexism.





INTRODUCTION

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.

Maya in Anita Desai's *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 poles 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.

African-American literature has played a significant role in American literary history since the eighteenth century. Black writing owes its very nature to the oppressive conditions under which the Blacks have been subjected to in America. What motivates the Blacks to write is the condition of oppression, and what they desire of their writing is to ameliorate their condition. Racism and sexism have made heavy inroads into the lives of African-Americans. Black woman is a victim of multiple oppression and double marginalization of race and gender. Keen attempts have been made, particularly in the last two decades, by





Black women writers to withstand and rectify the evils of racism and sexism. A plethora of critical and fictional works, by writers like Barbara Smith, Gloria T. Hull, Ann Shockley, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison are gaining attention and general leadership.

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 marvellously 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.

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.

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 in *Cry, 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 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. 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.

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 studies have engraved a unique filigree in literary genre in their own right.

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