Chapter 5

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5.1 Understanding Agency

The concerns of subalternity and agency are dialectically related. They derive their meaning from one another. There is a deep-seated need for agency in oppressed societies, as this study of Morrison, Tan and Gurnah’s texts foregrounds. These authors record certain micro histories of oppressed peoples. The stories of several characters reveal a trajectory from subalternity to agency. In order to be able to throw light on how agency comes about in the novels it is important to understand how agency is conceptualized. Before a theoretical understanding of agency is embarked on, it is very important to ask the question, “why agency now?” Laura M. Ahearn answers this question with the following assertions:

While there are undoubtedly many answers to this question, one is that there is a clear connection between the emergence of interest in approaches that foreground practice on the one hand, and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s on the other... not only the social movements of the past few decades but also postmodern and poststructuralist critiques within the academy that have called into question impersonal master narratives that leave no room for tensions, contradictions, or oppositional actions on the part of individuals and collectivities. (109-110)

According to An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language the word “agent” means “one who performs or does, a factor” and is derived from the Latin word “agere” which means, “to do, drive, conduct” (Skeat 10). In philosophical and sociological understanding the idea of the agent is seen more complexly than its literal meaning suggests because it is understood that action does not happen in isolation, but within structures and a matrix of other acts which may include oppression and restrictions on action. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines agency as, “In very general terms, an agent is a being with the capacity to act, and ‘agency’
denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity” (Schlosser 1). Action has been a ripe field for philosophical discussions. How actors are formed both within and opposed to social structures; what the implications of action on subjectivity are; and how action becomes a source of social resistance are some of the crucial questions that arise when one tries to understand action and resistance in the economically and culturally unequal societies. The *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* defines the dialectics of agency and structure in these terms:

> An important debate in sociological theory concerns the relationship between individuals and social structure. The debate revolves round the problem of how structures determine what individuals do, how structures are created, and what are the limits, if any, on individuals' capacities to act independently of structural constraints; what are the limits, in other words, on human agency. (Abercrombie et. al. 5)

In sociology the concept of action has been furthered and specified in arguments relating to agency. The idea of agency is central in Anthony Giddens’ writing, particularly his theory of structuration. There are two major strains in his concept of agency, ones that relate action to consciousness and those that relate to power. Agency is closely interlinked with power, as its very definition suggests; it is the source of action.

Agency for Giddens flows through individuals who are self conscious beings, and agency is not contained in them. Society is a recursive phenomenon in that it is constituted of the recurrent practices of individuals. Giddens writes:

> Society is a structured phenomenon and… the structural properties of a group or a society have effects upon the way people act, feel and think. But when we look at what these structures are, they are obviously not like the physical qualities of the external world. They depend upon regularities of social reproduction. (Giddens, “Conversations” 77)

Giddens stresses that agency is not to be considered as being something that exists within a closed social structure. Agency is preeminently what defines the humanity of the subject, and socialization is largely the impact that social institutions have on the social being. Giddens does not reduce social beings as being subservient
to the social structures they inhabit. Rather he observes that despite being members influenced by certain institutions, people do not lose their ability to act as conscious beings. They can rationalize about their actions. These grains of autonomous behavior are an important aspect of subjects’ attitudes. As Giddens points out, “agency doesn’t mean that the world is plastic to the will of the individual” (Giddens, “Conversations” 80); it only means that the agent can act in a way that he can reproduce and reconstruct his life which is constituted to some extent in a social structure. Human social activities are not directly brought into being by social actors but are constantly amended and reproduced by them through their activities. The actors are in control of producing activities which control conditions that affect societal practices.

Giddens does not see an agent as being transcendentally free from all social structures. According to him, social structures continue to influence the extent of agency that can be exercised by the individual. Individual choice, then, is not without constraints, and not all social institutions are limiting. Social institutions are both “constraining and enabling” (Giddens, “The Constitution” 83) and structural properties make the actions of the agent possible.

The idea of agency presumes some form of constraints; on the other hand constraints also presume agency because the outlet/outburst of energy is always already present in the tension that oppression creates. Agency is a way to overcome constraints, and hence is born out of constraints. Giddens goes on to assert that agents are always individuals and a societal agency is largely a metaphorical term. Agency is vested in individuals and not societies. Also agents exist within a space and time and act from within their structures. Giddens avers:

To be a human being is to be a purposive agent, who both has reasons for his or her activities and is able, if asked, to elaborate discursively upon those reasons (including lying about them). But terms such as ‘purpose’, ‘intent’, ‘reason’, ‘motive’ and so on, have to be treated with caution, since their usage in philosophical literature has very often been associated with hermeneutical voluntarism and because they extricate human action from the contextuality of time-space. (Giddens, “The Constitution” 3)
Giddens relates agency to power. Interventions in the ongoing world that influence its functioning and state of affairs are the “causal powers” (Giddens, “The Constitution” 14) of agency. Domination, according to him does not simply create human subjects who act like automata; rather, he asserts that there is a dialectical relation between actors and collectives where the control is not singularly exerted over the oppressed; the oppressed too influence the activities of those in power. Giddens calls this the dialectic of control in social systems.

Change according to Giddens is a possibility that exists at all moments in social life. Agency occurs as a flow and not just an aggregate of human actions carried out temporally and spatially. An individual is a temporal and a spatial being, since s/he has a body that exists in time and space. By understanding how social institutions are operative in space and time, the agent can reconfigure them in her existence. In this connection, Steven Loyal further clarifies Giddens’ position when he says that, “Despite his claim to provide a sociological account on which a delicate balance between agency and structure is reached, Giddens’ agent remains the sovereign autonomous agent of liberalism: one who is both rational and creative” (51).

Agency is often related to free will where the focal point of interest is what the subject does, as opposed to what happens to him. The initiation of an action requires free will, deliberation, intention, and a view of the result. The idea of free will, however, is problematic because it isolates action. In reality action always occurs in a socio-cultural space that affects it in complex ways. Oppressive social forces essentially seek conformity and are hegemonic. They require some form of acquiescing to rules which have an ingrained sense of being apt and natural. At the same time, there are several other social processes that deter giving up to oppression and initiate rebellion. Breaking away from the condition of oppression and entering into a relatively free world where one is in control, constitutes agency. Agency itself is never permanent, it has to be recreated continually. The individual is only relatively and not completely autonomous because action is never purely self-directed. The self does emerge through agency, but again, the self is a canvas where complex determiners play their game.
Foucault’s conceptions of power, subjecthood and agency are radical and need to be looked into at some length. According to Foucault, power is exercised and retained through the configuration and distribution of knowledge. Knowledge comes to be organized as discourse. Discourse is important because it relates to truth and power. Certain truths are circulated in society through the interstices of discourse. Discourse, then at this conjecture is full of possibility. If power is exercised through discourse, it gets a tangibility, a concentration. Since discourses are always in the process of formation, they can be deformed. This deformation and deconstruction is the seat for agency. Foucault writes:

We must make allowances for the complex and unstable processes whereby a discourse can both be an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart. (Foucault, “History of Sexuality” 100)

Knowledge is central to being an agent because knowledge gives the subject not only an understanding of the social structure, but also generates a voice for the subject. Knowledge as we know from the Foucault’s interrelationship of power/knowledge, is used in the institutional dissemination of power; the knowledge of the subject then lends her power.

Agency is often mistakenly equated with resistance. Responses of resistance to power take many forms that either look back to the past or move to the future. In resistance, there is always some form of move towards a retaliation. Agency however, is not purely resistance since it can include a combination of acceptance of power, accommodation, ignoring the oppressor as well as protest. Giddens, opposes the idea of agency as free will or resistance, but rather situates agency within structures. He relates how social structures influence action and vice-versa.

Despite the disorder and seeming rigidity of oppression, the individual can still act by choice. Imagination is an important source of agency that begins from consciousness. Human life and development are determined by imagination and it makes individuals what they are and what they will become. Imagination is the source
of an alternate reality and going beyond the given. It is the harbinger of freedom. It is without reason or explanation and therefore is also the part of human life that evades control. Nigel Rapport says:

For what is currently lived is itself the issue of past imaginative acts of the world- creating and dependent on continuing individual practice for its continuing institutionality, inevitably present imaginative acts will be moving to new possible futures; in the process of creating a new world, existing worlds are inexorably appropriated, reshaped and reformed. (5)

Creativity exists in the domain of insanity, impropriety, rebellion etc. because it tries to overhaul existing and established systems. The agent, when s/he successfully brings about a change in the disordered world, enters the sphere of being heroic. She ceases to be normal and becomes almost an extraterrestrial entity, who, has to then wage another battle to be accommodated into the neo-normal sphere. The creativity of the agent is seen as a dangerous anomaly by those in power and in control of social structures. They demarcate what is considered proper and engage the masses in the norm by creating in them a fear of the repercussions that transgression would have.

Certain oppressed people are hybridized by existing in a colonized realm. This hybridization, Bhabha contends is not clearly negative as would seem on initial inference. Hybridity, the condition of imbibing values of multiple cultures is actually a handing down of strength in disguise. Bhabha has almost become synonymous with the term hybridity, which has a double signification – in terms of cross-culturalism and the resistance that is born out of it. The colonized subject comes to acquire a multishadedness and acquires a multiple identity. This multiple identity is not to be seen as a fissuring of the self, but as an intersubjective process that gives additional dimensions to the colonized subject. The colonized becomes neo-localized in the processes of colonization and is not simply displaced. This neo-localization is also the space of agency.

It would be fruitful to introduce some of the insights of the feminist theorist, Judith Butler to shed light on women’s resistance. She points out in Gender Trouble (2006) that the subject exists prior to discourses and culture. This preexistence allows
for recourse to freedom/agency. Agency is possible because of this space where the subject has not been always already subjected. Here the subject exists in a decimal space before cultural constraints. This may not suggest that the subject exists as a prediscursive “I”. It simply means that the subject is capable of transcending discourse or negotiating the cultural space. Butler writes: “The culturally inmued subject negotiates its construction, even when those constructions are the very predicates of its own identity” (195).

She contends that recourse to a pre-linguistic “I” is impossible. The “I” can only be reached by engaging signifying structures. The “I” is enabled into existence through language. Thus language exists as a structure through which the “I” comes to exist. There is no subjectivity possible outside of language. Butler’s views can be linked up with Spivak’s idea of the subaltern speaking. For Spivak, as for Butler speech is thus inextricably tied to subjectivity and agency.

Language initiates a form of symbolic resistance in the face of oppression. Oppression occurs at a crucial level, as already discussed earlier in the present chapter, through language. Moulding language as a subjectifying process, as the feminists or colonized do, then is a vital form of resistance. Both reaching a subjective definition and speaking out of one’s oppression occurs through language. Agency is mediated through socio-cultural acts and language is the medium of mediation here.

There are many levels at which resistance occurs. Resistance is essentially political, but politics is not limited to the larger issues. Politics affects the day to day lives of the subalterns. Conversely, some form of counter politics is also operative here as the subalterns rebel with their own personal discretions, within their ordinary, personal worlds. What little the subjects do in their day to day lives to become agents on the whole becomes more important than the occasional dramatic uprisings in the public sphere. There are very few instances of organized public dissent in the texts, but a subtle resistance operates through them. Where dissent occurs, there is an intersection between resistance at the macro and micro level. Dynamics of agency in all their ramifications are operative in the works of Morrison, Tan and Gurnah.
5.2 Moving towards Agency in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008)

In Toni Morrison’s novels chosen for this study various characters move from being someone to no one to someone again. In their attempts towards retribution of their selves, they exit the dominant structures and enter a sphere where they are not socially regulated. They re-instil existence into the barren sphere of their oppressed lives and become visible again. They create conditions of opportunity while also existing within a system that deters change. They are determined individuals who have a counter rationality that spreads by drawing into its vortex other human subjects living in similar conditions.

Slavery of the African Americans remains a blot on the American visage. It was a form of colonization that left the psyches of the oppressed corroded. Their psychologically abraded and impaired selves in turn delayed responses that would make them agents. Agency for them was like exiting a vicious circle or a whirlpool that continually drew them in. The most apparent agents in *Beloved* are Baby Suggs and Sethe but as carriers of traumatic memories they lapse back into subalternity. The eponymous protagonist, on the other hand remains unformed and under developed. She gets lost in her wish-fulfilling agendas and finally literally evaporates from the novel. Agency, Toni Morrison might be suggesting, comes hard.

Baby Suggs forms a vital centre of agency in *Beloved*. She is the novel’s philosophical voice, the intellectual and moral motivator who has an almost infectious agency. This control over other people’s consciousness and sense of self is also a component of her agency. Her agency and influence do not come from self actualization, but ironically they spring from her understanding of her own incompleteness as an African in a white world:

> Because slave life had “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,” she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart- which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an un churched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it. (Morrison, *Beloved* 102)
Later on in life, after Beloved’s murder, she loses energy and strength. Her initial struggle gives way to a distaste for and distraction from life. Suddenly, all the meanings that she had read into life become futile. This highpoint of her anguish leaves her hopeless.

Sethe and Denver too engage in a battle with their past that exists in the form of a ghost haunting their home. They engage in a perfunctory battle against their space. Every space has a physical nature, its gravity, the weight of its objects, buoyancy, motion and inertia. Action happens within these limits. The American space also has political barriers like those of admission/acceptance, expulsion/rejection, imitation of an outside space, power, hegemony, and coercion. In Beloved the space becomes supernaturally charged with the existence of the inexplicable ghost, indicating that the experience of trauma is almost supernatural to the human psyche and leaves the subject less than human.

The first descriptions of the haunted house do not name the ghost. All we know is that it has something to do with the family’s past. We are told about Sethe’s nameless daughter and how Sethe lends language to her nameless existence. Sethe names her Beloved after she dies. Sethe could not name her till then because of the exigencies of slave life. She gives her the name “Beloved” after the first word of the sermon delivered at her funeral. Naming her dead, nameless daughter is for her a form of intervention into her existence. The naming is also Sethe’s own fight with her inner guilt. She wants to reiterate her love through this symbolic religious naming.

Paul D’s wandering is a way of dealing with the constrictions of his space. He keeps on shifting space and is always on the move because, somehow, he wants to be free in the ultimate sense of the word. He is superficially free as he is no longer a slave. He nevertheless keeps on trying to be free from all bonding.

We realize through Sethe’s and Denver’s character that agency does not come involuntarily but is a conscious, voluntary act. Sethe and Denver become agents in their own idiosyncratic ways. Denver becomes an agent through fostering solidarity with the women of the neighbourhood. Sethe’s actions in her relation with Beloved are born in desperation. Also, when she disengages herself from the neighbourhood, she is following her emotions subconsciously and is not making a conscious decision. After the homicide, Sethe’s sensitivity is pushed to a corner of her self and the
survival instinct takes a primary place in her life. In the process, the finer nuances of existence are relegated to a back seat. She seems the “quiet queenly woman” who is in control of her life:

The one who never looked away, who when a man got stomped to death by a mare right in front of Sawyer’s restaurant did not look away; and when a sow began eating her own litter did not look away then either. And when the baby’s spirit picked up Here Boy and slammed him into the wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his eye… still her mother had not looked away. (Morrison, *Beloved* 14)

This control however, is superficial. Sethe is a bold woman who faces her circumstances. Sethe is cautious and this caution chains her to her past. She becomes, as it were, a pawn for the past that controls her. African Americans are often rendered incapable of forming bonds with other people because of the scars that trauma leaves on their psyches. Sethe’s strength lies also in her ability to keep loving Denver. Unlike Baby Suggs, she clings to this last one and loves her unconditionally. Paul D however, like Baby Suggs, observes that loving one’s children like this was risky. This is a way Sethe fights with her circumstances and intervenes as an agent. She makes up for her general lifelessness – the life that Paul D notices has been punched out of her eyes – through her love for Denver. Her children become for her anchors:

Other people went crazy, why couldn’t she? Other people’s brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new, which is what must have happened to Halle… What a relief to stop it right there. Close. Shut. Squeeze the butter. But her three children were chewing sugar teat under a blanket on their way to Ohio and no butter play would change that. (Morrison, *Beloved* 83)

Her motherhood stops her from going mad. She is involved in her motherly duties so deeply that she finds it impossible to do anything that does not fall in line with motherhood.

Survival is a key concern in the novel. The various characters struggle to remain alive or sane and become agents in their own right. Their conscious decisions
make them agents while spontaneous psychological or emotional reactions to oppression are largely deterministic. Agency does not come from being politically free; political freedom is just an aspect of agency. Agency must be created and recreated continually as one goes on struggling in life.

Songs become for the characters a way of coming to terms with life and becoming agents through creativity and art. Paul D sings various songs to come to terms with his life. They are a vent for his traumatic experiences. Paul D lives a very insecure life like several other African Americans in *Beloved*. He feels insecure in rooting himself to any place. Sethe feels insecure as a runaway slave, Denver's life is relatively secure but her loneliness and lack of companionship make her insecure. Their insecurities can either hold them down with their burden, or they can evolve out of these insecurities by making choices that are conducive to their wellbeing.

Agency forms slowly in the lives of various characters in the midst of stark images of slavery and brutality. Avowed agents often revert to previous states of trauma when they feel overwhelmed by their slave past. There seems to be no way out of it but the characters must engage in a constant struggle to undo its effects and to step out of its restrictive and binding domain.

Some people also become agents by making other people’s lives easier. Agency for Halle means buying freedom for his mother. His act of agency is not directed inwards but is closely tied to his emotional core that attaches him to his mother. Halle is a mild subject. Sixo on the other hand comes to symbolize a revolutionary who breaks rules and goes against what is normative. He is aware of freedom which guides his life’s choices. His agency lies in avenging himself on the white masters. This revenge that he takes from the masters is his way of bringing about some form of change in his situation. The slaves, nevertheless, are also aware that what has happened before can happen again. They continue to be influenced by what happened in the past. What Denver says about the past makes the reader realize that even if the past allows one to intervene, it always carries a threat of repetition:

All the time, I’m afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don’t know what it is, I don’t know who it is, but maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again. I need to know what that thing might
be, but I don’t want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside this house, outside this yard. (Morrison, Beloved 242)

The constant repetition that life is, leaves us with the surety that what has happened can happen again. This can be both debilitating and reassuring. It makes us realize that a free life is possible. Agency comes about through action. When individual actions become aligned with co-agents, revolutions are willed and worked for. The idea of solidarity and belonging is closely related to agency. Group solidarity sometimes becomes a prerequisite in becoming agents. When Sethe loses her agency and becomes depressed in dealing with Beloved, the women of the neighbourhood come together to exorcise the house and expel the ghost from Sethe’s life. Right at the time when the women gather at Sethe’s house, a man wearing a hat comes on a horse, Beloved disappears. It is an example of an abreaction. The scene outside is in a way a recasting of the scene of Beloved’s murder, which then replays in Sethe’s mind. This bringing of the traumatic event to the consciousness causes the exorcism of Beloved from Sethe’s house. At a symbolic level, it may be seen as the final acceptance of the act of murder by Sethe.

Agency involves some form of consciousness about the world. Reading meanings into existence is the beginning of agency. Humans always strive towards certainty and knowledge and move towards dispelling confusion. Confusion remains an important motif in A Mercy. The text itself is written as a confusing, jumbled set of events and irrelevant details heighten the already confusing tale. The plot is not complex, only the way it unwinds is intricate.

Florens becomes an agent through experience and knowledge. As a teenager, she is naïve. She grows as a sensible subject, however, after her journey to find Blacksmith. This journey reveals to her several facets of life that she had not hitherto seen. She grows through it and becomes an agent when she pens down her new understanding of the world and life. It is a rebirth or renaissance for her. Every birth, however, also comes from a death. Her first experience of what may be called a metaphoric death is when she is given up by her mother and ceases to be a daughter. Something in her vanishes again when Blacksmith gives her up; only this time, she has gained experience and understands what desertion means.
When the Blacksmith goes away Florens begins to “dream and plot” to meet him. As a farm help, she has very little agency. Being an African teenager, she is not only denied visibility and importance, her own inner resources are also inadequate. Yet the fact that she plans shows that she has a need to control her own life. When she is given the errand to go to the blacksmith she has to cross the forest all alone. It is a fearful enterprise but because of her sheer excitement to reach her goal, Florens is able to make her journey successfully. She reaches closer to becoming an agent when she undertakes this journey. She is, however, not free in this enterprise. She is driven by her attachment and being infatuated to the Blacksmith she feels that they are one, when in reality they are disjointed beings. Florens has several misperceptions about the world which go on to restrict her passage to agency. She moves towards becoming an agent only when she appraises her situation after Blacksmith shatters her expectations. Her very act of writing her story on the walls is initiated by her introspection. She is, like all human beings, what her story has made her. Every story has several versions and none is completely authentic. There are always gaps imposed on stories from the outside or even by the medium that these stories take shape in. Reading and writing are ways of becoming agents through knowing and expressing. When Florens and her mother secretly learn language they learn a mode of self expression. The Africans are forbidden any learning because it would empower them and end the control that the whites exert over them.

We are told about Lina that she is a hybrid of Red Indian and white American culture. She goes to church and dresses like whites but she wears beads underneath and dances her tribal dance in the twilight: “A praying savage, neighbours call her, because she is once churchgoing yet she bathes herself every day and Christians never do. Underneath she wears bright blue beads and dances in secret at first light when the moon is small” (Morrison, “Mercy” 3). Lina maintains a balance between her two lives and comes about as a firm character. She has reached a positive mean between the disjointed aspects of her self. Lina is a thinking woman and she is the seat of female agency in A Mercy. She is the only female character who somehow feels in control of her life. Yet, she too has her share of trauma. Lina pieces together her life after the traumatic experience of the death of her entire village. She takes a detour to her past to find her subjectivity:
She decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found in other words, a way to be in the world. (Morrison, “Mercy” 46)

Like Lina, Blacksmith too is an agent because he exists outside the rules of the whites, unlike most African men. He lives on the other side of the jungle but not with the whites which can be read symbolically to mean that he is like the whites but in a different way. He can look at a white man when he speaks to him because he is a free man.

Jacob is a different type of agent from the women in *A Mercy*. His agency lies in bringing nature under his control: “Sir was a hurricane of activity laboring to bring nature under his control. More than once when Lina brought his dinner to whatever field or woodlot he was working in, she found him, head thrown back, staring at the sky as if in wondering despair at the land’s refusal to obey his will” (Morrison, “Mercy” 47).

Jacob, like Florens and Lina struggles with the natural environment. He faces confusion like Florens when he has to traverse the American landscape. He symbolizes an expansionist who wages a battle against the environment. Jacob’s freedom is based on economics. His agency comes from being economically free. He continually recreates his agency by constructing several houses. There is no rest for him. Even after he dies his ghost haunts his home. His last wish before he dies is to be taken to his house. Building property, is a way to becoming an agent. Lina’s community build houses before the Europeans take them away, Blacksmith who is an agent is also a builder, and Jacob tries to become an agent through the act of building houses since they are the landmarks of his strength and presence in the world. These constructive acts are symbolic of the motivation to construct something and in doing so confronts the oppressive and destructive practices that tend to marginalize the subject and restrict her movement.

When Lina and Rebekka shed their differences and come together in a collective battle against nature which tries to challenge their survival, they become
agents in a new light. They realize that they can only deal with the challenges that nature poses to them by coming together against it.

Humans try to lend eternity to their work by the act of passing it on. In the absence of heirs their work also ceases to be important. Humans can oust passing into oblivion by death only symbolically by passing on remnants of their lives to people who come after them. In the light of the fact that everyone on the farm is an orphan, the act of passing on becomes all the more important.

The main characters in the novel have all had bleak and challenging lives. Rebekka is an uncared for child, Jacob is an orphan, Lina has survived the death of her entire village, Florens has been deserted by her mother, and Sorrow has a negative history that we are never told about in detail. The farm is for these characters a place of renaissance or rebirth.

Thus, we see that Toni Morrison’s novels record and question the colonization of African Americans and in turn raise multiple philosophical issues related to oppression. She records the disordered experience of African American life. Her characters deal with oppression in their individual ways. Paul D journeys, Sethe shuts up her emotional core, Beloved craves stories, Florens writes, Lina comprehends life rationally, Sorrow fights mental illness through attachment with her baby and Jacob builds houses. Some of these strategies are ego defense mechanisms and escape routes while others are confrontations. Agency is an untangling of the chaotic mess of oppressed life. Morrison suggests through the character of Sixo that one can stand up for one’s rights even if it means annihilation; through the character of Sethe that gaining support from community can give one the strength to confront oppression and one’s own guilt; through the character of Florens that one must express and record memories of oppression; and through the character of Lina that one must reason to oppose oppressive forces rationally.
5.3 Agency through Interpersonal Connection in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001)

Like Morrison’s novels, Tan’s novels, too focus largely on women characters, their trials and tribulations, and the ways they employ to deal with their subalternity as colored women and migrants. Tan’s women, particularly the first generation migrants and traditional Chinese women have a subtle sense of agency. They seem confounded in their limited, socially dictated lives, but nevertheless access agency from within these socio-cultural structures. Despite the social hierarchies and pressures arising from these hierarchies, they are able to envision ways to destabilize these systems ingeniously. While catering to these structures and living inside them, they engender counter roles that often arise out of centuries of wisdom passed on by women to other women. Often, there is an initial misunderstanding, trivializing and sometimes even complete rejection of this wisdom, but when these women find themselves in trying situations, the seeds of inherited wisdom germinate and grow.

Tan introduces us to a form of cognizant action that is triggered through a passing on of consciousness. She creates a pattern in this. The women pass on wisdom as mothers but were once unruly daughters who failed to acknowledge what their mothers had to pass on to them. This design of inheriting wisdom in the family structure seems to be lacking in the Western societies, where individuality rules. The second generation migrant daughters whose consciousnesses are largely westernized, remain aloof to the Oriental wisdom their mothers have to offer. Life has been largely problematized by the fact that the individual finds herself and her world in a constant flux. Individuals strive towards freedom but despite this being achieved to a large extent in the Western societies where they have come to live, they look for something to fill in what remains missing in their lives. Tan’s two generations of women find themselves in this situation of amalgamation where their very hybridity becomes less and less debilitating and instead becomes a source of strength. There is a wise conscious voice that enters the novels through Tan, who is herself a second generation immigrant, her voice becomes interlinked with the voices of the mothers and daughters. She comes to occupy a middle space somewhere between the mothers whose actions are well channelized to become agents despite their negative heritage,
and the confused daughters who think, ironically, that their agency lies in removing the stains of ethnicity from their identity.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, attachment becomes a mode of attaining agency. Whether it is communal organization among diaspora, attachment to family and friends, or the mother daughter bond, these attachments engender agency. In the opening section of the novel, the Chinese immigrant is attached to the swan as the last remnant of her country. She resists parting from it at the customs but has to let it go in the end. It becomes a symbol of all that immigrants have to let go when they come to reside in a foreign country.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Suyuan Woo dies while she is still searching for her lost daughters. Her daughter, Jing-Mei carries forward her dream by finding her daughters and sharing with them her mother’s life. Her connection with her mother is strengthened posthumously through this endeavour. This finding and carrying on of legacy becomes a defining factor in Jing-Mei’s relation to her mother and her Chinese past.

The first generation of migrant women in *The Joy Luck Club* form a club called the Joy Luck Club to share their happiness and anxieties. It is a carried over tradition that Suyuan had originally started in Kweilin during the war in China. The meetings of the Joy Luck Club are a way of coming to terms with exploitation and the “past wrongs done” to women. It is their way of reviving hope, and fighting free of the oppressor’s stranglehold over their lives. The Joy Luck Club is their way of fighting sorrow that comes in the wake of oppression: “It’s not that we had no heart or eyes for pain. We were all afraid. We all had our miseries. But to despair was to wish back for something already lost. Or to prolong what was already unbearable… So we decided to hold parties and pretend each week had become the new year” (Tan, “The Joy Luck” 24). Also, the mah jong table on which they play during these meetings, forms a link between the two worlds—America and China. Ben Xu observes:

Just as the mah jong table is a linkage between the past and the present for the Club Aunties, Jing-mei Woo, taking her mother’s seat at the table, becomes the frame narrator linking the two generations of American Chinese, who are separated by age and cultural gaps and yet bound together by family ties and a continuity of ethnic heritage. (14)
In the fourth section of *The Joy Luck Club*, all the stories are told by mothers except for the last story which is told by a daughter fulfilling her mother’s wish to meet her twin daughters whom she had to abandon long ago during the Sino-Japanese war. Cao Shuo observes: “Jing- mei’s concluding narrative about going back to China functions in a number of ways as a paradigm for the other narrators’ stories that also need cultural resolution” (240). This act of fulfilling their wishes is an act of strengthening the bond between the mother and the daughter. Once Jing-Mei goes to China to fulfill this wish, she strengthens her bond with her roots in China. Gloria Shen observes:

The novel ends with the arrival of Jing-Mei Woo in China, the “mother-land,” where the three sisters are reunited and where Jing-Mei finally accepts her Chinese identity. Jing-Mei had to leave the West and travel all the way to China before she was able to realize that both her mother and China are in her blood. (ed. Bloom 14)

Jing-Mei has to connect with her roots to become an agent and to feel some form of reconciliation of her Chinese and American existence. When she goes to China, she comprehends her Chinese heritage more completely and accepts it. Finding oneself is a way of survival because it involves a revelation of the hidden, or the obscured. Obscuring of the native cultural values in diaspora is a hegemonic act because it involves a hiding of what is vital to the subjectivity of the oppressed. It is a creation of absence, a clear negation of the inherent and a subsequent imposition of an essential image. Jing-Mei Woo’s mother desperately wants to unearth her daughter’s talent who is not at all interested in this conscious battle to find the exceptional in herself. She eventually takes up piano lessons, ironically from a teacher who is deaf. But all the time Jing-Mei is dreaming of something else, which can be understood as her inherent needs as opposed to those that have been essentiality forced on her by her mother. She resists her mother’s efforts to impose an identity on her. She is comfortable with being an average child rather than being someone she is not:

“I’m not going to play anymore,” I said nonchalantly. “Why should I? I’m not a genius.”

She walked over and stood in front of the TV. I saw her chest was heaving up and down in an angry way.
“No” I said, and I now felt stronger, as if my true self had finally emerged. So this is what had been inside me all along. “No I won’t!” I screamed. (Tan, “The Joy Luck” 141)

Just like Jing-Mei severs the part of her that plays the piano, Ying-Ying aborts her baby who came from a man she did not love and in the act severs him from her body. The severing of the unnatural from their lives is an act of agency and hence also of authenticating their existence.

Amy Tan in The Bonesetter’s Daughter articulates her ideas of how writing leads to agency through one of the protagonists of the novel—Ruth. Ruth is a ghost writer and is in several ways an autobiographical character. She exemplifies Tan’s own life and her ties to family. Ruth’s relation with her mother is similar to that of Tan’s. Tan’s confusions as a diasporic are also reflected in the text and so are the strategies she adopts to deal with oppression as a migrant and woman of colour. Ruth survives by being economically dependent on her writing, but her writing also untangles the multiple threads of thought that she is grappling with. Ruth seems to be confused but ironically helps others give voice to their thoughts. She is a writer of self help books but herself needs help to configure the various disheveled parts of her existence. Her writing can only help her partially. The missing blocks that can smoothen her existence, she realizes, exist in her mother’s history. After reading her memoir Ruth becomes more integrated with herself than before. She comes to understand that her American life must conjoin with her Chinese heritage if she is to make complete sense of her life. Ruth tells Art, “It feels like I’ve found the magic thread to mend a torn-up quilt. It’s wonderful and sad at the same time” (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 322). The torn quilt that Ruth refers to is her own troubled existence. She makes sense of her existence through the missing pieces of her mother’s life and finally comes to associate with her more readily than she had, before reading the memoir.

LuLing makes sense of her life and hence goes on to become an agent through the memoir that she writes. She wants to pass on to her daughter the essence of her struggles in life. Her story is for Ruth, otherworldly, but instructive and caters to her sense of self. It is written in Chinese, a language that Ruth cannot understand readily. It is however a her-story that holds a rare record of the past.
In Tan’s two texts the mother/daughter bond is an important way women become agents. The mother and daughter, however, do not always share a congenial relationship. There are developmental stages through which their bond passes, and strengthens with time. In the case of LuLing and her mother, the bond has no time to develop because her mother, whom she calls, Bao Bomu, dies before LuLing can know who she is. LuLing feels a connection with her dead mother once she comes to know her life story. In Ruth’s case, the turning point of her developing affiliation with her mother and regard for who she is, comes after reading her memoir. She too regrets the attitude she has had up till then towards her mother, but has time to reconfigure her relationship with her. She understands that just like she is unable to share certain parts of her life because of the complex generation gap between them, her mother too finds it difficult to talk to her freely about her past in China. On reading her memoir, Ruth feels, “Parts of her mother’s story saddened her. Why did she feel she could never tell Ruth that Precious Aunty was her mother? Did she fear that her own daughter would be ashamed that LuLing was illegitimate? Ruth would have assured her that there was no shame (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 322). The generation gap and psychological distance between the two is evident here. Reading her mother’s memoir mends not only the torn-up quilt that Ruth’s life is, but also her relationship with her mother and rejuvenates the comfort that a mother and daughter can impart to one another. Cao Shuo observes, “The struggles, the battles, are over, and when the dust settles what was formerly considered a hated bondage is revealed to be a cherished bond” (240).

LuLing as a young woman learns to become an agent through her life at the orphanage. At this point in her life, she knows that she has nothing to lose after losing her mother and the family she had been considering herself a part of. This is, as if, echoed in the song that LuLing reads written on the walls of the orphanage, “We can study, we can learn./ We can marry whom we choose./ we can work, we can earn./ and bad fate is all we lose” (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 240). This sense of extreme loss gives her strength. She grows out of her problems rather than succumbing to them. What is perceptible about her agency is the creativity of her solutions to the problems at hand. When the orphanage has to be vacated and the girls have to be taken to a safe place during the ongoing war, she makes up their faces with cosmetic pus and blood to save them from the army. The army that would have ordinarily harmed girls lets them pass thinking that they are suffering from some terrible disease.
LuLing, is also open to new happenings and circumstances and makes full use of every situation. This is especially revealed through her life at the orphanage where she grows from a nobody into someone of importance. This phase of her life is also the beginning of her enthusiasm for life. She is empowered not only because she is enthusiastic about her existence but the very structure of the school for orphan girls is such that it leads to her growth. The man who runs the orphanage is liberal and dynamic. The orphanage is a result of his enthusiasm to improve lives. His zeal for the growth of his students is infectious and motivates the inmates of the orphanage. The structure of the orphanage is in sharp contrast to the structure of LuLing’s family. The space of family is traditional and restrictive for the women characters. The family curbs movement and follows hackneyed mores. The orphanage on the other hand is a new, modern space where the inmates are allowed to grow and flourish. The rules that are followed are conducive to the development of women’s subjectivities. The orphanage is important in giving a firm footing to women who have no roots. It gives them a space and a history. It is a feminist space and an experimental space where new guiding principles of life are tested. Agency, though does not reside in institutions, but emerges through individuals’ actions; sometimes, however, it is institutions which guide individuals to develop attitudes that can strengthen and organize their disoriented lives. Individuals do not become agents in vacuum but as members of certain institutions. The orphanage is a body that nurtures and helps in creating self sufficient women. LuLing writes about the attitude that is inculcated in the inmates of the girl’s orphanage:

Whenever visitors came by the school, Miss Gruttof had us perform a skit and Miss Towler played piano music, very dramatic to hear… One group of girls held up signs that were connected to Old Fate: opium, slaves, the buying of charms. They stumbled around on bound feet and fell down helpless. Then the New Destiny girls arrived as doctors. They cured the opium smokers. They unbound the feet of the fated ones and picked up brooms to sweep away the useless charms. (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 240)

LuLing, growing in such a place, becomes a feminist, and at the same time imbibes the best of Christianity and Chinese culture, becoming self reliant in the process. LuLing’s mother whom she calls Bao Bomu is also a feminist like her. She is
an only child, is pampered and lives on her own terms. She falls in love with a man and resists to another man who woos her. She is firm and strong in her opinions. These are reflected in the fact that she chooses her own husband at a time when women were prevented from doing so. She is the first generation of women agents in the novel. Her daughter and grand daughter, too are agents but in different ways. Their struggles are different because of the different spaces and situations they occupy. As scenarios change with time and after her migration to America, LuLing leaves her battles behind and now has to fight other battles. She, at first, is represented as the puny insignificant woman who we know through Ruth’s observations. Her heroism is veiled in the diasporic space. Her battles in America seem unimportant to her daughter. It is only after she conveys her history to Ruth through her memoir that we come to see her in a new light. Her battles gain currency through self expression in the memoir. Self expression becomes in this novel not just a way to agency but also a way of passing on her wisdom to her daughter.

Many times in the novel, the characters lose their voice, metaphorically and literally as oppressed subjects. We know in the first few chapters of the novel that Ruth loses her voice every year at the same time. She has no control over it and she thinks it has psychological origins. Her husband thinks that it is laryngitis. She, however infuses this loss of voice with relevance when she tells her friends that it is a ritual and not just a happening:

The following August, rather than just wait for muteness to strike, Ruth explained to her clients and friends that she was taking a planned weeklong retreat into verbal silence. ‘It’s a yearly ritual,’ she said, ‘to sharpen my consciousness about words and their necessity.’… She made her voiceless state a decision, a matter of will, and not a disease or a mystery. (Tan, The Bonesetter’s” 10)

Like Ruth, her grandmother, whom LuLing calls Precious Aunty also loses her voice when she tries to commit suicide. Thereafter she communicates with LuLing through signs or in writing. She has no way to speak but through her daughter, LuLing. She suffers the ultimate emotional breakdown when LuLing disrespects her and in the trauma of rejection by family and daughter commits suicide. She had always been a free-spirited young woman whose agency disintegrates under the
pressures of a patriarchal society. After her death, LuLing rejuvenates in herself the same attitude that her mother had had when she was a young woman like her.

Tan’s focus in her novels is on women as agents. She creates characters who grow as individuals over the span of their lives, through their connections with other characters. Interpersonal bonds and certain institutions like family help them become agents. Guilt, anxiety, low self esteem, and self annihilation are the major problems that arise for her subaltern characters. These are triggered by oppressive social structures like patriarchy and through migration. The women in her two novels fight these by drawing on the experiences of other women and learning new attitudes through them.

5.4 Agency and Freedom in Gurnah’s *Paradise* (1994) and *Desertion* (2005)

Oppression functions in several ways, impacting identity and making agency a complex goal to reach. This section of the chapter takes on the following questions related to agency and freedom as they are clarified or problematized in Gurnah’s novels chosen for this study. Whether agency in a scenario of oppression is possible through group action or individual struggle, or through both? Whether, one can attain an authentic self by virtue of merely membership of the dissenting group without direct involvement? How the individual establishes solidarity with his/her group to strengthen themselves, and aid the emergence of subjectivity? The debate over freedom is also of relevance to understand agency: if complete freedom is ever possible, if one is born free, and if freedom and belonging are opposites or cognates. Gurnah’s characters in *Paradise* and *Desertion* become agents by undertaking journeys like Yusuf and Rashid; negating social norms and establishing their own – like Rehana; through writing about their and other’s lives as a means of revelation and understanding oppression, like Rashid, Amin and Farida; building strong and well thought out choices like Yusuf. Apart from this the novel foregrounds issues of freedom and agency.

The difference between positive and negative liberty is an important debate in understanding the idea of freedom and its various cognates. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* at the outset of its article on freedom defines different types of freedom:
Negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has negative liberty to the extent that actions are available to one in this negative sense. Positive liberty is the possibility of acting — or the fact of acting — in such a way as to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes. While negative liberty is usually attributed to individual agents, positive liberty is sometimes attributed to collectivities, or to individuals considered primarily as members of given collectivities. (Carter 1)

Freedom can never be experienced without the experience of subalternity. Thus, to be free, one must first be un-free. Negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, while positive liberty is analogous to agency. Paradise and hell, subalternity and agency, and colonization and freedom inhabit the same space. Freedom and bondage, normal and abnormal, colonized and colonizer are some of the significant binaries that are brought under the dissection knife in Gurnah’s novels.

Garden is a recurrent motif in Paradise as it is evident from the very title of the book itself. The meaning of paradise here is not limited to its religious meaning of a heavenly garden, but takes on myriad meanings and significances. In a world that is heterogeneous – in the sense that no two experiencing subjects are the same – arriving at the ultimate truth is out of question. Gurnah’s novel unfolds, as it were, in the middle of Rehana’s story and moves towards an incomplete ending, incorporating characters and events that have loose ends. His cosmos is ever expanding. In the text, paradise comes to mean different things for different characters. The different ideas of paradise converge on the protagonist, Yusuf’s idea of paradise, which is freedom. Hamid’s paradise of pigeons that symbolize freedom, Aziz’s idea of paradise as a utopia and Kalasinga’s idea of homeland as paradise all have a similar thread. They were hatched from the same shell, as it were, and in one way or another refer to freedom.

Paradise exists in the space of the ‘un’ – the unseen, unattainable, unfathomable, underground, and even unnatural because it is out of this world. Paradise also is something that comes after the end of life and hence never completely arrives because the end means that there is nothing after it. This knowledge is the root of agency which means, in a sense, that we take things in our own hands and act in a way which we think will take us to paradise. The ultimate idea of Paradise that Gurnah comes to advance through the novel is freedom. Freedom also means many
things for the various characters. For the gardener, Mzee Hamdani, freedom is largely an internal construct is for him, a state of mind. He says:

They offered me freedom as a gift. She did. Who told her she had it to offer? I know the freedom you are talking about. I had that freedom the moment I was born. When these people say you belong to me, I own you, it is like the passing of rain, or the setting of the sun at the end of the day. The following morning the sun will rise again whether they like it or not. The same with freedom. They can lock you up, put you in chains, abuse all your small longings, but freedom is not something they can take away.’ (Gurnah, *Paradise* 223)

According to Mzee Hamdani even in one’s captivity, one can be free. His philosophical notion of freedom sees people as being born free. However this idea of freedom is like that of God. One cannot see it. Constant battles are being fought for sustenance, rights and freedom, often ultimately becoming battles of gaining control over life. We can, however never attain ultimate freedom because we can never be freed of death. It means that there is no ultimate agency. There is always a universal striving and only a limited attainment of agency.

Mzee Hamdani thinks that people can exert their subjectivity even in conditions where they are externally bound. For Yusuf, freedom is both physical and mental. For him freedom in the metaphorical sense, means living in a garden that is not walled. He wants to be banished from his present world to be free. His intertwines what he considers a free life with his urge to live with the girl he loves. Freedom for Yusuf comes with fearlessness which further comes from his self knowledge and having ideas of what resistance means for him. Despite his resilience, however, he must trade one captivity for another at the end of the novel. So desperate is his need to escape his present surroundings and to expand the borders of his subjectivity, that, he runs from Aziz’s home to join another captor, the German army. This act is depicted in unheroic terms by the author: “The marching column was still visible when he heard a noise like a bolting of doors behind him in the garden. He glanced round quickly and then ran after the column with smarting eyes” (Gurnah, *Paradise* 247). This ending has baffled critics ever since the first appearance of the novel in 1989. Why Yusuf suddenly joins the German army, what this act symbolizes, and what it articulates about the nature or natures of colonization. The novel ends in irresolution
and Gurnah may be indicating through this that agency is never complete. Fawzia Mustafa observes about this ending, that Paradise is written in the style of the bildungsroman and its ending conforms to this structure:

In representing competing hegemonies, Gurnah cleaves closer to the historical record than to either the generic requirements of the bildungsroman or the texts that follow in the wake of Conrad... Its irresolution, in other words, mingles the presumption of individual choice underlying the traditional genre with the determinism produced by the overlapping regimes of the competing colonial operations. (251)

A cursory glance at the ending of Paradise, reveals that Yusuf seemingly grabs the first opportunity of freedom by joining the German army. It looks like a sudden act of desperation. A deeper reading, however, reveals that his entire life till then has played a role in shaping up this one decision. Yusuf reaches this final moment in the novel after a long struggle. He learns, through the journeys he takes, several truths about life. The literal journeys he makes are in Aziz’s troupe for selling merchandise. Through these journeys he experiences the world outside of the confines of Aziz’s shop. Literally and metaphorically, these journeys are an expansion of the horizons of his identity. Over these time periods he has romantic experiences, is terrorized, venerated, doubted, and considered a confidante. He performs the roles of a student, lover and friend, but lacks the sense of belonging throughout. He realizes that most of all, he wants to belong somewhere. He does feel solidarity with the other merchants, gains their support and supports them in several scenarios, but solidarity is not effective enough to make him belong with them. He runs away to join the German army because he wants to belong somewhere. He wants to own a place, rather than being its temporary occupant. Belonging and agency are bound together in his mind. He feels that finding a space of belonging would make him an agent, since spaces where one can belong, according to him, empower the subject. Yusuf too feels that he must enter a space or institution that can aid in his struggles to find meaning in his disorganized life. His life is disorganized by economic structures and he has come to understand that economy and power are related. He realizes that he cannot readily acquire economic gains, therefore, he goes to join the army. His captivity in the army is different from his captivity as Aziz’s servant. He will have relative autonomy as an army man and will gain control over at least a section of society. Therefore his joining
the army gives him relative freedom in comparison to his life as Aziz’z servant which is to a large extent, servile.

Several other characters in the novel also lead an oppressed existence. Amongst these Aziz’s first wife is a stark representation of what patriarchy does to women who do not meet its standards. Aziz’s wife has a mark on her face and therefore does not come up to traditional standards of beauty set by patriarchal discourses of her time. She suffers immensely because of this aberration in her being and punishes herself masochistically by refusing to be content with herself. She has inherited and imbibed in her mind, the patriarchal ideology and sees herself through the eyes of a male dominated society. We never know if Aziz rejects her or not, but we know that she rejects herself. Like Yusuf, Mzee Hamdani and Khalil, her efforts at becoming an agent are flawed. She tries to become an agent through Yusuf who according to her is almost a Messiah. She forces him to accept and love her. She tells him to give her sermons and tries to establish a romantic relation with him. She, therefore tries to become an agent through Yusuf’s acceptance of her. She can only accept herself if Yusuf accepts her. Her attempts at gaining agency are flawed because it does not come from self acceptance but are contingent upon someone else’s acceptance of her. Khalil tells Yusuf, “She says it is not your knowledge but your gift that will cure her. She wants you to say a prayer… She says she wants you to touch her heart and cure the wound in it” (Gurnah, Paradise 210).

In Gurnah’s texts one finds that several times the characters are represented as being savage. Mohammed Abdalla, the Arab travel guide is more savage than the blacks living in the jungle. Aziz is savage in his own way, though he is a colonizer. Similarly the German whom Yusuf sees at the railway station snarls at him like a savage, “Suddenly the man bared his teeth in an involuntary snarl, curling his fingers in an inexplicable way” (Gurnah, Paradise 2).

A noticeable thing in the novel is that the colonizer and the colonized are related. Aziz, the colonizer is Yusuf’s uncle. Also, he is a colonizer even though he belongs to the same race and ethnicity as Yusuf. The only difference between them is that of class and age. Gurnah expands the notion of colonization in the novel to include forms of captivity and authority that are usually not talked about in literary discourses. Yusuf must learn that though he is related to Aziz, he is not his uncle because of the barriers that exist between them. Khalil tells him, “‘He ain’t your uncle,’ Khalil said sharply, and Yusuf winced in expectation of another blow”
(Gurnah, *Paradise* 25). Nevertheless, there is no denying the fact that Yusuf is attached to Aziz like a baby and as a lesser developed individual. His life, much like the life of the members of his family, depends on him.

Gurnah challenges the Western modes of comprehension as well as the African. This challenge makes Gurnah subvert the given meanings, reconfigures them, and then reinvents newer meanings. All subalterns and all colonized people all over the world have to take on this challenge of thwarting the given binaries of the colonizer’s culture as well as the binaric configurations of their own native cultures. Without this their struggles to regenerate their subjectivities and rejuvenate their agencies or even to reinvent their freedom remain futile, half-hearted measures.

*Desertion* (2005) tells three interlinked stories about individuals whose lives were influenced by the incidents in Rehana’s life. The novel brings to light different forms of oppression, the most important among them being imperialism and dictatorship by native governments. Freedom does not necessarily end the effects of imperialism. Rather, it stays in the cultural space as a source from which actions spring and decisions are made. The native can never rinse the Western residue and is conditioned by it. Also, the novel refers particularly to Zanzibar which was terrorized by dictatorial regimes of its own rulers even after the foreign colonizer had been ousted. The novel is not merely an exposition of different forms of colonization but engages the reader in several other ways as it grapples with engaging stories – stories which the subaltern has to understand before s/he can emerge as an empowered subject. The stories in the novel are polysemic and the same story is understood variously by different characters. At some level all characters deal with political processes that challenge their sense of self.

Self knowledge and self sufficiency are the roots from which agency grows. The very idea of self knowledge is simplified in *Desertion* through the adoption of traditional roles. This oversimplification at one level itself becomes a problem because some part of our self is inherited and not creatively formed. When Hassanali encounters Pearce, the western orientalist wanderer, he thinks:

What kind of a man would leave his home to wander in a wilderness thousands of miles away? Was that courage or a kind of craziness? What was there here that was superior to what he had left behind? Hassanali could not imagine the impulse that would make him wish to do such wanderings. (Gurnah, *Desertion* 19)
The questions that Hassanali asks here, are vital, and are not esoteric as they may seem on cursory a glance. Wandering is a very important motif in Gurnah’s novels. All forms of wandering, across political, cultural or philosophical borders are subjective in nature. They are born out of some form of restlessness in the present vitiated space and time. Acceptance of life and being still is a form of stagnation, a confinement. Time wanders; it in fact exists in several spheres of past, present and future. Since we live within time, we too wander. Genuine existential wandering, however, happens only when one decides to uproot oneself from the constraints and unchanging firmness of the past.

When Rehana, who has been deserted by a man, resists succumbing to her past and emerges out of it by having a romantic relationship with Pearce, she has wandered off, not only from her constraining past but also from social norms. Despite the freedom that comes out of it, her life has been problematized. Her freedom is only conditional, in that it comes at a price. Rehana becomes a rebel and an agent. She takes control of her life and takes on its responsibility. Before wandering off with Pearce she was in perpetual wait, earlier of a husband who had run off and later of someone with whom she could share her life. When she decides to have a relationship with Pearce she has stopped waiting for things to happen and has acted. She accepts her urges and does not silence them even if it means being ostracized by community. She becomes an agent by taking a stand against patriarchal guidelines for how women should act. Her act is an act of an agent because she asserts her humanity rather than allowing the superego to silence it. She redefines what social mores mean to her life after realizing that the society she has been subservient to, has in fact done nothing to alleviate her pain and anguish.

The third section of the novel *Desertion* deals with Rashid’s diasporic experiences. The diasporic space is colonial and creates hybrid beings. The subject in diaspora has to struggle much like the colonized subject residing in her native country. The colonial space whether diasporic or native, necessarily postpones if not precludes self expression and agency. For those existing in a space which continuously places them in a sphere of flux, mobility becomes a rule. This space is characterized by changing associations between the outside and the inside because stability does not exist. In diaspora what is stable has ceased to exist. The fight of the agent then is not to be stable but itinerant. Existential wandering generates agency
because it implies some form of seeking and answering. In the process of seeking, agents are formed and subjectivities emerge. Journey takes one closer to self knowledge. Desertion is replete with journeys and wanderings and initiates several modes of answering: from the historicizing by Pearce to the pseudo stability of Hassanali, Rehana’s bold step to exit home and social norms, Rashid’s criticism of life and literature, Amin’s memoir writing, and Farida’s poetry. These characters give us insights into subjectivity through their individual grapplings with oppression and deficiency of agency. Individually, their life coping strategies are distinct and incomplete. Within the structure of the novel, they acquire linkages and demand to be grasped in totality.

Hence we see that Gurnah’s novels deal with questions of subjectivity and agency, and find the complex links between them. Through the multifarious struggles of his various characters Gurnah culls out the meanings of being an agent. Agents are never completely formed, but engage in being continually reformed while facing often changing oppressive scenarios. Gurnah by writing about civil strife in Zanzibar after winning freedom from Western imperialism seems to be suggesting that oppression of some form or the other will keep on ailing individuals in societies. Struggles on the part of the agent will always have to be recreated within changing social and political scenarios. History unfurls and truths change, new struggles are established and rounding off of the act of freedom is impossible. Freedom is not an achievement but a seeking. Fullness and completeness exist in death. The subject is influenced by political and social changes. S/he has to manipulate structures by accommodation with them, assimilation into them or their annihilation. Agency is an individual act but also a political act because the subject exists within politicized structures and has to respond to them through counter politics, since not being political is also a political response.

5.5 Conclusion
Agency, as is evident from a reading of Morrison, Tan and Gurnah, is an ongoing journey to counter oppressive forces and to act affirmatively. It is not just an outside goal one has to reach, but is a tapping of one’s inner resources. In the case of Morrison’s characters agency means not just freedom to act against oppressive scenarios but also includes seeking to be free from the constraints of traumatic past.
Agency thus comes about through creating authentic selfhood as is the case with Sethe, and begins from being able to consciously assess one’s life as is the case with Florens. Several women characters in Beloved and A Mercy succumb to oppression but at some point they have all tried to fight it out. Like Morrison, Tan’s focus is also primarily on her women characters, how they cohabit and bond to fight patriarchal structures and how they deal with the problems engendered by their diasporic existence. These affiliative links that Tan’s characters from do not come about strongly in Morrison’s texts. The psyches of Morrison’s characters have been largely shorn of this ability to affiliate. In case of Gurnah agency comes about through understanding and experiencing life, as is the case with Yusuf. Also journeys and discovery come about as liberating processes. In Desertion he compares various forms of agency by introducing female diasporic and colonial agents. There are several clear crossovers between these three authors in that their characters try to figure out and experience agency. A combined study of texts of these authors has thrown good light on how individuals become agents in varying oppressive scenarios particularly, those of slavery, patriarchy and diaspora.