

ISSN 2249-9059

# Ruminations: The Andrean Journal of Literature

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Vol. IV

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St. Dominic Road, Bandra, Mumbai 400 050

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**Published:** August 2015  
St. Andrew's College  
Bandra, Mumbai 400 050

**Printed by J. Rose Enterprises**  
27 Surve Service Premises, Sonawala X Road,  
Goregaon (E), Mumbai 400 063.

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## ***To Kill a Mocking Bird: An Analysis***

**Dr. Soonu Kapadia**

The 1961 Pulitzer prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee is a book for all seasons; a book whose vastly popular universal appeal extends to readers of all ages. It works at various levels with a wealth of moral implications, which though subtly present in the background, make no clumsy didactic intrusions into the telling of the story. The book has as its setting a small Southern American town near Montgomery in Alabama which goes by the fictional name of Maycomb . Harper Lee with tremendous insight and sensitivity relives her own childhood memories of the nineteen thirties in the midst of a conservative White population, still nursing the wounds of defeat during the American Civil War, and tenaciously clinging to the traditions and beliefs of an outdated order. The Black community has no expectations from its White counterparts. These Black folk are a submissive, generous, caring people, resigned to their fate and uncomplainingly accepting it. The trial of an innocent negro, Tom Robinson, for supposedly raping a White woman and the pronouncement of guilty by an all White jury, serve as a glaring example of wilful prejudice and a blatant miscarriage of justice. The trial is undoubtedly one of the high lights of the book, but amongst its greatest achievements is Harper Lee's portrayal of the lawyer for the defence, Atticus Finch, a remarkable presentation by any account.

One of the most challenging tasks a novelist faces is to depict a near perfect character. Dickens, a great caricaturist, fails miserably when he attempts to draw his paragons of perfection. But in the presentation of Atticus Finch's character, inspired by that of Harper Lee's own father, we have a remarkable creation of a perfect gentleman, near faultless individual, who is still very much alive and can hold his own among the world's greatest creations.

Children are a product of their home lives and environment. Boo Radley, Dil, Mayella Ewell, Jem and Scout become what they are because of what

life metes out to them at home. It is here, as in everything else related to Atticus, that he stands way above others, and yet not a whiff of the saccharine is there in his making. He stands as a model of the non-interfering, widower-parent who respects his children's individuality and allows them to develop according to their own preferences and not the dictates of a tradition-bound, hypocritical, hierarchical society. A delightfully amusing and revealing scene, indicative of the family relationship and the pressures at work occurs when Atticus' sister Alexandra, whom Scout firmly believes is a changeling, comes to stay with them. A close examination of the scene is indicative of the informal, natural ties between father and children, the embarrassment and discomfiture that occurs when Atticus duty-bound, is compelled to subscribe to something which goes against his grain and the amazement and disturbing impact it has on his children.<sup>1</sup>

But if Atticus never enters into his children's rooms without knocking, does not pry too closely at the games they play, he is by no means an indulgent parent. Discipline is firmly and sternly exercised when other individual's feelings are at stake. "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it"<sup>2</sup> is his belief. He not merely adheres to this but makes sure that his children also learn to stand in other people's shoes. Their education is a product of several such instances, where Atticus teaches by example, occasionally faces opposition from the children, but eventually the lesson is driven home. The Mrs. Dubose episode where Jem is compelled by his father to read to the nasty, incurably sick woman who takes every opportunity to verbally attack Atticus, "the nigger lover" is one such incident. After her death, Atticus tells his children: "I wanted you to see what real courage is... It's when you know you're licked before you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won, all ninety-eight pounds of her."<sup>3</sup> The point Atticus wishes to underline to his indignant children, who were compelled to sacrifice much of their free time reading to a mean and bigoted woman, is that Mrs. Dubose had achieved her goal to break free from

morphine. This incident could well have been conveniently omitted. The moral war Mrs. Dubose wages against her addiction serves no purpose and does no good for she herself is a dying woman. In hindsight, a more mature Scout, who as a little girl had been painfully embarrassed, puzzled and humiliated because her father had aroused tremendous resentment by putting up a strong defence for a black man, probably saw events in a different perspective. Mrs. Dubose's struggle against "the clock and mortality", self-centred as it is, may be compared to Atticus' disinterested struggle to uphold his own morals. Despite the hopelessness of his case, the resentment and humiliation the family were subject to and the lack of support in the town, Atticus persisted. He informed his children that he would not be able to ever look them in the eye, if he had not done his best for an innocent black man condemned to the gallows. And the effort was not in vain. Tom was falsely implicated. But the shocking verdict was glaringly there and could not be wished away. A giant step taken, would see fruition several decades later as Atticus optimistically foresaw.

However Atticus, generous with others and mindful of extenuating circumstances when dealing with them, can be rigidly obstinate when it comes to situations involving himself and his children. As long as Atticus was convinced that Jem in defending himself and Scout had caused Bob Ewell's death, he would not compromise with the supposed truth. In a powerfully moving yet determined, emotion-charged speech, he explains his stand.<sup>4</sup> Matters change, when the truth comes out. It was the publicity shy recluse Arthur Radley, in his attempt at rescuing the children, who had struck that fatal blow. "Scout, Mr. Ewell fell on his knife. Can you possibly understand?"<sup>5</sup> asks the hapless father to his daughter. "Atticus looked like he needed cheering up. I ran to him and hugged him and kissed him with all my might.' Yes sir, I understand,' I assured him. 'Mr. Tate was right.' Atticus disengaged himself and looked at me. 'What do you mean?' 'Well, it'd be sort of likes hootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?"<sup>6</sup> Atticus' advice to his children when he bought them the guns they so desired as a Christmas gift, had finally gone home. "Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a



mockingbird.”<sup>7</sup> As Scout points out it was the only time Atticus spoke of something as a sin. Mockingbirds spread joy with their music. They were neither destructive nor vicious. They become a symbol of innocence. This mockingbird motif which gives the novel its name is the device by which the two otherwise different plot elements are unified. Boo Radley and Tom Robinson may be interpreted as the two principal mockingbirds. They come from totally different backgrounds, but are innocent victims, exploited by callous, self-centred forces. Boo has been transformed by rumour into a mysterious, unnatural figure with blood-stained hands who dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch. His imprisonment at home is the consequence of a youthful prank in the company of other boys. He is made to pay a life-long price by being made to live at home in solitary confinement by unimaginative foot-washing Baptist parents whose proud family name had received a set-back. Tom Robinson must bear the consequences of a White woman’s indiscretion and for being the gentleman that he was and rendering her the help she required. Ultimately to kill a mocking-bird is to exploit another’s weakness. To Atticus no crime could be worse than that of a White man taking advantage of a Black man’s helplessness. Despite the pain both men have suffered, it is the purity of their heart that distinguishes them in their interactions with others. Both Jem and Dill may also be termed mockingbirds for their exposure to the world results in their loss of innocence and the pain of growing up.

At one level *To Kill a Mocking Bird* has the makings of a Bildungsroman. It is a sensitive portrayal of Jem’s painful entrance into adolescence and the accompanying disillusionment that follows in a world characterised by exploitation. The Finch children’s home provides them a security most other children do not enjoy. Harper Lee uses this as yet another theme in a novel which focuses attention on the upbringing of children and their crucial formative years. Dill’s broken home contributes to his sensitivity and the grief he experiences at the crass behaviour of the prosecution attorney during the Tom Robinson trial. His constant escape into a world of the imagination, his unnatural interest in Boo Radley, his promise to

get married to the eight year old Scout and get babies are all an outcome of this.

The book's vast portrait gallery of eccentric characters of varied hues and prejudices further adds to the interest of the novel. These characters are essentially flat but contribute in no small measure to the quiet and at times wry humour that characterizes both Lee's style of functioning as also that of some of her more sensitively drawn characters. Probably the most entertaining of these characters is the eight year old Scout herself. She is the book's narrator and her naivety in reporting adult actions without understanding them add to the quiet hilarity of many a scene. With her as narrator, the novel has a double perspective. We see situations both from the child's point of view and at times from the retrospective musings of an adult. Her sense of justice is still basic and fundamental. Thus the hypocrisy of her teacher who can whole-heartedly condemn Hitler's persecution of the Jews and yet "be ugly"<sup>8</sup> about the poor persecuted Blacks at home baffles her. She accepts the norm that the verdict of the majority must be right and therefore questions the actions of her father whom the White community viciously term a "nigger lover". Scout's mercurial, lovable nature adds new dimensions to a novel rich in God's plenty. The only regret Lee's many admiring readers undoubtedly have is that she did not think it fit to write more novels than she has.

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All page numbers from the text are from the following edition:-

Lee, Harper: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Published by Arrow Books, 2010. London: The Random House Group Limited.

1. Harper Lee: *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. See pgs. 146, 147 and 148.
2. *Ibid.*, pg. 33
3. *Ibid.*, pg. 124
4. *Ibid.*, pgs 300, 301 and 302
5. *Ibid.*, pg.304
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 304
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 99
8. *Ibid.* pg.272

## **Will-to-forget and Need-to-remember: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as 'not a story to pass on'**

**Dr. Manisha Patil**

*The past is not something to be escaped, avoided or controlled...  
the past is something with which we must come to terms and  
such a confrontation involves an acknowledgment of limitation  
as well as power.<sup>1</sup>*

As it is well known *Beloved* is inspired by the true historical account of Margaret Garner. In January 1856, Margaret Garner escaped from her owner Archibald K. Gaines of Kentucky, crossed the Ohio River, and attempted to find refuge in Cincinnati. She was pursued by Gaines and a posse of officers. They surrounded the house where she, her husband Robert and their four children lived. At this moment, Margaret Garner seized a butcher's knife lying on the table and with one stroke cut the throat of her baby daughter. Margaret Garner chose death over return to the slavery where her children, like herself, would suffer institutionalized dehumanization. However Morrison claims, '...*Beloved* is not about slavery as an institution, it is about those anonymous people called slaves.'<sup>2</sup>

It is a neo-slave narrative which unlike the old slave narratives does not exercise a willed omission of trauma as a defense mechanism against humiliating memories of slavery but instead uses strategic silences to disrupt the very forces of cultural hegemony and assimilation which forcefully silence the expression of trauma. Historically speaking, at the time of *Beloved's* publication (and even today), there was (is) an all pervading American national amnesia about the disturbing history of slavery as whites did not like to acknowledge their barbarism, and blacks were so overwhelmed by the dehumanization, humiliation and shame brought upon them by the slavery that they tried to force forgetting into a willed activity. But as Morrison herself claims 'it is not a story to pass on' meaning both 'a story to forget' and 'a story to repeat', this story must be remembered so that it is not repeated again in the future.

The major action of the novel is suspended between memory and amnesia. The trauma of slavery is so painful that remembering it can renew all the suffering. So the safe way is to forget it. But even this forgetting is not easy. Even though one wills to forget, one cannot forget because memory is not governed by will. Rather memory has its own will. Some things go; they pass on. Others just remain, on their own. Yet memory of any particular thing is not always the same. Memory by nature is unstable, rambling and changing. Imagination is its integral part. It is not an objective, photographic record of facts but a subjective and emotive re-creation of an experience. Every time you remember a particular thing, it has a different shade of color because the current state of mind inevitably affects the selection and re-creation of that particular memory.

Sethe is the main figure in the novel that both resists and governs memory. Combining verb and noun, she creates her own term *rememory* to refer to her reminiscences of past. ‘The prefix [re] suggests the idea of memory as always already re-created: that memory is never a stable, singular calling up of the past, but rather a partially invented, subjectively selected narrative of that past. The phrase *my rememory* makes explicit a modernist foregrounding of memory as emphatically subjective and unstable.’<sup>3</sup> Sethe ponders how despite the brutality at Sweet Home, what she remembers is its ‘shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too.’ (7) She is also perplexed by the fact that her memory of her sons is fast fading but the events which took place eighteen years ago—picture of Sweet Home, Schoolteacher, his nephews, their stealing of Sethe’s milk, Sethe’s plan to run away, her actual escape, her blessed life for twenty-eight unslaved days before setting in the tragedy, slave catchers’ return and finally her murdering of her ‘crawling already?’ baby daughter, followed by her prostituting with the engraver to get the word *Beloved* engraved on the baby’s headstone—each and every detail of those events are as fresh as if they had happened just yesterday.

These memories are threatening to Sethe because they are evidences of her italics as an object. The central episode in the novel—the murder of Beloved—is also at the center of Sethe’s memory which she both wants to forget and needs to remember because its moral ambiguity is at the heart of deciding her object/subject status and her animality/humanity. This event is too horrific to narrate directly. As a result, even though it is the nerve center of the novel, it explicitly comes to the surface only at the end of Part One, and that too through three separate perspectives.

The first perspective is that the alien white perspective that focuses on the so-called *objective* factual details (*what, when and where*) and thereby *objectifies* Sethe. This incident instantly hit the newspaper because it was ‘out of the ordinary—something white people would find interesting, truly different, worth a few minutes of teeth sucking if not gasps.’ (183) A mother killing her own child was not only horrific but also *interesting* from a white perspective because it reinforced their notion of black barbarity: ‘All the testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred.’ (177)

This newspaper clipping Stamp Paid shows to Paul D and — the resulting musings become the second version. He compares Sethe to a hawk, in the same fashion as Schoolteacher compared her to a horse. However, Stamp’s account is a little more sympathetic as it takes into account the circumstances (slave catchers’ sudden arrival and betrayal by the black community) leading to the murder. Yet as it is an onlooker’s perspective. Ultimately, it is Sethe who explains *why* she did it.

“I stopped him”, she said, starring at the place where the fence used to be. “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe.”  
(193)

Sethe’s narrative strongly counters ‘the dominant metaphors of the master(’s) narrative—wildness, cannibalism, animality, destructiveness. In radical opposition to these constructions is Sethe’s re-conceptualized

metaphor of self based on motherhood, motherliness and mother-love.’<sup>4</sup> Her purpose is undoubtedly to protect and not to kill, and her motivation is obviously her ‘too thick’ mother-love. When she is cornered by both whites and blacks and is pushed to the limit, she takes her destiny in her own hands and ‘wards off both transgressors, the one by seeming to confirm the master narrative, the other by transgressing the infanticide taboo.’<sup>5</sup> While both white and black perspectives condemn her action as madness and sin respectively, Sethe’s perspective suggests a radically different interpretation: ‘Sethe’s “rememory” of the act shows its distance from madness, its proximity to agency. Sethe is a thinking subject who acts and uses reason to form what appears to her a logically and rationally determined resolution to kill/save her children... the immorality implicit in her infanticide lay with the slave system, not with the slave mother... It was not madness but the reality of slavery that drove Sethe to kill her child, fully aware of the act and its brutality as well as its compassion.’<sup>6</sup>

However, one should not forget that all the three versions including Sethe’s are selective in their approach. However she might justify the murder, she does know that she has done a wrong thing with a right purpose. Killing was not saving because it destroyed the very thing it wanted to preserve. And although it restored agency to Sethe, it further marginalized the baby. Kathleen Marks rightly says, ‘If Sethe’s furious baby has a soul, then the possibility also exists that she may have preferred to live even an enslaved life, anything but this half-life in her mother’s tomb of a mind.’<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the haunting of *Beloved* which starts the novel and continues till the end and even thereafter, suggests that *Beloved* wanted to live at any cost. Even Sethe wants her to be alive and when she actually appears in flesh and blood, Sethe is ready to sacrifice herself for her *Beloved*. James Phelan points out that Sethe’s *will-to-forget* is the main driving force of the novel’s action: ‘Morrison identifies Sethe’s habit of “beating back the past”, her efforts to repress the events of 1855 as both impossible and dangerous; the consequence of this move is to increase the pressure on the revelation of those events—Sethe’s future will be determined by what happens when she faces rather than beats back that past.’<sup>8</sup>

Paul D's arrival starts the process of *re-membering*. He drives out the baby ghost and makes Beloved reappear in human form. 'A fully dressed woman walked out of the water.' (60) Until now, by willing not to remember the details of baby's murder and by considering the ghost as a living member of her household, Sethe tried to negate her violent action. Beloved's return in the flesh seems to fulfill Sethe's desire and negate her *will-to-forget*; furthermore paradoxically it allows Sethe to *re-member* her violent action, its cause and effect. In symbolic terms, water stands for the unconscious mind. Beloved's emerging from the water and that too '*fully dressed*' refers to Sethe's veiled memories which are now gradually coming to the surface. Though Beloved appears to be around nineteen or twenty years old (her actual age at present if she had lived), her behavior is like that of a two year old child (the age at which she lost her life). Beloved also displays open, quiet devotion to Sethe which flatters her. Beloved further engages Sethe's attention by asking her questions about her past life. 'Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from story telling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost... But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself or her thrust for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure.' (69) Thus Beloved compels Sethe to confront her repressed memories and come to terms with them.

No sooner does Sethe understand the real identity of Beloved than she allows Beloved to claim her and take over totally. However with Beloved in power, death rules over threatening the life of both Sethe & Denver. Hinson D. Scot writes, 'Beloved is the manifestation of the past's demands on the present, its desire to usurp the present and to deny Sethe and Denver and the entire community their right to live in the present.'<sup>9</sup>

The Sethe-Beloved relationship also has overtones of the Abiku/Ogbanje myth. It is a Pan-African metaphysical idea (called 'Abiku' in Yoruba and 'Ogbanje' in Igbo) whereby a spirit child caught into an infinite cycle of



birth, death and rebirth, is born to the same mother again and again to play a tug-of-war of both power and love with her. An Abiku child simultaneously resides in the world of the living and the spirit world. With its repeated deaths, it is a reminder of mortality. Yet with its ageless and timeless state and compression of all the past lives in the present life, it is immortal. The mother wants to keep the child under her control through her, authority and love as well as through community norms. The child, on the other hand, eludes all the bonds and instead gradually seizes authority, thereby controlling the mother herself. The mother becomes more and more indulgent and the child becomes more and more demanding. 'Endowed with hindsight, insight and foresight, abiku is the eye of the tornado that tears up the community. He is wise beyond his years as he seeks to appropriate elder rights, the basis of parental authority. From hindsight, he knows what is missing from the past; with insight he manipulates the present; and with foresight he will disappear, then create and move on to a new place. These competing demands result in unsettling reincarnations when abiku becomes an embodiment of history. Yet his is always an unfinished story.'<sup>10</sup> Thus Beloved is at once the murdered 'crawling already' baby of Sethe and the reincarnation of 'sixty million and more' people who died as slaves during and after the Middle Passage. She is both a character in the novel and the embodiment of historical imagination of the black race. On the one hand, she symbolizes the horror of racism and on the other, the radical claim of a lost generation to be recognized as an integral part of history.

I am Beloved and she is mine... how can I say things that are pictures... All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked

Some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at



night I cannot see the dead man on my face day light comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes I am not big small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in if we had more to drink we could make tears we cannot make sweat or morning water so the men without skin bring us theirs one time they bring us sweet rocks to suck we are all trying to leave our bodies behind the man on my face has done it it is hard to make you die forever you sleep short and then return in the beginning we could vomit now we do not...

We are not crouching now we are standing but my legs are like my dead man's eyes I cannot fall because there is no room to the men without skin are making loud noises I am not dead... those able to die are in a pile... the little hill of dead people a hot thing the men without skin push them through with poles the woman is there with the face I want the face that is mine they fall into the sea... if I had the teeth of the man who died on my face I would bite the circle around her neck bite it away the woman with my face is in the sea a hot thing (248-9)

The above passage, shot through the stream-of-consciousness of *Beloved* alludes to the unspeakable horrors of Middle Passage—thousands of people are chained down and packed up for weeks in a small space at the ship's bottom where no air or sunlight can reach, starved to the extent that they eat human excreta and drink urine to stay alive. However, all of them want to die and some of them do. The dead and alive stay together till the whole lot is brought on to the deck and surveyed. The dead are thrown in the sea and those alive are marked with a red hot iron. More than sixty million people underwent this monstrous ordeal of the Middle Passage during four hundred years of legal slavery. 'Sixty Million and more', a very large, yet indefinite number refers to 'an *occurrence* which was not and cannot be recorded, documented, quantified to the satisfaction of historians' simply because white slave catchers on the ship deemed the life and death of

these black slaves as too unimportant to mention in their ledgers. ‘Toni Morrison writes: “Nobody knows their names, and nobody thinks about them. In addition to that, they never survived in the lore; there are no songs or dances or tales of these people. The people who arrived—there is lore about them. But nothing survives about ... that.” (14)... This desperate need not to remember left the Africans in the Middle Passage *disremembered*.’<sup>11</sup> So the question is how to re-member those who were so ‘unaccounted for’ that they have no trace at all? Morrison solves this problem by embodying this untranslatable loss in the figure of *Beloved* who expresses the murmurings of these millions who were dislocated, who lost their names, languages, families, traditions, and lives along with her own loss of self and mother. In the novel, the past, whether recorded or unrecorded, lives alongside the present, seeking revenge, haunting the living and reminding the readers that the past can never really be past, that it cannot be escaped or ignored, because it is always already living alongside the present, dismantling the authority of the word, interfering with the linear narrative of history. This embedded message of the novel’s narrative is very important because the *will-to-forget* is not limited only up to the characters but is extended to all the people in America—black and white. There is a wide spread historical amnesia about America’s slave history. Nobody talks about it and definitely nobody wants to hear about it. The memories of the Middle Passage and the atrocities committed against the blacks shatters America’s self-flattering image as the most free and democratic country in the world, as a land of boundless opportunities. These atrocities were worse than those done against the Jews in Nazi Germany. But unlike Auschwitz the Middle Passage is completely forgotten. According to Barbara Christian, this massive cultural repression of the memory of the Middle Passage, is due to two reasons—guilt on the part of whites, and horror on the part of blacks.

That event [the Middle Passage] is the dividing line between being African and being African American. It is the four-hundred-year holocaust that wrenched tens of millions of Africans from their Mother, their biological mothers as well as their Motherland, in

a disorganized and unimaginably monstrous fashion. Yet for reasons having as much to do with the inability on the part of America to acknowledge that it is capable of having generated such a holocaust, as well as with the horror that such a memory calls up for African Americans themselves, the Middle Passage has practically disappeared from American cultural memory. What did, what does that wrenching mean, not only then, but now? That is the question quivering throughout this novel. Have African Americans, how could African Americans, how are African Americans recovering from this monumental collective psychic rupture?<sup>12</sup>

Morrison is narrative plainly shows the cost of such repression: any attempt of ‘keeping the past at bay’ on the part of the characters as well as the readers is ultimately doomed. At the same time, she is also aware that some memories may prove too horrific to ‘integrate.’ So she uses the twin procedure of retention and removal—retaining only those memories which are prospective and rewarding for the present and discarding the fallow, ill-conceived and harmful from the vastness of the past. Kathleen Marks rightly remarks: ‘The figure Beloved is the difference between what ought to be saved from the past and what needs to be discarded, the limit between what can and cannot be known.’<sup>13</sup> Sethe finally acknowledges her grief and thereby moves beyond it. Similarly, all the readers, black and white, must confront America’s slave history and the brutalities of the Middle Passage so that the past is not repeated.

*“This is not a story to pass on.”*

**(Endnotes)**

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**The Possessed Men in *Paradise* and *the Bluest Eye*:  
A Study of Unresolved Masculinities and the  
Impossibility of Exorcism**

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“The past isn’t dead and buried. In fact it isn’t even past.”

*William Faulkner*

My paper intends to look outside the immediate ambit of the obvious spectrality in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*<sup>1</sup> and *Paradise*, beyond the spectral figures, the liminal spaces and the ‘ghosted’ (Anderson n. p.) women that haunt these works and that are so well traced, analysed and discussed by Anderson. It intends to take a look at the black men who find themselves in the grip of their new found/superimposed historically and politically composed masculinities and a suddenly surfacing gender anxiety. Tormented by repressed emotions, haunted by their past, shadows of their former selves, these are mentally mutilated men who individually or collectively project their darkest fears and unspoken and sometimes ‘unthought known’ apprehensions onto someone who they consider more vulnerable than them, compelled to act the way they do. For these men, who are constantly battling ghosts, the skeletons in their closet outweigh their material problems. For them, there seems to be no transition, no redemption, no way out of the eternal torment as they fail to understand their own manhood and succumb hopelessly to a white model of patriarchal masculinity turning into ghostly and ghastly figures, embodying ‘the ultimate form of male domination encapsulated in violence (Gallego 55)

The most overwhelming presence in the novel *The Bluest Eye* is that of the bluest pair of eyes which is oddly never seen but is always an absent present. Like this ubiquitous central motif which eludes the eye coaxing the reader with the ‘premonition of its arrival’<sup>2</sup> (Punter 262) to read on, overseeing the narrative, taking us through it, there are other apparitions too that make themselves visible, not to the naked but to the discerning

eye. In sharp contrast with the unemployed, alcoholic and abusive<sup>3</sup> black father, Cholly Breedlove, is the presumably nice, well-off, absent, white father of Dick and Jane, the master of the lovely house described in the opening pages of the narrative who provides for his children and ensures that they are not ghosted<sup>4</sup> or end up wandering in the space between dream and reality, the real and the unreal, like Pecola. The overweening presence of this reassuring white father is juxtaposed with Cholly's incompetence and worthlessness establishing the stereotypes of essentialist white and black masculinities; it can also be seen as a revenance<sup>5</sup> or an uncanny returning of the two white men who had exploited Cholly's vulnerability years ago by catching him in his first act of love making and forcing him to carry on while they watched:

... When he looked at her face, she was staring wildly at something over his shoulder... there stood two white men... there was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it... Cholly jumped, trying to kneel, stand, and get his pants up, all in one motion. The men had long guns... "I said, get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good."... With a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers, and underwear... Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her... the flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile (*TBE* 115-116).

What should have been a beautiful intimate experience marking the transition from boyhood into maturity for Cholly becomes a cheap pornographic act shattering his masculinity even before it took shape becoming a nightmare coming back to taunt and haunt him for the rest of his life, reminding him of his mental impotence.

Dick and Jane's father has nothing in common with the two white men except for the racial association. Denying Cholly his rightful entry into manhood and appropriating his sexual prowess to cater to the voyeurism

of the white men implies a symbolic emasculation<sup>6</sup> or depriving the black slave of his phallus which is one of the many violent residual memories embedded in the African American masculine unconscious. The lynching which these white men resort to stems from the entrenched disposition of white hegemonic masculinity to be perversely attracted to the black male body as an object of sexual activity and physical excess and also symbolizes the myriad ways in which racial oppression is practiced.

The men invisibilise and infantilise<sup>7</sup> the Cholly by reducing him to a performing diminutive and making a spectacle out of him. The narrative tells us that Cholly goes in search of his father after this incident - a frightened little child in search of a reassuring parent after a terrible nightmare only to be disowned a second time. He tries to repress these ghastly encounters, keep the skeletons firmly locked up in his closet and a period of relative peace and happiness follows when Cholly meets Pauline marries her after a brief courtship. But the repressed memories always return and so do the, ghosts, dragging along with them phantoms from a bloodied and violent past that had stood witness to the emasculation and the 'picnic (king)'<sup>8</sup> of Cholly's ancestors at the hands of their white masters in numerous plantations.

In her book *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, we see Melanie R Anderson put Cholly Breedlove in the category of 'social ghosts', who has an opportunity to 'shape his identity' the way he wants to as he seems to be 'isolated and disconnected' from his community and his past (18-24). But how rootless and free can Cholly really be given his traumatic past? Repressed memories translate into unwarranted fear and violence which is projected on the most vulnerable. Dealing with a marital relationship which is more like a festering infection than any kind of bond, and yet clinging on to the ghost of this once beautiful relationship (the only meaningful relationship he probably had) Cholly finds himself wavering between two worlds, two spectral spaces; transfixed on the crossroads of love and estrangement battling physical and psychic impediments, repressing anxieties, warding off ghosts in a curious and



inexplicable combination of rage and tenderness he rapes Pecola his own daughter:

Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt... the sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love... Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child-unburdened-why wasn't she happy?. ..He wanted to break her neck-but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet (*TBE* 127).

Whether the act amounts to an attempt to reclaim a lost manhood or is the manifestation of a repressed emotion or the return of something hidden and its projection onto someone vulnerable or all of this, it reduces Cholly to the category of the stereotyped and much feared and abhorred black man embodying violence, depraved sexuality and a criminal mindset. If these ghosts which shadow Cholly like bloody apparitions lead him to do terrible misdeeds which result in stigmatizing black masculinity, there are other subtler, less explicit apparitions floating in the labyrinthine darkness of the unconscious which haunt Mavis's husband Frank in *Paradise* leading him to abuse and torment his wife. These cunning ghosts refuse to come out in the open, directing and pulling the strings from behind the curtains, resulting in discoordinated and unsynchronised movements from the ones they control: a smile followed by a blow, furtive sex followed by withering looks, a desire to love coupled with a desire to hurt. In the unconscious of these men are intertwined the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely and the unhomely, the strange and the commonplace in an inextricable coil.

The town of Ruby regarded as Paradise by its elders is ironically nowhere close to a Paradise. True, it speaks of success stories and abundance, material prosperity and community living, upholding of an ethos and adherence to a way of life, but it fosters many evils which manifest themselves in the running of a society given to exclusionary and prejudiced practices. There's a deep rooted narcissism in the elders of Ruby who are proud and possessive of their unadulterated, unmixed and undiluted



blackness. This narcissism is tormented by the shadow of the memory of the Disallowing when their ancestors were turned down by light skinned Africans for being too black and asked to go and settle elsewhere. This is very much a part of the collective racial memory of the inhabitants of Ruby and a reason for their exclusionary practice of maintaining the *pure blood* (italics mine) feature in their community. Thus the town of Ruby run by patriarchs is based exactly on the white hegemonic xenophobic model of racial intolerance proving the incapacity or inability of blacks to exorcise the ideological ghosts of their white masters.

The elders of Ruby, the patriarchs who have laid down the rules for the village, epitomize black hegemonic masculinity, a masculinity unfortunately modeled on white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and they feel threatened by the women in the Convent who follow a different set of rules and have their own means of subsistence. These are men who started came of age without any interference, benevolence or assistance from whites or other communities. They laid down the rules determining the social practices of the village that rested on a loyal adherence to binaries. Women were to manage the house and raise babies while men would work and provide for them. Ironically these men are proud of their ethnicity; however what they fail to see or realize is apparently how deeply they have internalized the rigidification of the sex roles laid down by white-supremacist patriarchy which relegates women to a domesticated existence and urges men to understand and realize their masculinity by being responsible for the family's upkeep which primarily and finally means running the house, earning money and making decisions: an essentially male prerogative.

The humiliations of the past return to torment the patriarchs of Ruby, and in the women of the Convent they see reflected their rejection and irrelevance. The fear of erasure and being reduced to a state of powerlessness and insignificance, is a constant underlying anxiety, surfaces and translates into their 'fear of the evil eye'<sup>9</sup> The fiercely possessive makers of Ruby take upon themselves the task of guarding

her jealously and warding off the evil eye, in this case the women in the convent, who can mean nothing but harm for the people of Ruby.

The women become witches, their routine activities become sinister rituals and witchcraft and the Convent becomes a space requiring cleansing. The men, in showing a great deal of reluctance in accepting the convent as a possible home or haven for me homeless also symbolically negate their original homes<sup>10</sup>, the womb of their mothers, the original prehistoric home, since the convent is nothing less than a womb taking everyone into its protective fold and breathing new life into near dead tormented souls. Their crusade to the convent and the subsequent massacre of the women reinforces the desire of the foetus to control the womb which Mary Daly explicitly proves through the metaphor of the vehicle and the astronaut, and the notion of the vessel in her book *Gyn/Ecology The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*: She quotes Ellen Frankfort who comments on Thomas Ford's likening of the fetus to an astronaut in a spaceship:

It takes a certain kind of imagination to assume guardianship for something lodged within another's body - a rather acquisitive proprietary imagination that fits right in with the conception of a woman as a spaceship and the contents of her womb as an astronaut (Introduction 30).

The elders of Ruby would like to have total control of the vessel which had started steering on its own through the women in the convent. Possession of the vessel combined with an unexplained dread of the original prehistoric home, the dark chamber prompt them to project their fears onto it and destroy it.

Though Morrison makes the women living in the Convent blur the boundaries of the spaces defined by binaries and transcend the material to continue existing as spectral beings, reaching out to people and healing troubled and traumatized souls, for the men in Paradise, the torment is not over. We see the men as the sum of their losses. They are shadows of their former selves. Steward's lost ability of taste is suggestive of his lost ability

to enjoy the finer things in life. No interest in 'quiet flavour' is how Dovey his wife sees it. His material gain is exactly proportionate to his personal loss. Deacon, haunted by his memories with Conie nevertheless cannot come up clean in front of his wife.

Ironically in what seems to be a gynophobic move the men claim to have cleansed the convent of all evils but fail to free themselves from the ghosts and spirits of the past. The erasure of these women doesn't salvage the situation. If anything the task becomes harder. But they realize this too late in the day, and victims of their own misdeeds and folly, they now begins the slow painstaking task of healing, of trying to redeem themselves. Small changes are gradually visible.

What we see in these novels is the black man's predicament as he struggles with the eternally ambivalent model of masculinity he is expected to don; making peace between the native who wouldn't experience guilt for having abandoned his family or not fending for it and the newly freed slave who has internalized the white master's values of hegemonic masculinity. Both a witness to and a survivor of the trauma of emasculation at the hands of white masters, the black man in his new found freedom is again symbolically emasculated<sup>11</sup> by the black woman in the race to empowerment through employment. Caught between two worlds again, the distant ethnic world and the recent world of plantation with its defining value system, these men are helpless preys caught in the vicious tentacles of the past, prodigal children of morbid histories who do not wish to do disservice to any ghost. Since earning a livelihood is a remote possibility, the desire to be powerful and assert that power manifests itself in the form of violence and oppression. .

One bears witness to both, individual instances of sporadic violence in a domestic space, and calculated and organized violence inflicted on women within a social space with an intention to control and wipe out resistance as a determining feature of black masculinity. New found masculinity<sup>12</sup> in the need to assert itself battling with age old ghosts runs amuck in the

absence of a model; like a many armed monster, it is awkward, directionless, purposeless and predatory. In the indiscriminate and unexplained violence inflicted on black women by black men, we see an inability to be decolonized, a revenance or a compulsive return of the abuse of black slaves at the hands of white masters once used as a strategy to control and rule.<sup>13</sup> They are ghosts from a traumatic past, avenging furies that have come back with a purpose, refusing to leave or die down till they have attained what they set out to, and when they retreat, if at all leave behind ghosts and spiritual wrecks, residues and relics of what once was the real black man before he was enslaved, mutilated, emasculated, and possessed.

### End Notes:

1. Ail further references to “The Bluest Eye” will appear in the text in parenthesis as (TBE)
2. Drawing from Derrida’s suggestion of the eventual arrival of the apparition Punter shows the paradoxical and uncanny presence in an absence, a premonition of arrival which will never be fully removed or replaced. ( Punter 262)
3. The stereotyped black masculine as 1) violent 2) sexual and 3) incompetent (Jackson 123)
4. Anderson attempts to understand Morrison’s ghosted women in the light of Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock’s description of a ghost who he says is “... that which interrupts the presentness of the present... and its haunting indicates that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story, that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events.” (Spectral America 5)
5. The word ‘revenant’ occurring in Derrida’s discussions when he talks about the anticipation involved in waiting, how it is ‘at once impatient, anxious and fascinated: this the thing (‘this thing’) will end up coming. The revenant is going to come.’ (qtd. Punter 262)
6. Jackson talks about the two most common forms of punishment meted out to black men by white slave owners for offences ranging from general to grave, one of them being ‘emasculatation or ‘...cutting off the penis. This removal of the phallus symbolized the denial of black masculinity.’ (124)
7. Gallego refers to Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* in which he says how “... Black men were literally treated like boys, not adults, and systematically denied their manhood, thus feminized, or even castrated - physically but also psychologically, (footnote Gallego 53)
8. The two punishments Jackson talks about one being emasculatation and the other a picnic, “... the social etymology of the term...” being “pick a nigger” when “...white slave owners would bring their children, wives and friends, to witness the hanging of a black slave who was deemed disobedient.” (Jackson 124)

9. Freud in *The Uncanny* talks about the fear of the 'evil eye' and attributes the origin of the fear in a person when he "possesses something precious, but fragile, is afraid of the envy of others, to the extent that he projects onto them the envy he would have felt... what is feared is thus a covert intention to harm, and on the strength of certain indications it is assumed that this intention can command the necessary force." (Freud 146-147)
10. Freud describes the womb as the original home of every man at the same time indicating the discomfort certain men feel about female genitals which implies their reluctance to return to their original homes. (Freud 151)
11. E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) presumed that contemporary problems among black communities stemmed from the destruction of the black family, as the female-headed household replaced the patriarchal order. The erosion of the traditional male role led generations of studies to contend that gender identities among black men developed pathologically, creating a sense of social impotence both inside and outside of the family. (Buckner 9)
12. Gallego talks about 'slavery's traumatic legacy' and how '... the foundations of the Black community rely heavily on a White model markedly flawed by racist and sexist prejudice. (Gallego 53)
13. When slavery ended... black men often used violence to dominate black women which was a repetition of the strategies of control white slavemasters used. (Hooks 4)

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## **The Pulitzer Trio: Revisiting Works of Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker**

**Ms. Glenis M. Mendonca**

The prestigious Pulitzer Prize has an American origin and bestows recognition to works in journalism, literature et al. Awarded in 21 categories, it not just amounts to winning \$10,000 cash and a certificate, but a high standard of recognition conferred by Columbia University in New York City. This prize has a larger role to play. It helps America honour its commitment to democracy.

A significant contribution to American democracy has been recognised by awarding women novelists and poets the Pulitzer honour. I prefer to choose the three women Pulitzer Prize winning writers who are drawn towards each other by the common thread of being African-American with numerous shared and ‘shed’ experiences; they are Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. The “Pulitzer Trio” shed the slough of the traumatic experience of what Fanon calls “a hybridized split existence”, trying to live as two incompatible entities at once. They attempt to negotiate between different identities, between multi-layered value systems (especially being women), and try to challenge racial discrimination and patriarchal subordination. However, as Fanon puts it, though one may assimilate White values and get “white-washed”, you can never be White enough.

### **Foregrounding the Backgrounds**

Maya Angelou, nee Marguerite Johnson, writer, dancer, singer and civil-rights activist, born in April 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri; was the second child of Bailey (a doorkeeper and dietician) and Vivian Baxter (a nurse and realtor). At eight, she was raped by her mother’s boyfriend and left traumatized, not talking for four years. To be voiceless was not unusual for blacks in America then. During this time Maya found respite in



voracious reading. When she tried talking, she did so with elan and eloquence. Her turbulent childhood resulted in promiscuity and she had to face being an unwed mother at sixteen. Come early twenties, and Maya was all together a Creole cook, a street car conductor, a cocktail waitress, a dancer and poet. Dreaming of being a white princess, she refused to speak slang at school or allow herself to be called “nigger”. She was greatly influenced by her grandmother (Momma) and arose with resilience when trapped in a run of bad marriages. She won the Pulitzer for her poetic work ‘/ *Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*’, which is laced with memories of her childhood experiences. America along with the Muses wept on 28 May 2014, when Angelou died at the age of 86.

Toni Morrison was christened Chloe Anthony Wofford in February 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. Her father, George Wofford (a shipyard welder), her mother Ramah Wofford (a housewife), treated their second born of four children with love and care. Graduating from Lorain High School, Toni Morrison attended Horward University, where she majored in English. Earning a Masters degree in English at Cornell in 1955, she returned to Horward to teach English. At Horward, she met and married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect. As the marriage attenuated, she returned to Lorain with her two sons Harold Ford and Slade Kevin. After her divorce, she moved to Syracuse, NY in 1965, where she worked as a textbook editor. In 1989, Morrison accepted the Robert Goheen Professorship in creative writing, women’s studies and African studies at Princeton University, becoming the first Black female to be so honoured by the Ivy League. Her novel *Beloved* won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1988.

Born in February 1944, in a rural town of Georgia to Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Grant, both sharecroppers, Alice Walker grew up amidst the oppressive sharecropping system and racism of the American South. As an eight year old, she was accidentally shot by her brother, and was permanently blind by one eye. Ashamed of her disfigurement, Walker isolated and . drowned herself into reading and writing. She actively involved herself with the African American Civil Rights Movement.



Walker, walked away with the Pulitzer for her novel *The Colour Purple* (1982), which chronicles the struggle of several Black women in rural Georgia in the first half of the twentieth century.

### **Common and Uncommon Threads**

All the three women writers under study grew up in a lower socio-economic background. They faced hard times and grew up amidst discord and suffering. According to Schaffer, children born to parents of a lower socio-economic background defer to their authority, tend to stress obedience, neatness, cleanliness and respect for power — attributes which enable the children to adjust well in blue-collared jobs. In contrast, children of middle class parents... specially professionals, are more likely to stress ambition, curiosity, creativity and independence. (Shaffer<sup>82</sup>). However, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are exceptions who do not fit this generalisation. This exceptional commonality underscores the authors' intrinsic intellectual ability to be creative writers.

Maya Angelou and Alice Walker faced traumatic experiences of child abuse and even rape. Walker lost her sight (one eye) and was disfigured, while Angelou was raped at the tender age of eight by Mr. Freeman, her mother's paramour. These sorrowful incidents made these women writers withdrawn as children. As unfortunate loners, they sublimated their negative feelings into voracious reading and wrote with power. Morrison and Alice Walker both excelled at school and gave every reason to make themselves feel proud. Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison both changed their names: 'Maya' was an affectionate name given to Ms. Angelou by her brother, and 'Toni' was a name Ms. Morrison accepted for herself as her college mates found 'Chloe' difficult to pronounce. 'Toni' was absorbed from her middle name 'Anthony'.

All the three writers under study were/are single parents. In fact, single parenthood becomes a significant theme in their stories. In Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, the poet makes a constant reference to her discordant childhood and her upbringing by her grandmother, who

was a strong influence in her life raising her up almost like a single parent. It was “Momma” who instilled in her wisdom and shaped her moral values as she grew up into a fine Black woman. In Morrison’s *Beloved*, we see the central Black woman protagonist Sethe, trying hard to be a single parent to her recluse teenager, Denver. Similarly, in Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple*, we witness the central character Celie assuming the role of a single parent to her sister Nettie.

### **Historical, Socio-cultural and Religious Influences**

Historically speaking, colonisation had a deep-seated impact on the writers and their works. The work of Black women writers in the post-colonial times contains a vociferous voice which seeks for emancipation and liberation from the shackles of colonial hierarchies and racial and gender discrimination. As Fanon says, “Wherever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro - his race remains the ineradicable sign of ‘negative difference’ in colonial discourses.” ‘Blacks’ are considered demonic, shabby and licentious. Through their writings, the women writers ask for just treatment, equality and acceptance. Maya Angelou’s *poem I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* is an autobiographical account of her struggles as a young lass, left traumatised due to sexual abuse by a Black male family- friend. Toni Morrison *Beloved* and Alice Walker in *The Colour Purple*, explores the experiences and conditions of Black women in a racist and male dominated society.

Culturally speaking, the works under study depict “an impulse towards transcendence”. Rising above one’s humble beginnings, unfortunate experiences and perils is what African American culture are all about. Angelou’s voice in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* is coloured with a tinge of superstition which is evident knowing her South African roots. In one of her interviews she remarked: “Naturally, I believed in hants and ghosts and thangs. Having been raised by a super-religious Southern Negro grandmother, it would have been abnormal had I not been superstitious.” (129)

In terms of culture, mysticism has always been associated with African storytelling. The cultural inheritance of black lore mysticism permeates the multilayered fiction of Toni Morrison. The ghost of Beloved, the little daughter that Sethe kills, haunts the novel. Even in film *Beloved*, the tryst with the supernatural is the driving force of the film. Morrison confesses in an interview with Jean Strouse in *Newsweek*: “We were intimate with the supernatural. We were always begging them to repeat the stories that terrified us the most.” (57)

In storytelling, a negative cultural portrayal, however realistic, can cause tempers to flare and can result in furious responses. In Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple*, we see how a culturally sensitive readership responds to the mention of “the airing of dirty laundry”. Walker had to face resentment from Blacks (specially men) for her negative portrayal of the Black community in the novel. Walker stood her ground and defended her work which was embedded in realism. She silenced her critics through her autobiography *The Same River Twice - Honouring The Difficult*.

Reading deeply about the religious affiliations of the African-American community, one realises that Black writers reprimand and challenge the Black community to rid itself of the harmful patriarchal symbols representing God<sup>^</sup> that renders God as nothing more than a man of white hair and skin that alternatively, these writers have urged the Black community to replace this male symbolism of God with the image of the ‘Divine in Nature’ - trees, flower, wind and dirt as seen through the eyes of Walker’s female protagonist Sug Avery in *The Colour Purple*.

From Angelou’s, Morrison’s and Walker’s perspectives, there is a mutually recognizable contempt for the “male-humanized God”. Considering the Black enslavement by the Whites, specially men, this perspective can be seen as a reaction to the utter dehumanization of a race exploited and bereft of succour. Derrida, in his condemnation of apartheid in *Racism’s Last Word*, entreats readers to recognise apartheid as ‘a crime against humanity’, ‘the ultimate racism’. Even today, racism flourishes, and there

is a need to resist its advances. In Derrida's words, 'it becomes the atavistic other in a neo-colonialist gesture that once again, albeit unwittingly, disguises colonial imperatives' (Mongia 1997: 58)

Socially speaking, the three writers under study have been activists in their own right, demonstrating respect and concern for others. Maya Angelou was very active in the civil rights era, acting as northern co-ordinator for Martin Luther King Jr's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. An outspoken proponent for women support groups, she viewed the church as a means to reach out to an afflicted community. Alice Walker, likewise, has been a strong voice for the women's movement, the anti-apartheid and the anti-nuclear movements. Toni Morrison has inspired many of her students to take up social causes. Among her students have been poet Amiri Baraka, Andrew Young (former Mayor of Atlanta-Georgia) and Stokely Carmichael (civil rights activist). Morrison also nurtured Black authors such as Angela Davis, Jude Jordan and Wesley Brown.

**Revisiting the Trio's Pulitzer Works – *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*( 1969) by Maya Angelou**

This poem contains the recurrent image of a 'caged bird'-as-the poet eloquently expresses struggle to liberate herself from the shackles of racism and misogyny. This evocative first volume of her six of autobiography, vividly depict Angelou's "tender years" (three to sixteen), during the depression-wrecked 1930's in the American South,. Through this poem, Angelou challenges societal structures, and with the power of wit, powerful language and wisdom, she succeeds in building bridges across divides to heal what has been damaged.

"The caged bird sings  
With fearful thrill  
Of the things unknown  
But longed for still  
And his tune is heard

On the distant hill  
For the caged bird  
Sings of freedom”.

Singing poetry, gave Angelou an absorbing emotional arc which helped her grow from an inferiority complex to confidence, to find the strength to tackle “the puzzle of inequality and hate” through her “honeycomb of determination”. Gifted with linguistic and analytical intelligence, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, with its lilting rhythms, inspires and encourages us to persevere with fortitude in our own challenges with the assured belief that we “shall rise”.

*Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison

This multi layered work was declared the best novel of the past 25 years in 2006. In the words of ‘Charles W. Scheel, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (TMB) is a “traumatic book on the trauma of slavery”; a work of shocking evocations, stunning poetry and bewildering complexity. TMB is studied under various sub-genres: slave narrative, trauma literature, post-colonialism, post-modernism, Gothic and a novel with magic realism. Sethe (the central female protagonist) in *Beloved* articulates her pain and anguish as she battles with the haunting memory of an act of love wherein she kills her daughter in order to save her from slavery. She re-tells her traumatic experiences: her breast milk is stolen, she is beaten by the school teacher’s nephew and has to render sexual favours for engraving her daughter’s tombstone. The marks of slavery carved on her back act as a signification of what she has suffered. “I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running -from nothing.” (15), Sethe tells Paul D.

*Beloved* here is not just the daughter’s name which haunts in spirit, but as an adjective: it refers to the collective conscious of a race which is so endearing and full of love, despite being victimised. To quote Elaine Scarry, “Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story.” The ‘tobacco tin’ is symbolic of the secretive trauma of slavery

which has replaced Paul D's 'red heart'. Sethe and Paul D. find respite in telling their trauma tales to each other while the spirit of *Beloved* confronts them with a demand for love. This demand is also echoed by Baby Suggs, the ancestral voice which speaks to the congregation of Black men and women to love their bodies which are battered by slavery.

“Love your hands/ love them.... More than your life-holding womb and your life giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (88).

Black feminists hail Toni Morrison for her realistic portrayal of the black women who rise above their adversity and meet the challenges of slavery, racism and patriarchy with stoicism.

***The Colour Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker**

Racial and social violence perpetrated by black men on black women is the theme of this novel which chronicles the struggle of several black women in rural Georgia in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Constantly raped by her step-father, Celie writes letters to God as she has nobody else to turn to. The African American gender oppression reaches its zenith when Celie's father gets her married to a married man (Mr \_\_) with children, leaving her vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence. In 1985, a Steven Spielberg film based on the novel unleashed a volcano of controversy. It incited heated debates about black cultural representations and Walker was dubbed a sexist. However, Black women praised the work 'as 'feminist fable' for its resounding impact on racial and cultural discourses in the United States.

*The Colour Purple* is a beautiful yet disturbing story about love, hate, yearning and loss. Traumatized physically and emotionally by the Black men in her life, Celie finds love and empathy from other Black women. As she grapples with her trauma and yearns for her lost sister and stolen children, she finds solace in a taboo relationship with her husband's mistress. This novel makes us painfully aware of how the human spirit

can be beaten down unless it wills itself to survive by the sheer grace of God.

### **Common themes in the works of the Pulitzer Trio**

Several common themes can be traced in the works of the three writers under study:

- Facing human tragedy
- Overcoming adversity
- Mysticism
- Black Feminism

In the stories of Angelou, Morrison and Walker, there is a lot of suffering, pain and human tragedy. There are rapes, murders and abuse that traumatise women. Angelou is raped by her mother's friend, Sethe's mother in *Beloved* is raped and hanged by a white angry mob, while young Celie in Walker's novel is raped by her step-father. We also see the apparent killing of Angelou's rapist. And Celie's father is killed by white men. However, the characters overcome adversity and find ways to psychologically heal themselves. Angelou gives glory to God in healing her emotional bruises; Celie sublimates her repressions by writing letters to God, and Sethe's mind splits in order to survive. Then each story seek redemption, forgiveness and peace.

The works of these three writers are rife with Black Feminism. They voice the repressed sentiments of a race which is "the other" of the mainstream. As women writers of African American origin, the 'Trio' has given the American (and world) readers values of egalitarianism and democracy. A comparative study of Angelou, Morrison and Walker gives us a slice of African American fiction which dabbles, with myriad themes that are common thread in their novels. The three writers refuse to see the world in black and white terms. They are "bi-racial" and "multi-cultural" and celebrate "humanity in diversity".



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**“Ain’t I a Woman ?”**  
**Alice Walker’s Womansim and *The Color Purple***

**Manisha A. Shah**

Feminism emerged as an attempt by women to understand the nature of the inequality they were subjected to by examining their social roles and lived experiences. It was also a step towards defining, establishing and defending a state of equal political, economic, cultural and social rights for women in education and employment. Feminist activists campaigned for women’s rights in contract, property and voting while promoting bodily integrity and autonomy over self.

Feminism evolves around the empowerment of the female in a patriarchal society. It also focuses on equality across the board for men and women. The Feminist movement, comprised of theories from the white women’s perspective, saw the male counterpart as the primary enemy; the issues to be confronted were more to do with gender equality manifested through political and economical opportunities.

Black Feminism on the other hand is family-centred. Women of African diaspora have never had to face the same institutionalized power that white men used against white women. Women of African-American origin in the United States have always been keenly aware of the impact of race, class and gender. Since slavery, they have, individually and in groups, struggled to eradicate the multiple injustices to their communities. The experience of women of colour is different from that of the white woman. Black Feminism evolved out of this difference. The woman of colour could never think of emancipation, freedom and equality on an individual level. The ante-bellum experience put the black woman at the helm of her family thus making the black woman’s struggle family- centric rather than female- Centric. Though she is often called ‘a voiceless people’, the stereotypes, used to oppress them; ‘black Matriarch’, ‘bitch’, ‘bulldagger’ contradict that notion.

Black Feminism is the acknowledgment that women of color have been oppressed by sexism and racism, that there was a failure to recognize and address these issues in the Feminist Movement and the Black Liberation Movement, and that women of color have their own agenda that neither movement can take on. Using the term “black feminism” disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a ‘for-whites-only’ ideology. Black feminism, then focuses on the experiences, needs and desires of women of color, and asserts that woman of color face a multiple interlocking oppression at three levels: racism, sexism and economic exploitation, all at the same time. Black Feminism, though subtly different, is still a derivative of feminism.

Womanism has been defined by Walker in her literary work, *In search of Our Mother's Gardens : Womanist Prose*:

A Woman who loves other women, sexually or/and non sexually. Appropriates and prefers women's culture, women's flexibility and women's strength. Sometimes loves men sexually and/or non sexually.

Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist except periodically, for health. Traditionally universally. Loves music, Love Dance, Loves the moon, Loves the Spirit Loves, Love and Food, Love Struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves Herself.

Regardless.

For Walker then, a womanist is one who is committed to the survival and wholeness of all people including men. Rather than supporting separatism, Womanism promotes universalism. The self-authored spirit of activism, spirituality and the woman's relationship with herself, other women and her surroundings comprise an important part of this ideology. Rather than focussing on social change, Womanism, focuses more on celebrating womanhood and the Afro-American woman's strengths and experiences.

Womanism creates a space for Black Women and other women of color to initiate a dialogue within a non-threatening environment.

Alice Walker has always been preoccupied with themes of sexism, racism and other trials and triumphs of the colored people. The central theme of her novels has always been the question of personal action and the power of regeneration. Walker consistently shows her concern for the plight of women in society. She reiterates the belief that every person has the ability to survive and justify one's self in the face of odds.

*The Color Purple* focuses on male brutality within the Black Community. Walker places a group of women within the black society, at the centre of the novel and demonstrates how the subjugation faced by them is structured on lines of racism. Just as the whites created a racist culture, the Black man has created a sexist culture. Male is Master, Female the Underling.

At the centre of the group of women is Celie; not only is she abused by the man is considers her father, she is callously sold to a man who came seeking her younger sister's hand.

“She ugly, but she  
Aint no stranger to hard work and she clean.  
She work like a man.

Her fate is no better in her married home where Mr\_\_\_\_\_ her husband has scant regard for her.

“He beat me, Like he  
Beat the children He says Celie get the belt.

This total negation of Celie's self is most evident in the sexual aspect of their relationship.

Most of the times I pretend  
I aint there he never knows  
the difference. Never ask me

How I feel nothing.

So internalized is this feelings of self-negation that Celie advises her step son Harpo to beat up Sofia, his wife. This advice is a reflection of the segregation she feels from the free spirited Sofia. Yet, a feeling of guilt remains. She can't sleep. She writes

“A little voice says something

You done wrong. Somebody  
Spirit you sin again it.”

The knowledge of sinning against Sofia is an unconscious acknowledgement of her awareness of the sins against her own spirit.

Since this novel is about a group of people rather than an individual, we are introduced to Squeal, Harpo's girlfriend, who is raped by her own relative as “Compensation” for help given.

Life changes with the advent of Shug who is Mr \_\_\_\_\_'s girlfriend. This rich, confident woman becomes the vehicle for Celie's deliverance and her aid in recognizing herself.

The most important feature of womanism is that a womanist is an embodiment of all that black women are, loving, giving and ready to struggle for survival: essentially a person who loves nature's spirit within herself as well as other living beings. Walker suggests that this love for the spirit should lead to the forging of friendship much more fruitful than segregation. In *The Color Purple* the women move from segregation to this conscious bonding and succeed in emancipating themselves. The friendship between Celie and Shug Every is mutually beneficial. While Shug gives Celie the support and confidence that she needs to face Mr \_\_\_\_\_, Celie gives her the unconditional acceptance that Shug craved for all her life. Both can open up to each other and confide their deepest feelings, confident of understanding. The lesbian relationship that develops between them ought not to be judged as sexual relationship, per se, but as

an extension of the bonding between them. A relationship with someone who does not constantly threaten or exploit her, helps Celie to acknowledge and accept her own sexuality as natural rather than as a weapon of subjugation.

When Walker talks of woman's culture she includes all those activities that come naturally to black women. One of the most accepted forms of artistic expression was quilting, and Alice Walker uses this art to symbolize the forging of ties between Celie and Sofia. After their initial confrontation they start quilting together. The activity symbolizes a conscious effort on their part to bring together their experience in an attempt to understand each other. The name of the pattern of their quilt "Sister's choice" is equally important because these sisters do have a choice. The choice is to find each other and build bricks across their differences. Celie and Sofia deliberately build a relationship from the remnants of their selves. Shug brings forth to Celie the idea of financial independence as a means of wealth creation rather than survival. Here too, the womanist looks within her natural skills and utilizes her art as a seamstress to create the highly successful business, Folkspants.

The struggle for survival has been accepted as part of a black woman's life. From the earliest writers, this aspect has been discussed at length. Though both black men and women face struggle, the struggle is much more complex for the woman. Walker has incorporated this struggle as an important part of womanism. Mary Agnes epitomizes this spirit of survival. Her initial inability to stand up for herself leads to her victimization. However her rape becomes a mode of re-birth for her. From the stereotype 'Beast' she transforms herself into a blossomed and 'standing' self. The instinct to fight back and survive is deeply rooted in her character.

Another important aspect of the theory of womanism is the love for the Spirit. In an interview in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker says:

The truth is that I don't believe  
There is a god...Certainly I

Don't believe there is a god  
 Beyond nature. The world is god.  
 Man is god. So is a leaf or a snake.

This belief is incorporated into the theory of womanism when Walker says that the womanist loves everything that has spirit. In an extended discussion between Shug and Celie, Shug, the womanist, offers Celie an alternative faith. Celie's faith in the "Big, old and tall, grey bearded and white" God is badly shaken by facts unveiled by Nettie, her sister. Shug then tells her:

My first step from the old white  
 man was trees. Then air, then  
 birds, then other people: then it  
 came to me, that feeling of being  
 part of everything not separate  
 at all.  
 She also tells Celie,  
 God ain't a he or a she, but a It.

This 'oneness', this feeling of being a part of a whole controlled by a genderless god, is the essence of womanism. Celie's last letter addressed to "Dear god, Dear stars, Dear trees, Dear sky, Dear peoples, Dear everything. Dear god." reflects her complete acceptance of Shug's views on spirituality.

Though Walker put down the theory of Womanism in 1983, she had already used its principles fully in *The Color Purple*. The title of Celie's story reflects the belief that "Womanism is to Feminism what purple is to lavender." Since a womanist is concerned with the entire people, the women in *The Color Purple* can achieve freedom when they try to establish a fair and sound relationship with their men. At the end of the novel, Celie has achieved complete emancipation by accepting womanism and conscious bonding with the women around her. What is more

interesting is the change in Mr\_\_\_ and the other men in the novel. Mr.\_\_\_, who was definitive in his view of women as the underlings, changes his views and accepts a important role than Celie's in the company, Folks Pants. He also accepts the natural love that has developed between Celie and Shug. The repudiating of his patriarchal belief, not the physical gesture of apologising, is the triumph of womanism. Thus, with conscious bonding between women, the men also develop their consciousness.

Language is one of the most important aspects of culture, and Walker's deliberate use of black English is a confirmation of her decision to let the women in *The Color Purple* speak for themselves. Valarie Babb points out that the spellings, syntax and grammatical constructions all evoke the way Celie speaks.

The use of the black "to be" conjunction and omission of "are" in sentences like 'she be my age but they married' serve as examples of Walker's intention to let Celie speak for herself. This lets Celie create a world that she lives in, in her own language devoid of foreign influences. The dialect reflects an innocence that is characteristic of the spirit regardless of what experience is. Walker chose to write *The Color Purple* in the epistolary form which further embeds Celie's experience in her lived environment. The epistolary novels had heroines who wrote in secret to narrate the repression and suppression they faced. Each letter Celie writes becomes a frame that encompasses her growth, the continuous unfolding of intellectual awakening towards self and community, while allowing an immediacy and intimacy to the narrative.

Walker wrote *The Color Purple* to protest against a slavery much more complex than racism. She explored the total mental, physical and economic slavery of the black women within the black society. Yet she brilliantly conceals this protest in Celie's quest for freedom. Her theory of Womanism and its principles emerge victorious with Celie's victory. By celebrating the values of love, togetherness, compassion and courage to stand against oppression, Celie and others like Alice Walker, bring to the mainstream American Literature the thought that individuality is linked with group

identification and the universalism of womanism is the way to true emancipation of women of color.

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## **Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*: The Intersection of the Personal and the Historical**

**Anita Luther Bhasin**

Awarded the Pulitzer Prize posthumously in 1982 for her *Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath's "Daddy", written in 1962, which appears in this collection, is perhaps her best known poem. It has elicited a variety of critical reactions, from feminist praise for its unadulterated rage towards male dominance, to wariness in its usage of Holocaust imagery. It has been reviewed and criticized by scores of scholars, and is upheld as one of the best examples of confessional poetry. Written a few months before her suicide, "Daddy" gives a voyeuristic view of Plath's life as she skillfully combines the personal and the private with the historical to mount a brutal and venomous attack on her father Otto Plath and, indirectly on her husband, Ted Hughes.

As Sylvia Plath is acknowledged to be a major confessional poet it follows that "Daddy" has autobiographical elements in it. It is therefore essential to know something about her father and the over-powering influence he had on her. Otto Plath immigrated to America from Grabow, a town in the Polish Corridor. He was a Professor of Biology in the University of Boston and died of diabetes when Sylvia Plath was nine. Sylvia, who hero-worshipped her father, never wholly recovered from this emotional loss. For this supposed act of desertion and betrayal she attacked him in several poems. While in her earlier poems her rage was turned inwards resulting in bitter self-reproach, in her later ones she directly attacked her father since her love for him was mingled with sadomasochistic feelings:

... He was an autocrat... I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him. (Ramazani 1143 – 1144).

This father-fixation continued to dog her for the rest of her short life and when she met Ted Hughes, a hulking Yorkshire man and an upcoming British poet. She married him because she felt she had found her father in him. However, she was shattered when she learned of his infidelity. This resulted in her intensely passionate, vitriolic outpouring in “Daddy” a few months before her suicide.

It is an oft reiterated point that the blending of the personal with the Holocaust has given this poem the reputation of being the ‘Guernica’ of modern poetry and why Plath does so needs to be understood. When Plath was a student, the Holocaust was a topic of intense discussion in both high school and college, and her college professors encouraged the reasoned linking of Nazism with current political concerns. Erich Fromm’s *The Fear of Freedom (1941)* too had a central, lasting influence on her. In his book Fromm maintained that America’s conformism stemmed from the same fear of freedom as the more extreme authoritarian horrors of Nazism. Fromm’s skilful combination of psychology and history in his book to further his arguments had a great impact on Plath, who also combined the two in her later poetry. Moreover, with the Cold War at its height in the late 1950s, and the threat of a potential nuclear genocide, the concerns about the Holocaust became immediately relevant. Also, during the time Plath was in England in 1962, she watched the highly publicized Eichmann trial and her association with Gerry and Jillian Becker, who were Jews, made her veer round to the view that she and the world at large were victimized by modern life as the Jews and Japanese had been victimized by specific events in modern life.

All these personal and social influences mentioned above went into the making of “Daddy”. Baldly stated, this poem is written by a girl with an “Electra complex”, as Plath so famously said in her BBC interview. It is about her ambivalent love and hostility towards her father, and her desire to annihilate and exorcise him in order to be free of him. Ironically, in gaining her freedom, she also annihilates herself. There are several poems in the Plathian oeuvre written between 1958 and 1962 that deal with “the

persistent, doomed effort to reconstruct her father. To deny the vacant space left by his death [which forms] a central theme in [her] work” (Schwartz and Bollas 155). They are “Full Fathom Five”, “Electra on Azalea Path”, “The Colossus”, “Little Fugue”, and her final verbal onslaught in “Daddy” where the “Electra complex” has not been used to mute guilt over patricidal anger as was the case in her previous poems. Instead, here he is variously described as a “Fascist”, a “devil”, a “vampire” and a “bastard” who needs to be exterminated.

Understanding the twin feelings of love and hostility and prolonged sadomasochistic mourning is difficult to grasp but not surprising for Plath had read Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*, which aptly described her feelings and her reasons for committing suicide. As Ramazani explains:

... Although Freud allows that ambivalence inheres in all love relationships and in all mourning, he argues that a disproportion of negative feelings results in “melancholic” or “pathological” mourning, characterized by “self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of that loved object, i.e., that he has willed it”. The mourner’s self-reproach is therefore secondary, deriving from the primary anger towards the deceased. In melancholia, feelings of “sadism and hate” for the dead person “have been turned round upon the subject’s own self”, so that the mourner takes revenge “by the circuitous path of self-punishment” (Ramazani 1144).

While this helps in gaining an insight into Plath’s protracted, life-long mourning, how she takes revenge on her father for his supposed oppression by combining the confessional elements in her poem with actual historical events without inflicting any punishment on herself needs to be analyzed. In the confessional strain, “Daddy” has been read as Plath’s vindictive assault on Otto Plath and Ted Hughes, but this is also the poem in which she evokes the Holocaust and identifies with the Jews. The opening lines of the poem begin with a situation that is irksome to the poet:

You do not do, you do not do  
 Any more, black shoe  
 In which I have lived like a foot  
 For thirty years, poor and white,  
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

These lines, evocative of a little girl using nursery rhymes and childlike repetition, convey an “unresolved oedipal position” (Ramazani 1150). However, in the very next line the subject makes it clear that this poem does not deal with love, desertion and betrayal. It is about authoritarianism, dominance and oppression. The opening stanza assimilates more than one form of oppression: between daughter and father; rich and poor. Nevertheless, it is patriarchal oppression which is the main concern in the poem when she says that she has “lived like a foot” in a “black shoe”, “barely daring to breathe or Achoo”. There is an unstated desire for emancipation and a hint of triumph as she sets out to overthrow this patriarchal oppression. But, suddenly there is a shift in psychic time when the subject says:

Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
 You died before I had time –

Here there is an admission of a murder which has taken place after the fact. Her father died much before she imaginatively kills him. She admits that she had murdered him in a childhood fantasy, and now she must murder him again to save herself from annihilation. Though she “used to pray to recover [him]” in her earlier poems, here she does not do so for this father whom she had elevated to the status of God: “bag full of God”: is an oppressor and she the oppressed.

It is through the father that the subject discovers her own history and finds parallels with actual historical events that took place. The origin of the father, who left his Polish home town for America, is lost both physically and in language. Wars have devastated the town and its name forgotten:

In the German tongue, in the Polish town  
 Scraped flat by the roller  
 Of wars, wars, wars.  
 But the name of the town is common.  
 My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.  
 So I never could tell where you  
 Put your foot, your root,

These lines wipe out the origins of the father as the subject fails to recall the name of the town. This forgetting is essential for the mind resorts to this amnesia in order to survive.

If this poem is about the death of the father, it is also about the death of language. The father's oppression makes the subject inarticulate, for she cannot communicate with him and can only repeat endlessly in a destroyed, obscene language, "Ich, ich, ich, ich". It is like a word "stuck in a barb wire snare" that surrounded concentration camps. She fails to find her father anywhere but, ironically, she finds him in every German in a language she can hardly speak in. This representation of the father leads to the first reference to the Holocaust and engenders and forces her identification with the Jew:

An engine, an engine  
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.  
 I began to talk like a Jew.  
 I think I may well be a Jew.

It is worth noting that the speaker finds herself in the debased place of the Jew and that the pull towards identification and identity is dehumanizing. However, Plath's identification with the Jew is "partial, hesitant, and speculative... The trope of identification is not substitution but displacement, with all that it implies by way of instability in any identity thereby produced" (Rose 228). For this speaker, Jewishness, like that of

the gypsies, is the position of one without history or roots, who have been subjected to “weird luck”. By inserting her own history into that of the Holocaust she is trying to claim a relationship to an event in which she did not participate. Plath does this because she felt that patriarchal violence found its ultimate brutal expression in the Nazi concentration camps and that she too is a victim of a similar violence. Also, the patriarchal figure of the father and his language in the poem “occupies the place of the Lacanian Name of the Father, agency of prohibition and primer of the law, language and culture” (Bentley 33). Her father has bright blue Aryan eyes and is “Not God but a swastika / So black no sky [can] squeak through”. He is the ultimate symbol of oppression and she is forced to admit that:

I have always been scared of you,  
With your Luftwaffe, and your gobbledygoo.

The word “gobbledygoo” signals childish incomprehension as well as the difficulty in integrating the symbolic order of accepting the paternalistic universe. This linguistic breakdown, suggested by “ich” and “gobbledygoo”, is presented as “part of a crisis of language and identity” (Rose 228).

Nevertheless, despite the personal crisis the subject is facing, and her desire to rebel against patriarchal suppression she states:

Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you.

Stangeways (371-373) has pointed out that these controversial lines find their root in Erich Fromm’s *The Fear of Freedom* (1941) which Plath read avidly. He maintained that the sadistic authoritarian Nazi figure is equated to a strong, father figure on whom people depended on and looked upto. In so doing, people abdicated their individuality and depended on him for security. Throughout the poem the speaker and “daddy”, masochistic and sadistic figures, are dependent upon each other. Similarly,

both the figures' connection to Nazism, as Jew and Fascist, are linked by their dependence on each other to Fromm's theorization. Here Plath makes the point that the archetypal, sadistic male figure in the poem prevents the individuality of the daughter from flowering. The female figure's adoration of the Fascist is a reaction to the feelings of aloneness associated with freedom, through masochistic strivings. Freedom for the speaker in the poem would mean freedom from the authoritarian father figure and Plath uses the situation depicted in the poem to explore the dynamics of her attitude towards individualism. Interestingly, Anthony Burke too makes a similar point in *Poetry Outside Security* wherein he maintains that the security modern nation-states offer is "malevolent, vampiric, indeed *parental* power that ought to be as much a source of revulsion and struggle as of comfort" (308); that the price of security, territorial integrity, prosperity as well as the vaunted democratic way of life comes at the cost of drowning one's individuality; that Plath's struggle against her father is the conflict between submitting to authority or retaining one's individuality. "So, Plath's struggle, as ours, might be both against the figure of the father and her own psychic status of daughter; against her own historic investment of identity in the father, her abject binds of love and anger and submission, against her social, cultural, and familial structure of *being*" (308).

How does the speaker stage her revolt against this authoritarianism and lack of individuation? Her father, whom she has so consistently mourned, has now been transformed into the devil with "a cleft in [his] chin instead of [his] foot". As Plath had mentioned in her BBC radio comment, his death in this poem is the result less of love than of her need to defend herself against his violence:

The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. The father died while she thought he was God... she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it (Quoted in Perloff, *Two Ariels*, 14).

After demonizing him, she retaliates with equal and opposite violence for he "bit [her] pretty red heart in two". She now strikes back by driving

a stake in his “fat black heart”. She recalls all her debasing acts like elevating him to the status of God; trying to commit suicide; and in making a “model” of him by marrying “a man in black with a Meinkampf look”. This is an obvious reference to Ted Hughes and both the original and the copy have to be destroyed. She recounts the humiliations she has faced in her seven year marriage to Ted Hughes. The most humiliating was the discovery of his infidelity which she accidentally overheard while he was conversing with his lover over the telephone. She triumphantly announces:

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two –  
 The vampire who said he was you  
 And drank my blood for a year,  
 Seven years, if you want to know.  
 Daddy, you can lie back now

She has killed both father and father-substitute, because the inner need to re-compose her father that was an obsession with her is now no more. It is worth noting that, “psychologically, she depends on the very image she would murder for the means of murder itself; she drives the stake in the vampire’s heart. Her aggression, in its verbal and phallic form, is inseparable from the fantasized aggression of the father” (Schwartz and Bollas 157), who has been transformed into a Nazi. However, her aggression in driving a stake in the vampire’s heart is unsettling and bewildering and one wonders why the victim suddenly becomes the aggressor. The answer to this lies in the 1985 Hamburg Congress of the International Association of Psycho-Analysis that dealt with the children of survivors or Nazis during the Holocaust. The Congress found:

...Over and over again these patients found themselves in fantasy occupying either side of the victim / aggressor divide... For being a victim does not stop you from identifying with the aggressor; being an aggressor does not stop you

from identifying with the victim... the perpetrators experience themselves as victims in order both to deny and to legitimate



their role (to be a perpetrator you *have* first to ‘be’ a victim); the victim identifies with the aggressor out of retaliation in a situation where not only psychic but concrete survival is at stake (Rose 209-210).

These partial and transferable identities reveal a great deal about the workings of fantasy itself. Having killed her father in fantasy she now chooses sadistic vengeance over libidinal redirection or solace as the speaker’s survival is at stake. To free herself from her father-substitute, she tears out the telephone from the line so that “the voices just can’t worm through”. By doing so she can literally no longer overhear any conversations between Hughes and his lady love and, symbolically, from her dead father. The villagers dance and stamp over father’s dead body, not out of love but out of vengeance. The ritual exorcism has succeeded and Plath finally declares:

Daddy, daddy you bastard, I’m through.

She has spilled his blood to free herself of him with the violence she once directed at herself in her earlier poems. “Now she would rather get back *at* him than get back *to* him, rather renounce him than renew him” (Ramazani 1152). However, for all her vehemence and her vituperative outburst against her father, the conclusion remains ambivalent. The word “through” is ambiguous. Has she exorcized herself of her father’s memory through imaginative murder? Or has she finally made a connection with him and has got through to him? If the latter holds true then she will finally be united with him through suicide. In other words, her impending suicide is hinted at. In short, for all its triumphant overtones in exorcizing Daddy, the end of the poem remains ambiguous.

As Plath’s verbal blast drove the stake in her father’s heart, her morbid love-hatred towards her father and father-substitute made intellectual London sit up with unease over this strange and terrible poem written during the last months of her life. In this poem the mourning is not redemptive nor does it have a healing touch. Moreover, a lot of controversy

has been generated over her use of Nazi imagery and in her attributing Nazi characteristics to her father who was not one. Contemporary theorists like Adorno maintained that “to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Quoted in Bentley 34) because Auschwitz poses problems for literary representation and defies it. The proper language to represent it cannot be found as something of the horror is removed from it. It follows that there is a loss of metaphor and language and there is a crisis of representation, the repercussions of which “Daddy” traces. Whatever emerges from such art is merely voyeuristic as people have become complacent.

Plath is also accused of trivializing the horrors of the Holocaust and maintaining that the Jews with whom she identified only faced “weird luck” when in fact they were victims of an unspeakable horror and fate. There are others who feel Plath was unfit to write about the Holocaust for she did not experience it. Only people who experienced the hellish subject could write about it for familiarity had to be earned not presupposed. To counter this criticism George Steiner, Plath’s staunchest supporter, praises “Daddy” as the “*Guernica of modern poetry*” and adds, “Perhaps it is only those who had no part in the events who *can* focus on them rationally and imaginatively” (Quoted in Rose 214). What is also important to know is that Plath perceived such historical events in mythic terms. However, the traditional myth through which poetry works was devalued as it was unable to make sense of the Holocaust. In trying to represent the inconceivably mythic horror of the Holocaust the poem becomes flat. Nevertheless, “Daddy” tries to induce a sense of complicity by combining the events with an intimate tone and material which generates unease in the readers who are meant to feel uncomfortable. This is viewed as the poem’s success for “such poems are culturally valuable *because* the appearance of the Holocaust in them is like a “boot in the face” – certainly, few readers leave them feeling “complacent instead of concerned or disturbed” (Strangeways 385).

What Strangeways says has some merit, for in inserting the Holocaust into her poem Plath makes us aware of the crisis of thought, speech and representation which is applicable to all wars rocking the world today. It is imperative to understand this for somewhere down the line people fail to react to such crises because they have become mentally fatigued due to an over-exposure to all the bloodshed and atrocities taking place. In other words, people have become inured to this pornography of violence. Moreover, though this poem has succeeded fairly well in shaking us out of our complacency, the fact remains that Plath uses the Holocaust to aggrandize her own personal difficulties. “Indeed, both the Nazi allegory and the Freudian drama of trying to die so as to “get back, back, back to you” can now be seen as devices designed to camouflage what is perhaps the deepest thrust of this poem which is, like “Purdah”, a cry of outrage against the deceiving husband” (Perloff, *Two Ariels* 15). To counter this charge she has a staunch supporter in Rose who says, “Who can say that these were not difficulties which she experienced in her very person” (229) and very weakly maintains that castigating her for comparing herself to the Jews is beside the point.

It must also be admitted that Plath is not concerned with the nature of her experience as she does not reveal much about herself, the psychological workings of her mind, or come to any self-understanding about her situation. In this, the last word rests with Uroff who says that the pace of this lacerating poem “reveals its speaker as one driven by a hysterical need for complete control, a need that stems from the fear that without such control she will be destroyed. Her simple, incantatory monologue is the perfect vehicle of expression for the orderly disordered mind” (Uroff 114).

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## Traversing the ‘Glocal’ Space in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Lowland*

Dr. Kamala Gopalan

“The only journeys that have acquired heroic proportions in our times are the ones that sought to alter the cartography of the self”

Ashis Nandy

There is ample socio-historical literature that records the experiences of the Indian Diaspora. The word ‘diaspora’ today facilitates the inclusion of such disparate historical events such as African slavery and the activism spurred by the white man’s oppression among Afro Americans, as also the history of Indian indentureship which proved to be just as exploitative. The term has evolved into a more benign one today to include large populations migrating from their home countries for bettering material conditions and/or education and career prospects.

Peter Van de veer, referring to diaspora, calls it “the dialectics of belonging and longing” (qtd. in Paranjape, 161). Elaborating on this notion further, Gijsbert Oonk opines, “Here the theme of belonging juxtaposed rootedness with uprootedness, and establishment with marginality. Longing then was related to the desire for change and movement”.

Although Pulitzer prize winning writer Jhumpa Lahiri does not wish to be called an immigrant writer, her oeuvre does evince these qualities and themes. There is a tug between the local and global elements in her writing.

More than looking at the diaspora in general and Jhumpa Lahiri’s latest novel *The Lowland* in particular from a socio-historical view, this paper seeks to examine the female consciousness in diaspora, especially since *The Lowland* also covers the inter-generational dimension.

Steven Vertovec refers to the diaspora as a “type of consciousness [that] emphasizes the variety of experiences, a state of mind, and a sense of

identity”. He further clarifies in the following words: “First, it refers to the experience of discrimination and exclusion, and at the same time the positive identification with the highly praised heritage of the Indian civilization. Second, the awareness of multi-locality – belonging here and there...”(8) However, in *The Lowland*, “the historical heritage of the Indian civilization” itself causes dramatic tension and heartbreak for the protagonists. Lahiri traverses the ‘glocal’ space with the protagonists literally trying to straddle both spaces at times and escaping to one or the other, sometimes literally and at other times in spirit when unable to confront realities in one of the two spaces.

While Lahiri resists being ghettoized as an immigrant writer, it stands to question as to what extent she would be considered mainstream, although her writing has proved to be exciting enough to attract the Pulitzer. America is known to be a land of immigrants. Even as Indian Americans today constitute a significant number and wield enough influence, Vinay Lal expresses his doubts as he writes, “Even as Indian American voices have been added to that vast canvas known as American literature, it remains an open question to what extent such voices, even allowing for the cascading effect in the future, will appreciably alter alter the main contours of American literature, contributing to the celebratory conception of multicultural America, likely to alter the fundamental ideas of what constitutes “America”? (111) Yet, Lal concedes that Indian American literature has arrived.

As critics located in India, looking at second and third generation writers writing about ‘home’, there is a need to be wary of glorifying these “imaginary returns to imaginary homes”. There is a need to be aware of the political nuances of our very decision to study this area of Indian diaspora as Appadurai raises the essential question in these words: “...we might well ask ourselves if there is more than mere coincidence that the flourishing of diaspora theory comes in an era of free trade and globalization, an era where the virtues of fluid and border-crossing identities are endorsed not only by radical scholars, but sometimes even

more earnestly, by the powers-that-be” (qtd. in Chariandy, para 9, lines4-7).

Informed by such words of caution, one could still look at the works of JhumpaLahiri, fully aware of the limitations of a second generation Indian writer depicting the ‘local’ when admittedly her visits were confined to a few households and only the city of Calcutta. Questions of authenticity, location and depiction of characters could become problematic, given the reality of globalization and quick mobility. Makarand Parajape points out that “there is no ‘pure’ belonging; there is no ‘pure’ diaspora. What we must contend with, instead are types of belonging and uprooting, affirmations and denials of identity, sameness and difference”(11).

Diaspora has become a negotiable space today and diasporic subjects are selves-in-process, not rigid or fixed entities, capable of traversing local and global spaces even simultaneously. Within the framework of these notions *The Lowland* can be read as not just a tale of two brothers but two ways of being, the choices that are perennially present... Subhash and Udayan, the two sons of the Mitras are academically focused but feel marginalized from the elite/mainstream life represented by Tolly club, which is an archaic colonial remnant.

Poignant passages etch their childhoods running a parallel course symbolized by the two adjacent ponds in the lowland which only merge after heavy rains. The distinction between the ponds remains and emerges when water dries up. Udayan’s life takes on a different and intense trajectory with him joining Maoists and actively being part of a plan to overthrow the government. Subhash, who is always overshadowed by and incomplete without his brother is the one who chooses to migrate. Migration far from liberating him from being a shadow of his younger brother almost turns Subhash into a footnote to his brother’s life. As Udayan’s daughter Bela’s surrogate father Subhash points out a banyan tree to her on a visit to Tolly club while in India. “Her father explained that it was a tree that began life attached to another, sprouting from its



crown. The mass of twisted strands hanging down like ropes, were aerial roots surrounding the host. Over time they coalesced, forming additional trunks, encircling a hollow core if the host happened to die". (207) The symbolism of one tree growing out of another signifying Subhash's life is unmistakable.

To begin with Udayan marries Gauri, a student of philosophy and inducts her peripherally into the party's activities. Gauri plays a crucial role in the murder of a policeman and carries the burden of guilt through life. She, along with her in-laws witness Udayan's execution in the lowland for the act. The violence and trauma of this episode haunt the entire novel. Gauri feels betrayed by Udayan's death, especially since she is carrying his child. She agrees to marry his brother Subhash (much to the dislike of his parents). This seems to be a way out of the oppressive life of a widow and having to spend her life with abusive in-laws.

Subhash is much more than a biological father could be to Bela, Gauri's daughter, who in turn grows alienated from her as she grows. Gauri abandons Subhash and Bela and goes to California to teach at a college. Subhash brings up Bela and does not reveal the truth of Udayan's paternity till the last part of the novel. Ironically it is when Gauri returns to Rhode Island to sign papers for Subhash, signifying his release from her, that she secretly harbours hope of an actual comeback into their lives. However, Subhash discovers himself and mature love in Elise and finally is able to set himself free from having been trapped in the role of Udayan's shadow all his life.

Bela rejects Gauri and there is a suggestion that the troubled mother-daughter relationship possibly finds reconciliation after Bela's daughter Meghna inquires after her grandmother whom she meets briefly. Simultaneously Subhash, albeit in old age finds himself in love. The novel ends on a hopeful note for all relationships.

Lahiri says the character of Gauri was key to her exploration of how early events haunt and shape her characters for the rest of their lives. Referring



to Gauri's witnessing her husband Udayan's execution, she says in an interview, "I wanted to understand what it might have been to witness something like that, and what the consequences would be of witnessing something like that", she continues, " I mean she's a twenty-three year old woman. She's in love with her revolutionary husband. She watches him shot in cold blood. She discovers after the fact that she is carrying his child. How does one move on from that?" (para 8, lines 1-4) Referring to Gauri's state of mind after she goes to the US and in the aftermath of her involvement in the violent act, Lahiri says, "To be living with this day after day and then suddenly to be in a part of the world where it might as well not exist, because it is not on the radar of anybody you're around, and just simply the silence – I imagine for the characters, I imagine for Gauri, it was both a relief and deeply unsettling" (para 10, lines 1-6).

The US signifying global space and the act of migration itself becomes one of liberation to begin with, for Subhash and later Gauri, bringing with it myriad possibilities – opportunities for unfettered growth in education/career, a broadening of horizon, freedom to choose a life-style among other things. This space offers political peace, although there is a suggestion of past violence with the history of massacre of native Indians at a pond in Rhode Island later in the novel. The 'local' space signified by Calcutta of the early post Independence years literally invades the reader as also the now 'foreign' visitors with the sights and sounds of the Tollygunge area. The Tolly club is a constant and powerful signifier of the highly stratified, post-colonial society of newly independent India with an extreme divide between poverty and affluence in co-existence. The political backdrop is that of a disturbed city with the Naxalite movement at its peak on college campuses – a period in which political idealism was the dominant mood, the youth genuinely concerned about the direction the country would take. This discourse becomes a part of the alternative narratives that writers of non American origin create, that which constitutes a significant narration of the American and the Indian nations.

Referring to shaping of diasporic communities, Chris Berry writes, "...it is a discordant and dynamic conjuncture, constituted when different cultures (themselves may be less unified than we think) with different histories and different trajectories meet, intersect, overlay, fragment and produce hybrid forms within a certain geographical space" (qtd. In Paranjape, 4). Diaspora is marked by the celebration of multiplicity of locales, identities and narratives often reflected in the texts' structures.

*The Lowland* certainly demonstrates these qualities. It is globalization which has provided the stimulus for this trend as Vertovec points out, "...with reference to globalization, an interest in 'diaspora' has been equated with anthropology's now commonplace anti-essentialist, constructivist and processual approach, the fluidity of constructed styles and identities among diasporic people is emphasized" (19). This is evidenced by creolized, hybrid forms of cultural productions. Lahiri is successful, through Gauri's consciousness in exploding the myth of women as tradition keepers in diaspora. This role is reversed in the novel with Gauri abandoning home and making a life for herself. The breaking up of the stereotype is symbolized in the novel by Gauri cutting her long hair, ripping her old clothes etc. This is the turning point in the novel and in her consciousness. Having gone to a new land and enjoying anonymity affords her the choice.

Lahiri subtly enters the discourse of sexuality and desire through the very alterity of Gauri's subjectivity. This a subversive strategy effectively used. It starts with her social alienation when she marries Udayan for love. The ostracism is heightened several fold when he dies and her inability to be a good mother is commented on and it is a self-fulfilling prophecy when she later abandons her daughter Bela. Even while pregnant she feels alienated from her body and detached from the child in her womb. She feels alienated at home and in the host country with its different landscapes and geography. Yet she feels relieved from what would have been a trapped and stifling existence at home. The pent up emotions and psychological

baggage which she carries within weigh her down, not permitting her to take joy in motherhood.

Gauri's is the quintessential female psyche trapped in a joyless existence, a no man's land, refusing to partake of the new life she has herself chosen with Subhash. The world of philosophy, with its abstractions offers her an escape from a mundane existence. Her consciousness is fraught with ambivalence towards 'home' and the host country as she struggles to get past the nightmarish images of Udayan's death and the oppressive life she has left behind.

Lahiri, however, manages to draw a fine balance in Gauri's character by not allowing her a victim position. The anonymity enjoyed by the immigrant on the university campus allows her to be free of patriarchal strictures and taboos against sexuality faced at home as also by Indian women in diaspora. She feels attracted to a man who could be a professor and with whom she connects. "One day she looked back at him. Staring at him, challenging him to stop, to say something. She had no idea what she would do, but she began to want this to happen, to will it. She felt her body reacting when she saw him, the acceleration of her heart, the tautness of her limbs, a damp release between her legs" (172). Lahiri has been accused of swinging to the other extreme in portraying Gauri almost witch-like and completely callous to her daughter's needs.

Vijay Mishra, in an interesting application of Lacanian theory, sees diasporic discourse of the homeland as the return of the repressed. He writes, "Diasporic discourse of the homeland then represents a return of the repressed for the nation state itself, its pre-symbolic (imaginary) narrative, in which the nation sees its own primitive past" (9). The powerfully etched out backdrop of the novel – that of Naxalite uprising and violence of the post Independent period in West Bengal recur repeatedly as haunting images for the characters and the readers. Each of the central characters returns home at different points in the novel. Bela's visit is that of a foreigner. She feels alienated and longs for her home in

the US. Subhash's return is underscored by his parents' grief and the sadness of Udayan's death and nostalgia for the sights and sounds of childhood. It is also marked by relief on his return to the US symbolizing space free of the claustrophobia and clutter of past memories. Gauri is the last of the characters to return and her visit is intertwined with memories of the life she had and lost with Udayan.

All three of them find peace of sorts after this symbolic pilgrimage back home, as it were – Gauri reconciled with the limitations of existence in the US but liking its peace and stability, Subhash is finally able to live for himself but is still assaulted by guilt. This feeling is eloquently expressed in these words, “He had walked away from Calcutta just as Gauri had walked away from Bela. And by now he had neglected it for too long” (220). The act of betrayal is similar and cruel in both cases. Likewise, Bela moves on to carve her own identity. The return visits have graphic descriptions of the ‘local’ – the city of Calcutta. To quote an example, the reader can readily recognize, “In the taxis they sat in traffic, pollution filling her chest, coating the skin of her arms with a fine dark grit. She heard the clanging of trams and the beeping of car horns, the bells of colorful rickshaws pulled by hand. Rumbling busses with conductors thumping their sides, reciting their routes, hollering for passengers to get on.” (206)

The structure of the novel allows the writer the freedom to traverse the vast expanse of space between the global and local. In fact, they get intermeshed as ‘glocal’. Gauri dwells on this in these words, “Too much is within her grasp now. First at the computers she would log on to at the library, replaced by the wireless connection she has at home. Glowing screens, increasingly foldable, portable, companionable, anticipating any possible question the human brain might generate. Containing more information than anyone has need for.” (275) Ironically she does not find information about her daughter Bela, nor is there any information recorded about Udayan's contributions to the movement. The dominant discourses of the time submerge the events of the past. It should be observed that Lahiri is cautious in her approach to the Naxalite movement's history and

does not romanticize it. Early on in the novel, she writes referring to the Naxalite movement, “Echoing Paris, echoing Berkeley, exams were boycotted throughout Calcutta, diplomas torn up. Students called out during convocation addresses, disrupting the speakers” (26). There is a suggestion that the movement as so many other things is imported, its failure perhaps signaling a misreading of Indian realities. The hindsight view is always different with histories often rewritten or even erased.

As a reviewer of the novel notes, “Don’t expect an Arundhati Roy-style political activist. Lahiri is cautious and circumspect about portraying the Maoist uprising as a solution to the problems faced by India’s poor. But the novel incisively explores the various layers of society in Calcutta, and the contrast that exists in that city between extreme poverty and privilege” (Choudhury, para 7 lines 1-2). In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Lahiri says, “As Udayan’s creator, I don’t condone what he does. On the other hand, I understand the frustration he feels, his sense of injustice (qtd. In Choudhury, para 8). A non-judgemental perspective equips Lahiri to look at two different choices with their attendant consequences in an impassive and chronicling manner. She endorses this view in an interview, “ I thought it would be more interesting to set up a contrast between these two brothers, to have one involved politically and one to be aloof, because I think it creates an inherent tension between the brothers”, and adds, “. . .I wanted to show how the movement could seduce one while leaving another indifferent” (Neary, para 5, lines 1-2).

The novel does problematise both the global and local spaces by often showing an osmosis between the two. One is left with the moot question, “Are homelands imaginary spaces which authors should have the freedom to create and recreate or as Paranjape insists should they be considered as solid spaces, ever changing within the context of unfolding global realities with politics of their own?”

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## **The Malady of Bewildered Relationships In ‘Interpreter of Maladies’**

**Dr. Renuka Devi Jena**

Jhumpa Lahiri a second generation immigrant won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for her debut collection of short stories titled, *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*. Through her nine simple stories Lahiri subtly presents an in depth study of the intricacies of psychological struggle faced by married couples and their bewildered relationships. Out of the nine stories of *Interpreter of Maladies*, three are set in India and six are set in America, focusing on the lives of first or second generation Americans of Indian origin. Lahiri challenges the categorization of immigrant Indians, the cultural conflicts of East and West and the existential problems of modern man. All the nine stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* focus on the psychological condition, maladies of the first and second generation Indian Americans. Lahiri minutely details their varied experiences, maladies, angst, loneliness, identity crisis and existential problems. Jhumpa Lahiri “explores human relationships that exist in the complex network of ethnicity, nationality, identity, cultural assimilation and rejection as well as hybridity in the Bengali community in the United States.”<sup>1</sup>

‘A Temporary Matter’ the first story of the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* is about the misery of a married couple, Shukumar and Shoba, American citizens of Indian origin, who find it extremely difficult to communicate with each other after the still born death of their first child. The extremely sensitive issue has completely numbed the couple, all their expectations and planning to welcome the newborn have been totally crushed. Their dreams of parenting were shattered at the birth of the still born baby, this was an unbearable loss for them. The enormous grief of Shukumar and Shoba leads to a communication barrier between them, which greatly affects their relationship. They avoid each other and become detached and unconcerned about each other’s feelings. “They had become



experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible.”<sup>2</sup> The communication barrier had become so grave an issue that Sobha had to resort to a game strategy to communicate to her husband about her intention to move out. Every day when there was a temporary power cut of one hour they would tell each other something they never told before. Communicating in the darkness without confronting each other was the only resort of expression of their inner feelings. The game is an escapist tendency of Shoba, it acts as a catharsis. “In the darkness of the power cut, the silences between them melt away. They could speak out their minds to each other.”<sup>3</sup>

Finally towards the end of the story Shoba declares her intention of leaving Shukumar and musters the courage to state that, she had been on the look - out for a separate accommodation and finally she had found one. Shukumar who was trying his best to cope with the tragedy and attempting to make his wife comfortable was stunned to hear his wife’s statement, it made him dizzy having come to know that his wife had been planning to live by herself without him. Jhumpa Lahiri very remarkably projects the two different psychological responses to the same situation. Shukumar had never discussed the pain directly but made constant allusions to the tragedy by talking about insignificant things like his wife’s habits, about preparing dinner, about the cab in which Shoba went to hospital, about his efforts to cheer up his wife, his wife’s shopping habits and throwing surprise parties, etc. These simple mundane memories are the means of emotional escape for Shukumar. Jhumpa Lahiri narrates the story in a realistic manner, using very limited dialogues. Shoba’s crisis was her inability to deal with her anger and frustration of losing the baby for whose arrival she had planned elaborately. She distances herself emotionally and psychologically from her husband in her state of disappointment and self pity. The couple is able to understand each other only after Shukumar confesses his knowledge of the baby’s sex which Shoba never wanted to know. The confession affects Shoba so intensely that she breaks down emotionally. Letting out the pent up feelings certainly acts like a catalyst



in some ways. The marital discord is thus skillfully shown to be a temporary matter just as the interruption in electric power supply has been.

Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies' is a short story of the collection of the same title having manifold connotations within the text. It deals with the understanding and analysis of the problems of the protagonists. The interpreter of maladies in the story is Mr. Kapasi who works part time in a hospital. His job is to translate the patients' problems to the doctors and to see that the patients' ailments are rightly diagnosed and they receive the appropriate treatment, thus in a way he is responsible for their lives. His other profession is that of a tour guide, in the story he is giving a tour to Mr. and Mrs. Das an American Indian family and their three children. Lahiri's story concentrates on the strained relationship of the Americanized couple which she projects through the observations of Mr. Kapasi. Mrs. Lahiri marvelously brings out the conflict of the couple, their inability to share or communicate with each other with the help of ordinary mundane incidents. Mrs. Das seemed to be engrossed in her own activities least concerned about her husband or children, her indifference and constant bickering with Mr. Das makes Kapasi comment that the Das couple behaved like older brother and sister of their children not like parents. Mr. Kapasi aptly titled as the interpreter of maladies carefully scrutinizes the Das couple's incompatibility, their lack of communication, their conflict and their hostility and attempts to analyze the situation as he himself has tremendous communication problems with his own wife and was living in a loveless marriage like the tourists. He is familiar with the awkward situation and its maladies as, "the signs he recognized from his own marriage were there - the bickering, the indifference the protracted silences."<sup>4</sup> Mr. Kapasi like Mrs. Das is alienated from his own spouse, suffers from communication problems and lives a disoriented life. His wife's intense sorrow at the loss of their young son and her anger towards Mr. Kapasi for working as an interpreter for the doctor who was unsuccessful in saving their son, are the factors responsible for their isolation from each other. The interpreter of maladies has no malady for his personal problems other than to languish in a meaningless, loveless

married life. In his conversation with Mrs. Das he expects to find a friend as she appeared to be the only person who seemed to understand and respect his profession. Both of them shared similar issues of communication problems and were unable to connect with their respective spouses; they were lonely and isolated, suffering from a sense of alienation and aloofness. Thus they could bond naturally and understand each other's situation. The conversation between the two develops a link, a connection, and a bond which both of them longed. Both Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das suffered from respective psychological dilemma, lived with their partner with communication barriers. The story can be interpreted as the psychological issues of the immigrants, their existentialism and quest for identity and a longing for psychological connect.

Jhumpa Lahiri's portrayal of the characters' intricacies while highlighting their serious communication issues is commendable. Simple plots are used to bring out the malady of confused, disorientated relationships of couples. The main bonding factor in a marriage is communication, failure of which is the cause of misunderstanding and loneliness. The story excellently and in a very delicate manner analyses the institution of marriage and the maladies that couples silently suffer. Lahiri subtly indicates miscommunication as the warning sign of the malady of marriage. The other indicator is their careless attitude towards their children which is presented from Mr. Kapasi's perspective. Mr. Das however seems ignorant of the problems of his relationship, of his wife's attitude, of her detachment, etc. which are closely noticed by Mr. Kapasi. Mr. and Mrs. Das over a period of eight years of marriage have lost interest in each other; they no longer seem to love each other yet they with their three children, Tina, Ronny and Bobby who are on a visit to India on a holiday. All the love, understanding and trust they had before the illicit relationship simply seemed to have disappeared. Mrs. Das's behaviour can be because of her stress of withholding a secret from her husband. She considers Kapasi to be the right person to confess her secret of adultery, an extra marital affair with her husband's friend and a child born out of that

relationship. She expects Mr. Kapasi to provide her with a remedy for her inner conflict and stress. She draws a strange sense of relief from her psychological pain after her confession about the brief affair. Mrs. Das discloses to Kapasi that one of her sons is not her husband's child and asks Mr. Kapasi for his help with this malady, her secret. The secret had been with her for seven long years and finally she could confess it. The only remedy that came to Kapasi's mind was that she should be honest and tell the secret to Mr. Das, however he does not suggest that. Kapasi questions her whether she feels agonized or remorseful about the fact of her adultery. Mr. Kapasi's question irritates Mrs. Das as she expected sympathy and a remedy for her tension. She walks away from him to join her family. Surprisingly her confession has a more far-reaching effect than expected. She is no longer the brooding and disinterested woman, she is released from her load of guilt for the first time in seven years. A sense of guilt was responsible for the lack of communication between Mrs. Das and her husband. Once she confessed her pent up feelings were let out and she felt relaxed. Mrs. Das's quest abruptly seemed to have ended. The interpreter of maladies, Mr. Kapasi has resolved Mrs. Das's problem merely by listening to her confession. Jhumpa Lahiri lays emphasis on communication problems of individuals. She does not concern herself much with geographical barriers which are visible but with the invisible barriers which are responsible for conflicts and stress. "Though the story ends on an optimistic, open end it is doubtful whether they will remain together forever, share and communicate accompany each other forever. But the confession unites them and restores their faith in marriage."<sup>5</sup>

Jhumpa Lahiri's careful examination of the gender roles in India and their reversal in the American Indians is interestingly portrayed in the story. Mrs. Das represents the typical American Indian with Americanized characteristics. She is reluctant to shoulder the responsibility of her husband and children. Several insignificant incidents are used in a very significant manner to reveal the character of Mrs. Das. She reluctantly takes her daughter to the washroom, blatantly refuses her husband's

requests to join him in sightseeing on several occasions and mocks at his enthusiasm for tourism. She most of the time during the sightseeing trip isolates herself from her husband and children; rather than being an encouraging and enthusiast mother she simply moves about in a detached manner. Mrs. Das does not represent the stereotyped Indian woman who invariably shoulders all the responsibilities of her family. However, Jhumpa Lahiri is not concerned with justifying or propagating any particular cultural values, she is merely presenting a cultural perspective. Her stories represent both the ethnic and Western cultural societies. The story is an interpretation of hybridity, diasporic struggle and relationships. “Jhumpa Lahiri’s novels deal with issues that appear banal and every day but raise questions about culture, identity, the position and condition of the subject in an Americanized neocolonial world.”<sup>6</sup>

All the stories in the collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with simple ordinary events but are subtly concerned about much serious aspects of relationships. Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection of short stories is an in depth study of the cultural borders both seen and unseen which the characters have to violate in order to find their real self. Thus psychological conflict is an integral part of her fiction. The internal struggle is between a character and his/her own confusion, fears and existential quest. “Communication is the undercurrent theme of ‘Interpreter of Maladies’. The characters in the stories are tormented by maladies which accentuates the need for communication.”<sup>7</sup> Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das lead unhappy married lives because they cannot communicate without restraint with their respective spouses. The delicate inexplicable nuances of bewildered relationships are brought out with great ease of narration and sensitivity of emotions by Jhumpa Lahiri, the Pulitzer Prize winning writer.

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# **Maternal Affect and Journalistic Agency: Features by Three Pulitzer Prize-Winning Women Journalists**

**Sucharita Sarkar**

## **I. Are Women More Empathetic than Men?**

I will begin by asking a controversial question: “Are women more empathetic than men?” At the risk of sounding essentialist, I will iterate that the truth-claims of such a stereotypical assumption has been empirically and meta-analytically investigated in psychological research, with conflicting, and sometimes inconclusive results (Simon-Thomas; Mestre *et al*). In literary discourse, such an assumption that women are more empathetic, and that, by extension, women’s writing is affective and emotional, is validated and valorised by many women writers and feminist critics as part of their efforts towards empowering women.

Helene Cixious, proponent of *l’écriture féminine*, for instance, in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), calls out to women to “write your self. Your body must be heard”, in order to re-inhabit and reclaim their bodies and selves (880). Apparently, this self-focused approach of women’s writing contradicts the basic premise of journalistic writing, which is to write about events and persons other than the self. Journalistic writing, which, even at the beginning of the twentieth century was exclusively male writing, is writing for effect, not just affect: it commoditises and centralises writing that is “newsworthy” (Fleming *et al*).

In a way, the body that Cixious urges the woman writer to inscribe is more than her own individual body, it is the collective body of all women everywhere. Women’s writing must turn inward to reclaim her own self, and it must also turn outward, to engage with other women’s selves. Which means, therefore, that women should, “write about women and bring women into writing” (Cixious 875). Cixious goes one step further and categorises this affective ability of women writers to reach out and empathise as

explicitly maternal: “A woman is never far from ‘mother’.... There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink” (881).

This paper attempts to situate the writing of some women journalists, winners of the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism (Feature Writing), in the intersection of maternal writing and journalistic writing. Writing about children with a difference, these features show a clear connect of purpose and potential between affective, maternal women’s writing and effective journalistic writing. Contextualized against Cixious’s reiterated emphasis on “what it [women’s writing] will do”, these features demonstrate how “true texts of women—female-sexed texts” can combine affect and agency to empower and engender change (875; 877).

## **II. Alice Steinbach: A Mother of Unusual Vision**

Alice Steinbach won the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism Feature Writing in 1985, for her feature “A Boy of Unusual Vision”, which appeared in *The Baltimore Sun Magazine*, 27 May 1984. The boy in question is 10-year old Calvin Stanley, who has been blind since birth because of congenital glaucoma. The story opens directly: without pity but with empathy:

First, the eyes: They are large and blue, a light, opaque blue, the colour of a robin’s egg. And if, on a sunny spring day, you look straight into these eyes – eyes that cannot look back at you – the sharp, April light turns them pale, like the thin blue of a high, cloudless sky. (1984, 3).

The detailed emphasis on colour might seem unsympathetic in a narrative about a blind boy, but actually it is an insightful and empathic connect to the interior life of the boy:

He listens as only he can listen, then: “Orange used to be my favourite colour but now it’s blue”, he announces.... He is a boy who has a lot of pictures stored in his head, retrievable images which have been fashioned for him by the people who love him – by family and friends and teachers

who have painstakingly and patiently gone about creating a special world for Calvin's inner eye to inhabit. (1984, 3).

Steinbach's feature had been much praised, analysed and emulated by journalism schools, and the *Neiman Storyboard* at Harvard cites it as a "masterful example of how a journalist can use literary techniques – scene, dialogue, revelatory detail, character development, the top and bottom rungs of the ladder of abstraction – to elevate nonfiction from craft to art" (Banaszynski, n.p.). Recreating Calvin's world through effective intimacy journalistic techniques, Steinbach describes a network of empathy and support: "teachers, vision specialists and mobility instructors" who teach him in a regular public school with sighted children, and also special skills like independent travel and Opticon (Steinbach 9). There is Lois Sivits, his "favourite teacher", who is also blind and who teaches him braille (12). There is his policeman father: "They go to the movies together and they tell each other they're handsome" (5).

However, at the centre of Calvin's life is his mother, Ethel Stanley: "[h]e moves in the sighted world with trust and faith and the unshakeable confidence of a child whose mother has always been there for him" (7). Inheriting a maternal legacy of nurturing from her own "wonderful mother", Ethel Stanley got over her "awful" guilt at her son's blindness by pouring "her mothering love into Calvin" (7). She is both firm ("You have to learn how to deal with this") and encouraging:

You are *seeing* Calvin. You're just using your hands instead of your eyes. But you're seeing. And remember, there is *nothing* you can't do (3; 5). By reaching out to Calvin "in different ways", she is the one who inspires him to cycle, to play baseball, to dream of being a pianist or a computer programmer – metaphorically, to fly. As Cixious says, Flying is woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly (1976, 887).

Steinbach's story is impactful because of her efficacy in juxtaposing journalistic observation with maternal emotion, by blending the accurately-observed details with long, heart-tugging quotes. Steinbach is able to reach



out to this ‘other’ world of the blind boy – a child with a physical, congenital difference – and his mother and maternal surrogates because she (herself a divorced mother of two sons) engages so deeply with her own self. As she says in her memoir, *The Miss Dennis School of Writing and Other Lessons from a Woman’s Life*: “But one thing remained constant: My struggle to pay attention to my own inner life; to hear a voice that I would recognize finally as my own. Not only in my writing but in my life (1996, 12)”.

### **III. Sonia Nazario: Maternal Commitment to Immigrant Children**

Sonia Nazario won the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism Feature Writing in 2003, for her feature “Enrique’s Journey”, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, 29 September 2002. Enrique is a Honduran boy whose mother, Lourdes, leaves his sister, Belky, and him, when he is five years old, as she goes to the United States as an illegal immigrant to find work. This story, too, is centered around the mother-child relationship, with the other characters mostly peripheral, although important to Enrique’s life. Nazario begins her story with the impending separation, and the maternal desperation and guilt that accompanies Lourdes’s forced choice to leave her child:

The boy does not understand. His mother is not talking to him. She will not even look at him. Enrique has no hint of what she is going to do. Lourdes knows. She understands, as only a mother can, the terror she is about to inflict, the ache Enrique will feel and finally the emptiness. (Nazario 2002, 1).

Regularly sending money back home, she never saves enough to come back. Shunted between various grandmothers, uncles and aunts, he gradually spirals downwards, stops going to the church, drops out of school and sinks deeper into substance abuse, haunted by a deep sense of abandonment. Even as his mother keeps sending money for him and his sister, he is fixated on one goal: “I want to be with you” (2002, 1). As a fifteen year old hooked to glue-sniffing, Enrique realizes that his road to redemption is that “he simply has to go find his mother” (2002, 6). On 2

March 2000, eleven years after his mother left Honduras, he too leaves on his “dangerous odyssey to reunite with his mother” (2002).

Tracing Enrique’s emotional journey till the point where it impels his physical journey, Nazario recreates the trauma of millions of “mobility orphans”, left behind every year in countries like Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Sri Lanka, as their mothers are forced to migrate to more prosperous economies in search of jobs that will support their families back home. In an article in the *United Nations Chronicle*, Nazario recounts how migration is inscribed in her own personal history:

I come at this issue with migration in my blood—my grandparents fled Syria and Poland for Argentina; my parents migrated from Argentina to the United States—and as someone who has written about the issue for nearly three decades. From my perspective in the United States, I see it as an issue with many shades of gray, with winners and losers. (2013a, n.p.).

Nazario’s empathy extends to both the mother and the children. She represents the mothers’ act as an act of love, not selfishness: “To them, leaving was the ultimate act of love; their sacrifice meant their children might eat and perhaps even study past the third grade” (2013a, n.p.).

Nazario also physically re-traces, “step by step” the perilous odyssey that these mobility orphans undertake, “around 100,000 every year”, journeying alone on the tops of freight trains through Mexico to try and enter United States, falling off to evade detection, falling prey to criminal narco-gangs; some dying, some surviving, many getting deported. As she writes, “Enrique tries eight times to get through Mexico—braving 122 days and 12,000 miles”. Nazario locates the crux of this journey made by the mobility orphans in the desire to find the mother:

Many, including Enrique, begin to idealize their mothers. In their absence, these mothers become larger than life. Although the women struggle to pay rent and eat in the United States, in the imaginations of their children

back home they become deliverance itself, the answer to every problem. Finding them becomes the quest for the Holy Grail. (2002, 1)

Sonia Nazario's life-long involvement with the trauma of these different children can be read as maternal commitment. She has written incisively about "The Orphans of Addiction" (1997) and "The Plight of an Immigrant Family" (2013). She expanded her Pulitzer-winning feature into a best-selling book, "perhaps the most widely read book about immigrants in the United States today", which later came out in multiple translations and version, including one for young adults (2013a, n.p.). In her maternal commitment to Enrique, she also did a follow-up to his journey, narrativising his life post-migration in the United States. Her "Update on the Family" (2011) is centered around Enrique, reunited with his mother, his wife and children, and on Enrique's determination that despite his continuing struggles with his drug habit, he will never allow his family to disintegrate and suffer the way he himself had.

Most importantly, however, Nazario's maternal commitment has led to her activism. Her solution to the problem of mobility orphans is based on her empathy:

The migrants I met in Central America and along the train tracks in Mexico stressed that if they could stay at home with all they love... they wouldn't leave.... We must bring everything to this task: more microloans to help women start businesses, trade policies that give preference to goods from these countries and help promoting education for girls.... What if, instead, each developed country took on the task of job creation for women in the handful of countries that send them immigrants? (2013, n.p).

Nazario goes beyond writing: she is also part of the Kids in Need of Defense, a non-profit which provides pro-bono attorneys to unaccompanied immigrant children. It is this faith and hope that "everything will change" that Nazario's writing is imbued with, and which lifts it above mere reportage into a call for action (Cixious 1976, 881).

#### **IV. Lane DeGregory: Indictment of a Failed Mother**

Lane DeGregory won the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism Feature Writing in 2008, for her feature “The Girl in the Window”, which appeared in the *St. Petersburg Times*, 31 July 2008. The girl is the almost-seven-years old Danielle, the “rarest and most pitiable of creatures, a feral child”, who is forced to stay in a tiny closet-like room, unfed, unclothed, uneducated and uncared for, despite having a physically-able mother and brothers who stay in the same flat (DeGregory 2008, n.p.). After being glimpsed at the window by a neighbour, the city detectives and social workers intervene and take the girl away to the pediatric intensive care unit. In the narrative, the “window” opens to give a shocking full view of the feral child:

First he saw the girl’s eyes: dark and wide, unfocused, unblinking. She wasn’t looking at him so much as through him. She lay on a torn, moldy mattress on the floor. She was curled on her side, long legs tucked into her emaciated chest. Her ribs and collarbone jutted out; one skinny arm was slung over her face; her black hair was matted, crawling with lice. Insect bites, rashes and sores pocked her skin. Though she looked old enough to be in school, she was naked — except for a swollen diaper. (DeGregory 2008, n.p.)

A victim of the “the most outrageous case of neglect I’ve ever seen”, Danielle cannot talk, cannot cry, cannot nod to indicate yes or no, cannot even make eye contact: she is diagnosed with “environmental autism” and will remain severely disabled for life (2008, n.p.).

DeGregory’s narrative deliberately absents the mother till the very end, paralleling her deliberate absence from her daughter’s life. The court orders the child to be put into foster care, and the mother forsakes any claim to the child in lieu of not being prosecuted for criminal negligence. Danielle is legally adopted by Bernie and Diane Lierow, and very gradually starts a new life adjusting to her new family.

In Part Three of the narrative, the mother is re-introduced, because a failed mother is a monstrous other that attracts readers' curiosity as much as she repels and outrages.

The indictment of the mother is obvious, though understated:

She's out there somewhere, looming over Danielle's story like a ghost. To Bernie and Diane, Danielle's birth mother is a cipher, almost never spoken of. The less said, the better. As far as they are concerned Danielle was born the day they found her. And yet this unimaginable woman is out there somewhere, most likely still on probation, permanently unburdened of her daughter, and thinking — what? What can she possibly say? Nothing. Not a thing. But none of this makes any sense without her. (2008, n.p.).

Michelle Crockett, the biological mother, claims that “part of my heart died that day” when Danielle was taken away, she has Danielle's photograph hanging in her mobile home, and she keeps asking after her daughter. Yet, to DeGregory it seems that she is making a plea, spinning out a “story”, feeling “wronged” instead of assuming responsibility. DeGregory is subtly normative: the chain-smoking habit of the mother, the fact that she would regularly leave her children unattended to go off on trysts with a long line of male partners is reiterated to emphasise that “she is not fit to be a mother” (2008, n.p.).

In the follow-up to Danielle's story, “Three years later”, DeGregory, demonstrating maternal commitment, tracks the slow advances Danielle has made under the love and attention of her adoptive parents: she can understand instructions, is learning to toilet-train herself, can make a few sounds, and most importantly, can hug her family back when they hug her (2011). DeGregory's prize-winning story has had an enormous impact, it was read by over one million people online, strangers donated over 10,000 dollars for Dani, the Lierows appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show, and also wrote a book about her. In the update, the biological mother is absent, but it is a sinister absence:

Six years after that detective found Dani, four years since the Lierows adopted her, she still can't talk. She has spent as much time away from her birth mother as she did with her. Maybe, even with constant conversation and professional therapy, you still can't rejuvenate parts of the brain that were never stimulated.(2011, n.p.)

## **V. The Maternal as a Gender-Neutral Category**

The three texts selected above centralise the maternal relationship, or its absence, and they explore the nuances of maternal contact—in both senses, as touch and communication. Read together, the three texts support the two hypotheses that this paper proposes.

The first is that women journalists can create tremendous impact, and even initiate change, through their unique use of journalistic agency and maternal affect, an affect that includes empathy and commitment to the causes of children with a difference. This is demonstrated even more inextricably in the Pulitzer-nominated feature, “Never Let Go” by Kelly Benham in 2012, when she transforms her personal narrative of mothering a severely premature baby into an exploration of the cost and ethics of extreme medical intervention. Benham's feature is written on the maternal body and the child's body, and it moves through the body to question and change the context where these bodies are embedded.

The second hypotheses which this paper proposes is that the maternal is not a pre-determined, gender-based category. As was evident in Dani's story, mothering is not always best done by women. Lane DeGregory foregrounds the special relationship that Dani shares with her adopted father, Bernie Lierow, in both the original and the follow-up features:

She looked at her dad, lifted her hands and cupped his chin. Then the girl who had gone so long without love, whom everyone worried might never love, leaned close. And licked her dad's beard.(2011, n.p.).

Psychological research also corroborates that empathy is gender-neutral:

So while some research suggests women are more empathic than men, perhaps this is the only definitive conclusion we can draw: “Almost all humans, regardless of sex, have the basic ability to cultivate empathy” (Simon-Thomas 2007).

When Cixious says, “Women are bisexual”, she is foregrounding the empathetic ability of women’s writing, the ability to include and embrace differences (1976, 884). Men too can be empathically bisexual if they go beyond phallogocentrism. In the two stories of trauma, Enrique’s and Dani’s, childcare was thrust on the woman alone, whereas in Calvin’s story of triumph, nurturing was a collaborative effort by parents of both genders. Extending the feeling of empathy and commitment to define the category of the maternal, the paper concludes with the suggestion that children’s nurture should be a shared responsibility irrespective of gender. This seems to be the common message linking the three Pulitzer-winning features discussed above.

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