Subalternity and the Emergence of Agency in
Selected Novels of Toni Morrison, Amy Tan and Abdullrazak Gurnah

An Abstract

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The present dissertation studies subalternity, how it warps individual subjectivity, the emergence of agency and its role in building self-reliant individuals in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008), Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001) and Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise* (1994) and *Desertion* (2005). These texts have been analysed to throw light on the functioning of oppression in its various forms. The aim is to study how various characters in these texts move from a position of subalternity to attaining agency. As it comes out, this trajectory is not a straight one, and the passage to agency is often convoluted and complex.

The first chapter focuses on how subalternity affects individuals. It attempts to understand the workings of oppression and how it fragments subjectivities. The second chapter is on subjectivity. In this chapter, the process of how various characters form healthy subjectivities as they move towards agency has been studied. The third chapter deals with how various characters deal with traumatic memories by bringing them into consciousness and by accepting them as essential parts of their lives. That the collective memories play an important role in forming subjectivities also comes to light. The fourth chapter deals with the role of solidarity and belonging in helping various characters in dealing with their oppression. Solidarity, in this regards, does not just refer only to political solidarity, but to acts of forming social and familial relations in the conduct of everyday life. The fifth chapter deals with agency. The process of how the various characters become agents has been probed.

The study reveals that through their struggles, various characters are able to attain agency which undoubtedly is a complex goal to reach. The very resources that are required to restore subjectivity are depleted by oppression. Also, the subaltern gains agency through specific linguistic, cultural, social, and mnemonic functions. In addition to the colonial discourse and oppressive practices, there exist counter cultural discourses that tend to strengthen the subaltern and help her in gaining agency.