

ABSTRACT

RACE, GENDER, AND FEMININE LITERARY EXPRESSIVENESS IN THE WORKS OF ALICE WALKER, TONI MORRISON, ANITA DESAI AND ARUNDHATI ROY

PhD Student: Azam Sher Bayar Mohammed Saeed Othman

PhD supervisor: Prof. Univ. Dr. Dana Percec

The cross-cultural problematization of women's position in society, as marginalized by patriarchal institutions and mentalities, reflected in various literary traditions is the main focus of my doctoral thesis.

The purpose of the thesis is to investigate the intersecting issues of race and gender and the reconstruction of the self in the framework of slavery, classism, racism, segregation, and immigration, with a focus on the African American and Indian characters from four novels written by four female novelists from two different continents. The dissertation attempts to answer a few questions regarding the challenges faced by the female protagonists in their respective patriarchal societies. Why has this particular selection of the fictional corpus been operated? What similarities and differences in terms of tackled themes have been highlighted in the four authors? Why is relevant an analysis of (African) American literature compared with Indian literature written in English, over, for example, fictional works by Iranian, Vietnamese, and Japanese female authors? What is the purpose of connecting Indian literature with African American literature? How does this connection shed more light on the intersection issues of race, gender, and caste?

Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Arundhati Roy, and Anita Desai have been chosen in this doctoral study for their original portrayal of complex circumstances of womanhood, with many possible concerns, sanctifications, burdens, and restrictions. However, the oppression brought about by racism, sexism, and classism has ignored and denied the voices of both Indian and African American women and their overall presence. Their voices were equally erased from history, and they were unable to address their rights or to participate in any meaningful activity. Women's voices have been traditionally regarded as threatening and it was considered immoral for a woman to express her own ideas. The four novelists have raised their own voices to criticize the injustices of patriarchal society, being convinced that their voices should be released to act, oppose, change, and support. They also believed that words

must be devoted to overcoming internal fears, necessary in the struggle to end race, gender, and class oppression.

In bringing together the African American and the Indian writers, my thesis aims to analyze in detail the Western and Eastern rituals, especially the practices of subjugation, by employing a cross-geographical discourse. The double standards of these societies, in terms of gender expectations in the past and in the present, for example, are criticized by all these four female writers. Impassivity, silence, suffering, and catering to the demands of husbands are expected and desirable features of women in both patriarchies and these practices cast long shadows, captured critically by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Anita Desai, and Arundhati Roy. In the novels I discuss the authors show a clear commitment to the elimination of the ideology of supremacy, to the improvement of women's status, and to strengthening male and female relationships but especially female bonding and solidarity.

Even though the four novels' contextual factors, cultures, and circumstances are located at two different poles of the globe, the four novels' central characters are females who reveal their experience, history, and present standing in remarkably similar ways. In other words, although their stories explore various experiences and contexts, the main issue they share is female experiences in their male-dominated societies. Male dominance and traditional norms in India and the United States historically relegated women to the position of the enslaved. Women in the West and East confront gender discrimination and the four novelists reveal this common trait, concentrating on class, gender, sex, alienation, and the psyche of women. In addition, they depict the women's struggle for liberation from persecution. This is what inspired me to compare the novels of African and Indian authors, even if they come from two distinct nations, social backgrounds, and cultural traditions.

The methodology of the dissertation draws upon two approaches: cultural studies and close-textual analysis. The first concerns sociological and psychological issues, which clarify and contextualize man's behavior in a patriarchal society. The novels are examined from a cultural anthropological perspective, measuring the impact of gender, racism, and classism, on African American and Indian women living in two different worlds, and examining ways of adjusting Indianness to Western traditions or majority ethnic groups' traditions, on the one hand, and African American adaptation to white standards. On their path to integration, the characters under analysis reveal a concern with (re)constructing the self, as well as feelings of lack of self-respect and acceptance. The concentration, in the textual analysis sections, is on the way in which the characters react to the new culture, racial beliefs and to the pressures

exercised by majority ethnic groups, as well as on the impact their native culture has on the western American or British culture.

The thesis is organized in five chapters.

The first chapter, *Feminism, Race and Postcolonial Studies. An Intersectional Overview*, employs the theoretical framework of intersectionality which I later employ in reading the selected fictional corpus considers the overlapping influences of fields like gender studies, race studies, feminism, and postcolonialism. To further emphasize the postcolonial grid, this chapter also offers a view into the implications of the idea of Orientalism. This theoretical perspective helps understand the discourse used by Indian women authors working in English. The complex links between the act of writing and cultural politics, language, and power are the primary focus of this theoretical grid established by Edward Said. He endeavors to demonstrate how traditional Western fictional and academic discourse contributed to the widespread and unfavorable perception of Eastern cultures as inadequate. He also seeks to demonstrate how pervasive these portrayals are in Western culture, these depictions having been used to justify the West's imperialist policies in the Middle East, Asia and the Far East regions.

The second chapter, *Victimization and Creativity of the Black Woman—African American Female Writing*, examines how slavery inhibited liberty and self-expression. From the agonizing history of slavery to the present-day communal struggles, black people have been subject to many forms of oppression. In writing about the trauma of slavery, I wish to shed more light on notable African American women who recognized themselves as members of the traumatized and oppressed black women's community. Sojourner Truth, Harriet Ann Jacobs, Frances Harper, Maria Stewart, and numerous others have written about the brutality of slavery and how it impacted black people. The chapter also provides an overview of black feminist thought, represented by bell hooks and Audre Lorde, considered that this new movement should be set first to resist the passivity and unworthiness that were imposed in yesteryears by slavery. They argued that the black woman's silence contributed to her victimization. These wordless voices led to rape, sexual exploitation, and even vilification. The black woman's consciousness is examined by hooks through the desire to transform her frustrated state into self-recovery and self-fulfillment. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks argues that remaining silent is an act of liability, and she advocates for the power of speech as a liberating condition that could be used to fight against oppression.

The third chapter, *A Contextual History of Indian Women's Fiction from Pre-Independence to Post-Independence*, focuses on the British Raj, a period of direct British administration over the Indian subcontinent between 1858 and 1947 when India and Pakistan attained independence. This historical overview is meant to highlight the fact that the political oppression and the social stagnation imposed by the British administration in these colonies further contributed to the stagnation of mentalities regarding gender relations and hierarchies. After this overview, the chapter focuses on Indian women writers who wrote in English both before and after the independence, creating an entirely original corpus of fictional and non-fictional texts. After independence, women writers rejected traditional discourse patterns, including power relations based on race and gender, socioeconomic inequity, male dominance, and western hegemony, and focusing on the effects of the pressures worked by society on the female psyche.

The fourth chapter is divided into two parts. The first part under the title *Alice Walker's The Color Purple: Women's Traumatic Experiences in Sexist and Racist Societies*, examines the feminist opening of *The Color Purple* and attempts to comprehend the position of black women in patriarchal American society. Qualitative methods, including those from psychology, history, and gender studies, are used to dissect the novel in detail, converging towards the conclusion that black women in the United States have been the constant targets of sexism and that one way for black women to break free from male dominance is through the power of sisterhood. The second part focuses on the issues of identity, race, and gender in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison confronts the reality of the intersection of race and gender by examining how racism and sexism function and their potentially disastrous effects. Morrison challenges Western standards of beauty and demonstrates that the concept of beauty is socially constructed. In demonstrating pride in being black, this writer does not simply portray positive images of blackness. Instead, she focuses on the damage that the black women characters suffer through the projection of (ideal) femininity in a racialized society. This subchapter demonstrates that the novel offers a reaction to mainstream culture, debunking simplistic social binaries which adhere to a prescribed feminine ideal. As a result of trying to adapt to the standard of white femininity, the black female characters loathe their blackness, this leading to self-hatred, feelings of inadequacy, and despising their physical traits.

The fifth chapter, *Indian Women Novelists in English: Caste and Gender Issues*, is divided into two parts. The first part deals with Anita Desai, who depicts the varied realities of women's experience, particularly the challenges of being a woman in a rigorous traditional

society. The heroines in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* aspire to express themselves amid challenging circumstances, yet the concept of empowerment remains elusive. Desai illustrates the insurmountable inconsistencies, discontinuous identities, and fractured character of a heroine's life, yet she does not present an alternative paradigm of feminine behavior. The heroine remains a dreamer till the day she dies, but her knowledge of the social order to which she belongs is never disregarded. A woman's inability to succeed in her life does not cause her to be socially dysfunctional. In Desai's novels, the women's capacity to exist as women of their own time distinguishes them as resilient survivors in a brutal environment. The second part focuses on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, which invests a lot of attention in psychology, depicting the trauma and deep anguish of the female characters and provides valuable insights into child psychology. In this part I focus primarily on the effects of trauma on female characters and children, on its impact on the lives of the most vulnerable members of a social group. I also apply here the conceptual frameworks of psychological trauma studies to childhood in connection with the conceptual binary pair silence and voicing, a conceptual grid which comes full circle, bringing together the Indian writers and their concerns, on the one hand, and the desiderata expressed by the African American women writers, on the other.

The thesis highlights significant similarities of purpose as well as differences between the four writers in their vision about female experience. Marriage, family relations, sisterhood and the position of women in the community are, predictably, recurrent themes these writers share. The comparative analysis deals with how these topics are conveyed in frameworks that are sometimes convergent, but more often than not divergent, under the joint influence of religious, ethnic, and class factors. The characters of Desai and Roy are overwhelmed by severe traditions reflected in the relentless continuity of familial relations which can be regarded as a form of bondage. It is nearly impossible for their female characters to discover their identities outside these rigid norms.

Desai brings to the forefront, in cases which are individualized and filtered through careful psychological observation, problems which are specific of the Indian society, such as the exile of widows and unmarried women, the joint family, the dowry, arranged marriages and relationships with spouses and between their children. Her individualized protagonists, like those of Roy, differ significantly from those of Walker and Morrison, who pay great attention to female friendships and identify solutions in real and symbolic sisterhood. While protagonists featured in the Indian communities are solitary figures, evidence of an atomized society, the black women portrayed by the two African American writers believe in

communal strength, particularly in the healing power of sisterhood. Morrison and Walker highlight in their novels the necessity of sisterhood and demonstrate that communication among the female characters is life-saving, transforming their trauma into self-recovery.

A common topic tackled by both the African American writers and the Indian ones is the arranged marriage as an ultimate instance of discrimination and suppression, in which violence is systemic and the victimization of women is a routine. The structure and functioning of the families depicted in the selected corpus are determined by the patriarchal society, being the environment in which women are first positioned as others, bound to domesticity and regarded as weak. From the family as a microcosm to the society in general, this mechanism of victimizing or, alternatively, vilifying women, works in a bottom-up direction.

The aim of the thesis was to research the intersected issues of race and gender, the process of the reformation of the self in the context of slavery, classism, racism, segregation and immigration with a focus on the African American and Indian characters from four novels written by four women novelists from two different parts of the world. The novels are read with the help of the combined theoretical tools from sociology, psychology, immigration studies in the global context, as well as by applying theories concerning Orientalism, post-colonialism, migration, ethnicity, social space, reterritorialization, identity and the self, multiculturalism, integration, and marginalization. The thesis analyzes the characters' struggle to survive by reforming a new identity, as it is revealed in the novels under scrutiny, all published between 1970 and 1982. The novels set in America are *The Color Purple* written by Alice Walker and *The Bluest Eye* written by Toni Morrison in 1970, while the other two are set in the Indian and the Anglo-American space: *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (1997) and *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai (1976). The novels under discussion represent the variably successful process of integration of African-American and Indian male, but especially female characters in the Anglo-American space.

The study explores female authorship, women's lives in different racial and societal backgrounds and the ways in which female writers depict their heroines as spokespersons of a set of values represented by a certain gender and social identity. This study focuses on the discussion of the influence of the social, economic and political factors on the status and role attributed to women in different societies, at different historical moments. Nevertheless, what the women generally share is the need to find and construct their self-worth, either through bonds with others, for example through motherhood, marriage and sisterhood, or through professional struggles and activism. I argue that the four writers make their female characters

find the road to self-discovery despite the complexities of life, challenges, and temptations that their heroines experience. In fact, sisterhood gives the female characters the power to reconstruct their repressed or erased identity.

The research includes the investigation of the techniques with which female authors, judging by the writings of Roy, Desai, Morrison and Walker, construct and treat their heroines. As one of the matters of the study was the nature of female authorship, one of its important aspects is what makes their manner of writing and their work different from that of male writers. It is obvious that the four mentioned writers mainly concentrate on the dilemmas associated with the experience of being a woman within the framework of their own racial environments. Whereas the circumstances of life and the level of consciousness differs in their characters' experiences, what these female authors have in common is their perception of womanhood in general, with a particular focus on marginalization.